# A Marauder's Plan

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## Summary

What if Sirius decided to stay in England and deliver on his promise to raise Harry instead of hiding somewhere sunny? Changes abound with that one decision...

## Notes

Alternate Universe based on prompt 'What if Sirius hadn't run away to somewhere sunny after escaping Hogwarts but stayed and tried to make Harry's wish of a home come true?' Covers alternative 4th Year/Goblet of Fire and therefore does not follow canon religiously.

Pairings: Harry/Hermione is the main pairing. All others are surprises so read at your own risk - although I will say there are a number which follow canon.


Content warning of references to child abuse (neglect, emotional - Harry; physical, emotional - Sirius) in early parts, references and discussion of grooming and rape/dub-con/sexual
contact by an adult with a minor (not Harry) in the last two parts of the fic. Please consider your personal triggers and keep yourself safe. Character deaths abound.

Reviews welcome. Originally posted on fanfiction.net.
Book I: A Marauder's Plan (Basic Pranks)

Part 1: Initiating Operation Pronglet (The Lord Padfoot Prank)

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Sirius landed by the ruin of the Potters' home in Godric's Hollow. He dismounted the hippogriff, fighting against the urge to get back on and continue flying. The hippogriff snorted and backed away, heading towards a nearby puddle of water for a drink. There had been no clear destination in mind when Sirius had flown away from Hogwarts but something had pulled him to the Potters' old home.

The house was a crumbling wreck, shrouded in darkness. The cottage had been a wedding present from James's father to his son, an acknowledgement that unlike times of old, the newly married couple were not expected to live at Potter House with James's father, his mother having died when James was seventeen. Sirius could see in his mind's eye the way it had looked in its prime; the outside walls covered with ivy with the whitewashed stone peeking out in between the green periodically; the tidy front garden with its lavender and honeysuckle; the gleaming windows underlined with their boxes of flowers and herbs – Lily's pride and joy.

He let out a shuddering breath, a sob catching at the back of his throat. He shouldn't have come back, Sirius thought tiredly, but where else was there to go when there was nowhere else to go but home. And the cottage with its bright blue door with the griffin knocker had once been his home as much as James's and Lily's. He had always been welcome there; had lived there for a time while he recovered from tangling with Death Eaters and almost dying. Of course when James had lost his father, he'd moved himself, Lily and Harry to Potter House, but they had soon moved back when they'd needed to go into hiding.

Sirius closed his eyes against the wave of memories; the bright sunny rooms, Harry in his crib gurgling with laughter, James grinning about some prank, Lily teasing them both with a glint in her eye…

He rubbed at his forehead. It felt like years of fog were beginning to clear. Twelve years in Azkaban had left its mark, Sirius determined, that and his own blind rage at Peter. And that had started right where he was standing.

The memory of that night cut through his mind; sharp images of loss, the overwhelming panic when he'd realised Peter was missing; the shock of grief and terror at the sight of the house, and James dead…James, his best friend…

The grief sent him to his knees again just as it had on that terrible night.

Then, there had been Hagrid with Harry and orders to take Sirius's godson to Dumbledore and Lily's sister, Petunia. In hindsight, Sirius should have gone with him and told Dumbledore about Peter. He shouldn't have let Harry out of his sight. But he'd truly believed Harry would be safe with Dumbledore, and he had been fiercely pleased that it left him free to go after Peter. He'd been so stupid.

He opened his eyes and took in the sight of the battered house again. "I screwed up, James. I suggested Peter as Secret Keeper and he knew I'd come after him for betraying you. He was ready
He shook his head. He could remember the confrontation as though it had happened the day before; the cold of the air, the smell of rain, Peter's smug expression as he'd made his accusation and the heat of the explosion.

He'd been blown backwards, landing in a heap, blood pouring from a wound on his head. Had he actually been concussed? His thoughts had been cloudy and muddled, all over the place. He couldn't remember much of anything either…couldn't remember his trial – had there actually been a trial? – couldn't remember anything except waking up days, weeks, maybe months later in Azkaban with no way of contacting anyone who might have helped him. He'd taken refuge in the knowledge that he was innocent and the small comfort that Harry was safe. And he'd lost track of time after that until…until the Minister had stopped by and actually given him a newspaper. After that, his only thought had been to protect Harry from Peter.

Sirius paused for breath, realising belatedly that he'd continued talking out loud. "Talking to yourself – first sign of madness, isn't that what you always told me, James." He said softly. He sighed and stared blankly at the ruined house. He could feel the urge to leave nudging at him again; to get back on Buckbeak and head for somewhere warm and sunny where he could recover from Azkaban. But that would mean leaving Harry…

"Harry's living with your sister, Lily," Sirius said, "I went to see him there when I got out of prison." It had been the first thing he'd done – he'd wanted to check on his godson before heading North to wait for Peter at Hogwarts. Seeing Harry running away had changed his plans. "He's…he's not happy. I mean, he's brilliant, James; really brilliant – he saved my life! But he's…he's too thin and small. He wanted to come and live with me straight away! Who wants to live with someone they don't know unless they hate where they are? I think your sister and her family treat him badly, Lily. I need to get him away from them. Of course, I can't until I'm cleared and no longer on the run, and that's not likely to happen any time soon."

He got to his feet, crossed his arms over his chest and pushed the urge to leave away again. He frowned, his brow lowering as he mulled over the issue.

"The problem is that, as much as I hate to admit it, I've been acting too much like a Gryffindor." Sirius said with a huff of exasperation. "I went running off after Peter when you died, and this year all I've done is try and get to Peter again even if it was so he wouldn't hurt Harry. And I failed both times." He sighed heavily. "If I want to protect Harry properly, I need to start thinking and stop reacting."

The niggle at the back of his mind to leave Britain, to leave Harry, shivered and disappeared abruptly. He'd shaken off a compulsion spell, Sirius realised. Probably Dumbledore. The old coot had no doubt thought compelling Sirius to get as far as possible was for his own good so he wouldn't get caught by the Ministry. Or maybe so that he wouldn't stay too close to Harry.

That thought arrested him for a long moment.

He shook himself as though he was Padfoot, trying to dislodge the idea. But he had promised to start thinking and so he did, pacing back and forth to give into his need for movement.

Why would Dumbledore want Sirius to stay away from Harry? OK, Sirius could acknowledge that he needed to heal from the effects of Azkaban and that there could be reasonable doubts about his ability to care for a young teen. But, Sirius was Harry's godfather.

He could understand Dumbledore taking baby Harry with Lily's sister in the immediate aftermath of
James's and Lily's death – had even reluctantly agreed with the plan by handing over Harry to Hagrid in fact. Very few people had known where Lily's sister resided in the muggle world and Sirius knew Lily had placed wards around the place. He could also understand why Dumbledore had left him there once Sirius was imprisoned and Harry's godmother, Alice Longbottom, had been attacked. There was an automatic belief that blood relations were best and maybe Dumbledore had assumed that Petunia was the named guardian for Harry – Sirius couldn't remember if Dumbledore had ever seen the Potters' will. Dumbledore probably had little knowledge of how much Petunia disliked magic, and even if he had, he'd possibly made the assumption that Petunia would care for Harry regardless because he was family. Still, Sirius mused thoughtfully, it didn't excuse Dumbledore for seemingly missing all the signs of an abused child when Harry had gotten to Hogwarts or, worse, disregarding them and leaving Harry with the Dursleys anyway.

He stopped pacing. Why would Dumbledore have disregarded signs of abuse? No. Sirius couldn't believe that. He could believe that abuse had been missed – hadn't his own abuse at the hands of his dear mother been overlooked until he'd run away from home? But he couldn't quite dismiss his underlying notion that Dumbledore wanted distance between Sirius and his godson. Possibly Dumbledore thought Harry's muggle relatives provided a safer environment than Sirius – and OK, it wasn't as though Sirius could provide a home while he was on the run.

Or Dumbledore might just not trust Sirius.

Which sounded more likely because Dumbledore had always had trouble seeing beyond the Black name Sirius carried.

Wasn't that why he hadn't even rated a visit from the leader of the Order of the Phoenix after being imprisoned? Everybody got a second chance with Dumbledore except for Sirius it seemed. Sirius wondered if Dumbledore would have stood by and let him be kissed. Certainly it seemed like the kids had gained some kind of approval from the Headmaster to save him but...but just why was it that the kids had needed to save him? Why couldn't Dumbledore guarantee him a fair trial? Wasn't he the Chief Warlock? Sirius was aware that the old wizard didn't like to wield the power the wizarding world had given him too often but he had power.

Power was something that the House of Potter and the House of Black had once enjoyed; magical power aplenty certainly, but both families had also built financial and political alliances. And it was that kind of power that Sirius truly needed if he was going to protect Harry; from the Death Eaters, from Peter, from the possibility of Voldemort rising again. It was that kind of power which would get Sirius what he wanted from the Ministry, namely his name cleared and guardianship of Harry so he could ensure his godson had everything he needed – love, happiness, fun, security.

And he evidently needed that same power to ensure that Albus Dumbledore couldn't stop Sirius from being with Harry, if that was Dumbledore's plan.

Sirius looked up at the night sky and shook his head in denial of where his thoughts were leading him.

A rush of wind touched him and he breathed in the scent of lilies. At least he knew he had her approval. "You always said that you would do anything to keep Harry safe, Lily-flower. I always said I would do the same but I didn't get it until now that anything means anything."

Another breeze brushed over him. It felt comforting and familiar; affection, safety and family all tangled together in a way that spoke of love.

Sirius closed his eyes again, grief rocking through him. James. He gave a short, humourless laugh. "You shouldn't approve too soon, James, because you're not going to like my plan. Merlin knows I
don’t like my plan."

But if it was power Sirius needed…he looked back at the house and whistled for Buckbeak. It was time to retreat to the one place Sirius had never called home.
They landed in the back garden of 12 Grimmauld Place. Everything was overgrown and unkempt; a wild tangle of tall grass, weeds and flowers that had escaped their beds and meandered all over the once pristine lawn. The old trees that bordered the property created dark imposing shapes in the night. The protective statues were pale lumps of marble. They didn't wake with his arrival and Sirius breathed out in relief.

The house was under a Death Fidelius. He'd known that being a Black was enough to see the house but he'd been unsure that the actual wards around the property would accept him. He had been an outcast because of his allegiance to the Light – to the Potters – and had been worried that there might have been something to keep him out specifically.

He threw a look at the neighbouring houses. He knew the spells disguising the garden and house would mean muggles and other wizards would skip over Number 12 and see the next house along. "You can stay in the garden, Buckbeak, or go on your way." He said fondly. "You've saved my life and I thank you."

Buckbeak bowed low and Sirius did the same. The hippogriff turned and launched itself back into the air; a couple of sweeps of its powerful wings later and it was out of sight.

"Safe travels, my friend." Sirius murmured in the darkness. He made his way to the house, taking the side path to the steps down to the back door that led into the basement, the old merchant's entrance.

The narrow black door opened on his approach. It looked as though the wards had granted him more than simply access; they were inviting him in. Sirius took a deep breath and entered his childhood home.

The smell of dank mould and decay hit his nostrils immediately and he cursed his sensitive Padfoot nose. He wished he had a wand to dispel the stench. He stepped into the small receiving area for tradesmen and the door closed behind him, locking him in; the gaslight flickered on recognising his presence. Sirius ignored the doors to his left which would lead to a potions lab, a cell that he would rather avoid, and a staircase down to a cellar. He headed up the staircase to his right instead and came out in the long narrow kitchen.

The room was filthy with dust and dirt. He grimaced and hoped the rest of the house wasn't in a similar state. He'd been informed of his mother's and grandfather's death by the warden so for the house to be deserted and empty wasn't a surprise. He'd just expected the old house elf, Kreacher, would have kept up maintenance. Maybe the elf had died. Or his mother had killed him. He wouldn't put it past the barmy old bitch.

He opened up the door that led to the reception hall.

"YOU!"

His mother's voice had him snapping around in shock, his heart pounding. A portrait glared back at him in the half-light coming through the window above the front door.

A familiar pop signalled the arrival of the missing elf. The aged being took in Sirius with a glare. "You is not welcome here, Master."

"Master."
Sirius smiled at the elf's unwilling confirmation of what Sirius had hoped: that with the passing of his grandfather, it was Sirius who was the recognised heir and Head of House. "My house, Kreacher." He stated firmly. "You can stay and obey me or you can have clothes."

"Kreacher will stay despite the traitor to his mistress who is now his master."

Sirius let one eyebrow creep up in his forehead and the elf shuffled his feet and pulled at his ears, punishing himself automatically for his disparaging remark. "You will refer to me as Lord Black. You will not tell anyone of my location ever. You will obey only me and you will inform no-one of my secrets. You will speak to no-one without my express permission. Is that clear?"

"Kreacher obeys Lord Black."

"He's not Lord yet." His mother sniffed in her portrait. "The rings are in the vaults. I hardly think you, a convicted criminal, will be able to get to them. At least, you redeemed yourself at the end."

Sirius stared at her. "I hate to disappoint you, Mother, but I didn't actually betray the Potters or kill those muggles." He paused. "Actually, that's a lie because I love to disappoint you and would love to continue doing so. Unfortunately, I have recently realised that I have to restore the standing of the Ancient and Noble House of Black so I can take over the wizarding world thus ensuring my guardianship of my godson. So apparently you're going to get some of what you've always wanted."

His mother's portrait stared back at him, speechless.

"Yes," Sirius agreed, understandingly, "I was shocked and horrified myself."

Kreacher's ears perked up and he straightened with a gleam in his oversized eyes. "You intend to restore the standing of the Ancient and Noble House of Black?"

"I do, and as my mother well knows, I can perform the inheritance ritual here." He pointed at the elf. "This place is a mess and not in keeping with either our wealth or reputation. You will immediately begin cleaning and redecorating it starting with the master bedroom and bathroom for my use. Dark artefacts are to be placed in a trunk for my inspection. Neutral colours will be used and you will avoid the depressing gothic horrors of my mother's tastes. I will be in the study."

Kreacher snapped his fingers and popped off before Sirius could say anything more.

Sirius gave a heavy sigh and turned to his right. He avoided the staircase leading up to the bedrooms, catching a glimpse of a wall decorated with the heads of house elves. They hadn't been there when he'd run away; his mother must have gone completely insane in her final years, he mused. The door to his right would lead to the formal dining room, the informal living room and the Summer room overlooking the garden. He barely glanced at the doors to his left – the reception room with its public floo, and the formal parlour – instead, he took the door at the end of the corridor. It opened up into a cosy library. The main library was at the country estate but Sirius couldn't remember its location because of the Death Fidelius. The knowledge would return to him when he had completed his inheritance ritual. He bypassed the shelves of books, noting he'd have to go through them and put the more dangerous away. The door to the study was to the right and he entered the room with trepidation.

For a moment, he stood just inside the doorway. Kreacher must have raced to get to the room because it was devoid of the dust and decay in the rest of the house even though the décor remained tired and familiar, the ornate wallpaper peeling at the edges. There was a roaring fire, casting warmth across the room and the lamps had been lit. There was also a tea-tray loaded with sandwiches and cake that Sirius hoped Kreacher had conjured and not made given the state of the kitchen.
Sirius breathed in the scent of the old leather chairs; the faint lingering scent of the tobacco his father had preferred. He remembered only too well the last time he'd been in the room; it had been the Summer after his fifth year and his father had asked him bluntly what his allegiances were. Sirius had told him that he would never bow down to Voldemort; that he would never take the Dark Mark; that he would stand beside the House of Potter in the war.

His father had been surprisingly civil and agreeable. He had even suggested having someone on the other side of the war would help reduce the risk that the House would be decimated – after all, if the Light won then hopefully Sirius would be alive to continue the line. Sirius had politely agreed and privately thought he would never be the Head of House despite his father spending years grooming him to be just that; that he would never want to be the Head of House.

The irony was bitter to swallow, Sirius thought with dry amusement. Old history, Sirius told himself briskly. He might never have intended returning but he was there for Harry. He just had to remember that and all else was tolerable.

He sat down in his father's chair – his chair. He ate one of the waiting sandwiches as he reached down and rummaged in the top right drawer. He drew out a selection of wands; his father's, his mother's and his great-grandfather's. He tested each as he finished the make-shift meal and drank the accompanying juice and water. He settled on his great-grandfather's wand of oak with a core of dragon scale. It was an acceptable match and would suffice until his name was cleared and he could replace it.

Sirius pulled out a small ritual bowl and dagger from the bottom drawer. "Familius magicus." He tapped the bowl with his wand making the inside cloud up with swirling silver sparkles of magic. He slashed his palm without ceremony and let the blood drip into the bowl.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, claim by blood, by law, by magic, the House of Black. I swear to lead it with honour and fairness; to protect and shelter those who belong or ally to the House of Black by blood, by law, by magic, by oath; to deliver justice on those who break oath and trust with the House of Black. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

The magic surged out of the bowl and surrounded him; a bright cascading stream of silver that blanketed his core and tested his worthiness. He could barely breathe under the power of it; magic steeped in blood and ritual; magic as black as his name. But he refused to bow to it; he was a Black and the magic was his to command not the other way around. The magic left abruptly and settled before him in the cloudy shape of the house totem: a silver hooded snake. It bowed to him solemnly and disappeared.

It had worked.

Sirius let out a shaky breath and pushed his hand through his wild hair. The strands tangled unexpectedly with a ring on his finger and he drew his hand down to stare at the Lordship ring; a black onyx stone stamped with a silver snake set in a platinum band. The ring had been called to his finger with the ritual. He'd worn the matching Heir ring once upon a time and as his eyes fell to the desk he saw it sitting in the bowl. He gave a sigh, picked up the Heir ring and secured it in the wooden box on his father's desk where the ring had traditionally been kept. A tap of his wand had the box locked and only he would be able to open it.

He got up and turned to the fireplace with its surround and mantel of stone. In the centre of the mantelpiece the Black crest was carved in wondrous detail; it was also the keystone for the wards. Sirius pressed his still bloodied left palm onto it. He felt the wards shift to his control.

"Fidelius." Sirius said firmly. He felt the wards respond and knew his location was hidden
completely with satisfaction. "I, Sirius Orion Black, am named Secret Keeper." He focused again and shut down the floos with a thought; the portraits were put to sleep to prevent them from spying.

He sat back down, exhausted. There wasn't much time left before the end of school and there were a hundred things he had to do in order to ensure Harry would be away from the Dursleys sooner rather than later, but in truth all he wanted at that moment was a bed.

Kreacher popped in beside him. He held out a folded piece of parchment and another ornate box. He looked nervous. "Young Master Regulus ordered Kreacher to give these to you but Mistress punished Kreacher when Kreacher told her of young Master Regulus's death and ordered him to stay in the house."

Sirius took them with a frown.

"Lord Black's bedroom and bathroom are ready when you wish to retire." Kreacher popped away again.

Sirius looked down at the box and parchment. He sighed and set the box on the desk, opening the parchment.

"Dear Brother,

I regret many things but mostly I regret listening to our Mother and not following your path. I broke faith in the House of Black by taking the Mark of Voldemort, someone who I have realised is totally without honour; someone who would prefer to rule us all. He kills without regard for blood or for allegiance. I have seen pureblood wizards in his service fall at his hand and I have seen enough of the horrors he perpetrates to know I regret my decision to follow him.

I write this with the knowledge that I go to betray him tonight. It is this mission I must tell you about; he created Horcruxes. He has used items of great value to do so believing they will not be destroyed. He gave Hufflepuff's Cup to Bella for safe-keeping, a diary or journal of some sort to Lucius and the location of Slytherin's locket to me. I do not believe these are the only ones – he prefers seven as a number in rituals so with the assumption the seventh fragment remains in his mortal body or on the mortal plane, there will be three others. He spoke of an old Head of House ring which I fear may be a fourth, and I believe another item of Ravenclaw's resides at Hogwarts but as he only made an allusion, I could be wrong. That leaves one unaccounted for, brother. (I know you have problems with basic arithmetic). These abominations will need to be destroyed before he can be defeated outright.

Tonight, I will retrieve the locket. I hope I return and tell you about this letter in person when I present the locket and my knowledge to you and ask for protection. If I don't return, Kreacher has orders to give this and hopefully the locket to you. I hope it helps the Light – more importantly, I hope it helps you.

I have not been the best brother, Sirius, but I go tonight hoping to restore my honour and do you proud.

Regulus"

The letter crumpled in his hand. Sirius closed his eyes, remembering his brother. Sirius had protected him from their mother all their childhood but the year Sirius had gone to Hogwarts had been enough for her to turn Regulus against him. He sighed deeply, swamped with his own regret that Regulus hadn't lived to tell him in person that he'd seen the light – literally.
But…bloody hell: horcruxes!

That was how Voldemort would rise again. And when he did, he'd come after Harry, Sirius was certain of it.

It was just too much to think about after the day and night he'd had – finally having a chance to talk with Harry, facing Peter, reconciling with Moony, having to charge down Moony to save the kids, having Harry save him from the Dementors, having Harry save him from being Kissed, escaping, claiming the House of Black and setting the Fidelius charm.

Tomorrow; he'd deal with it tomorrow, Sirius decided, locking up the box Kreacher had left – the one which presumably contained the locket with its fragment of Voldemort's soul – in the desk.

He went in search of his bed.
Three days after his flight from Hogwarts, Sirius walked into the newly decorated and gleaming dining room for breakfast and immediately spotted the eye-catching phoenix perched on the back of his chair. A more non-descript brown owl he'd had Kreacher buy and whom he'd named Hooter, was also waiting for him and eyeing the phoenix as suspiciously as Sirius. The owl ward he'd reinforced would have turned away all but his own owls and Harry's Hedwig. He hadn't counted on meddling fire birds.

He'd sent charmed notes to Harry and Remus the previous evening saying nothing but variations of that he was safe somewhere sunny and that he would stay in touch. He didn't want Dumbledore to think he was still in Britain or alerted in any way to what Sirius had planned.

Because Sirius had a plan.

He had written everything on a large blackboard in the study and annotated it with sketches of Prongs and Moony. It had been a method he'd used with major pranks at school and important missions when he'd been an Auror. It worked well for him. He had a large tick by the first step – assume the Lordship of the House of Black, and had happily ticked off 'contact Harry and Remus' before going to bed. He just hoped the rest of the plan wasn't going to come to a screaming halt with the presence of Dumbledore's familiar.

"You'd better hand it over then, Fawkes." Sirius said resigned, sitting down. He savoured for a moment the feel of clean clothes (Regulus's cast-offs freshly laundered by Kreacher but he wasn't complaining) against his scrubbed skin; the knowledge of his newly cut shoulder-length hair and trimmed neat beard. He looked and felt human.

Fawkes dropped the parchment he was carrying into Sirius's hand and gave a reassuring trill that made him think the bird was trying to tell him not to worry.

"Sirius,

Thank you for the owl you sent to Harry. I've instructed him that I would reply using Fawkes in case the Ministry tries to track any correspondence…"

"That…"

Fawkes trilled again.

Sirius waved the letter at him. "Oh I don't think he's just being careful, Fawkes. Who is he to tell my godson that he can't write to me?" He glowered. "He could have suggested that Harry write a note for you to carry."

Fawkes tilted his head and bobbed it slightly as though conceding the point.

Sirius read the rest of the note aloud. "It was good to hear you have found somewhere to recover from your time in Azkaban. Take all the time you need, dear boy. I would ask you not to take risks for Harry's sake; he would be most upset if you were to be captured. Be assured that I will see to Harry's safety in your absence." He scowled. "Love and kisses, Albus."

He glowered at Fawkes who had trilled back at him admonishingly.

"OK, so he didn't send me love and kisses but, Fawkes, this is full of double speak and you know
"It." He gestured with the letter again. "What he's actually saying is: stay away from Harry. You and I both know it." He sighed. "Do you think that's what Harry wants?" Of course he had no true idea about what Harry would want. He hoped Harry's delight at the idea of living with him had been real.

Fawkes tilted his head and flew back to Sirius and nudged Sirius's chest with his head. Warmth filled Sirius, comforting him. Harry did want him in his life. The memory of Harry's smile when Sirius had made his offer for the teen to live with him filled his mind.

Sirius breathed out and stroked Fawke's plumage. "Thank you for the reassurance, Fawkes. I needed that." His eyes narrowed on the bird. "You agree with me, don't you? That Harry would be better away from the muggles?"

Fawkes cooed brightly.

"So, you won't be telling your nosy old wizard where I am?" Sirius started to smile as Fawkes bobbed his head in agreement. "Thank you." He said. He'd still look into adding a phoenix ward though; maybe one that would allow Fawkes but banish any wizard he might be unexpectedly transporting.

The phoenix sent him another admonishing look as though he'd read Sirius's mind and took flight. He disappeared in a show of flames.

Hooter gave a squawk, reminding Sirius he was waiting. Sirius handed over some bacon as an apology and took the letter. It was blank. Sirius grinned and tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

"Padfoot,

I'm glad you're safe. I've returned to my home near Oxford as I resigned from Hogwarts. Snape managed to let slip about my furry problem and, well, we both know what would happen so I left before Albus was placed in the unfortunate position of having to fire me. Truthfully, it is probably for the best – I was careless after all on the full moon, and I almost ended up hurting the children. It's certainly my fault that Peter got free.

My only regret is that I won't be able to spend more time with Harry but I'm reminded that it's a selfish desire when I think of all the time I've already spent with him and that you have been denied."

Sirius snorted. He couldn't deny he'd felt jealous at the idea of Moony spending time with Harry but he'd been relieved that at least Harry had Moony. Only he didn't anymore. "Stupid Snivellus." He muttered under his breath.

"Talking of Harry, there are things I need to tell you. I know it's probably for the best that you don't tell anyone where you are but...well, I've missed you, my friend, and I think our discussion will need to be face to face. Send word when you think it's safe for us to meet.

Take care, Moony."

Sirius felt his emotions surge and took a deep breath. He'd restarted his Occlumency training the night before in order to regain some control of his mind and his emotional state; his thoughts were too inclined to drift, his moods to swing. He had to get some control over himself if he was going to look after Harry.

Kreacher popped up beside him. "Do you wish something different for breakfast, Lord Black?"

"What?" Sirius stared down at his uneaten food. "Uh, no. I just hadn't started eating."
Kreacher placed a nutrient potion beside the plate and disappeared.

Sirius scrunched his face up in disgust but drank down the potion. He needed it and the food he tucked into with gusto. The kitchen had been returned to immaculate condition and he was enjoying Kreacher's cooking.

In fact the whole first floor of the house had been renovated since Sirius's arrival; old décor and furnishings had been thrown out and replaced or revamped. Warm neutral colours of browns, creams and gold pervaded. Red had been used as an accent including the study where the walls had been painted a warm maroon colour. Landscape paintings had remained but all others had been placed in storage in the attic including that of Phineas Nigellus Black. As a former Headmaster of Hogwarts, the portrait could have spied on him for Dumbledore, and despite Kreacher stating that Phineas hadn't visited his portrait in Black Manor for years, Sirius wasn't taking any chances. His mother's sleeping portrait had been given to Kreacher as a reward; house elf magic unsticking the damn thing from the wall. He had no intention of ever wakening her portrait ever again nor seeking her advice.

Even if he could use someone other than Kreacher to talk to about his plan.

His eyes fell on Remus's letter. *Moony.* Of course, he could ask Moony to come and stay with him – to help him. It was perfect. Remus would have a job and…and Sirius would have to be very careful about how he offered it or Moony's pride would get in the way of him taking it.

He finished his breakfast and sent a note to Remus with the second owl he'd purchased; a black majestic and distinctive looking bird bought for when he needed to send mail as Lord Black. He'd named it Reg in honour of his late brother. The note invited Remus for an interview that afternoon to be the steward of an Ancient House that had just been claimed. Sirius had included details of the salary, duties and benefits – and the address. If Remus was interested the letter would act as a portkey delivering him to his interview; if he wished to decline he could do so by reply.

Sirius hoped Remus would accept – he had questions for his friend about Harry, about what had happened in the intervening years when Sirius had been in Azkaban. And he'd missed him too.

The next few hours were torture. He had to distract himself with helping Kreacher cleanse the basement of dark magic. Sirius had no use for a potions lab or a torture cell, and they were turning the area instead into a combination gymnasium and duelling room; he needed to get his fitness back. But not before too long, Remus's scheduled arrival time was upon him and Sirius made his way to the reception room. He'd swung from optimistic hope that Remus would accept his invitation to pessimistic certainty that he wouldn't despite Reg returning without a reply.

Remus arrived on time, landing with ease. His face broke into a wide smile at the sight of Sirius and he dived across the room to sweep him into a hard hug.

"Padfoot. I thought it might be you!" Remus pulled back and grinned at him.

"Moony." Sirius couldn't stop smiling. He hugged Remus again and let him go before he embarrassed himself and burst into tears of relief.

"Well, as much as I'm sad there isn't a job, I'm delighted to see you." Remus said happily. "I can't believe you stayed in England!"

"I have plans," Sirius said tentatively, "and I'm afraid the job offer is real, Moony. I, um," he gestured vaguely to the newly painted crest on the wall as though to point it out to Remus, "I might have claimed the Lordship of the House of Black."
Remus goggled at him.

"Come with me and I'll explain everything." Sirius said, pulling Remus out of the room and to the study.

Sirius leaned back in his chair and twirled his wand thoughtfully as Remus stared at the blackboard and then back at Dumbledore's letter on the desk in front of them. He'd been doing the same thing for five minutes and Sirius couldn't quite stop himself from thinking it wasn't a good sign.

Remus sighed and took a fortifying sip of tea. "Well, I can understand why you've gone this route, Padfoot." He tapped the ceramic mug he held. "Despite my own debt to Albus, I've spent most of this last year alternating between wanting to thank Albus for the opportunity to finally get to know Harry and wanting to hex him for keeping me out of his life to date."

"How did that happen?" asked Sirius curious to know what had occurred.

His friend grimaced but met his gaze. "As soon as I got the news, I came back from Romania just in time to attend the small funeral for James and Lily at Godric's Hollow," he forestalled Sirius's question by raising a hand and answering it, "Potter House including the family cemetery there must have gone immediately under a Death Fidelius and obviously its location would have only been known to someone in the House of Potter."

Like Sirius who had been granted sanctuary in the House of Potter.

"I and the Longbottoms accosted Albus after the funeral both about you and about Harry." He shook his head at the memories. "I wanted to visit both of you – you so I could hex you into a million pieces and Harry so I could confirm he was safe and well. Albus informed me that you had already been sentenced to Azkaban."

Sirius waved away the information. "What about Harry?"

"Well, Albus confirmed that he had taken Harry to Lily's sister in the muggle world and she had assumed guardianship; that it was a done deal. Alice was furious but Albus pointed out you were in prison, they had been under Fidelius and he had no idea who their Secret Keeper was. Anyway, Frank said that was fine but now that they were out of hiding, they would take guardianship of Harry as James and Lily had wanted."

"And then they got attacked." Sirius murmured, trying to piece together the disparate information he'd managed to gather the previous year.

"Actually they were attacked two weeks later." Remus sighed heavily. "In that interim period, the Ministry demanded proof to overturn the guardianship of a blood relative. Well, the Longbottoms' didn't have a copy of the will. The Potters' solicitors Arkam and Arkam claimed theirs had gone missing." He took a breath. "I searched through your stuff at your old place since I had a key but couldn't find a copy there either. Gringotts claimed they couldn't open the Potter vaults without a Potter to retrieve the original."

"My copy of the will is in my vault." Sirius said quietly.

"Of course it is," Remus said, "I surmised as much at the time." He paused. "Frank and I had just agreed that the only thing for it was for him to negotiate with your grandfather to claim the vault under the House of Black and provide them with the will if it was there, but before he could, like you said, he and Alice were attacked."
Sirius shook his head, thinking how everything had conspired to go horribly wrong for Harry's guardianship after the death of his parents.

"Anyway, with the Longbottoms incapacitated and Augusta dealing with one traumatised baby, the whole thing was dropped. I know James and Lily had probably made provisions for if both you and Alice were unavailable and I toyed with asking your grandfather, but knew that unlike the Longbottoms I had no political leverage to get him to give me the will and I didn't want to give him the idea of, well…"

"Making a claim for Harry himself?" Sirius nodded slowly. "Wise. He would have done it. And you remember James and I used to joke that we were cousins? The relationship is a few times removed but…"

"Your grandfather would have run with it, and with you named as guardian in the will, it would have strengthened his claim." Remus took another sip of his drink. "I dropped the idea of guardianship and went back to Albus to request access."

"Which he refused." Sirius determined harshly.

"Said the wards had been set to deter dark creatures and regardless he had promised that interaction with the wizarding world would be minimal until Harry was old enough to attend Hogwarts."

"And by minimal, Albus presumably meant to say non-existent." Sirius said caustically, already upset on Remus's behalf for the dark creature comment.

"I argued with him that he couldn't leave Harry there without any oversight at all. He argued that with the wards he would know if Harry was attacked by Death Eaters. I argued that it wasn't good enough. He eventually conceded that perhaps someone placed locally to observe was a good idea." Remus's gaze darkened. "Then he argued that it couldn't be me as a young man interested in a small child would be suspected as a paedophile."

Sirius growled.

Remus's expression cleared and he gave an appreciative smile. "I know, Padfoot. I was upset too. But I had to concede the point. My interest in Harry would have been deemed unusual."

"At least you got him to put someone in to check on him. Figg, right? The batty old woman who used to come to the Order meetings stinking of kneazles? I saw her when I went there after I escaped." Sirius felt his anger at Dumbledore stir again; felt his certainty that Harry wasn't safe at the muggles grow.

"I never knew who it was." Remus took a calming breath. "After my confrontation with Albus, I was still determined to find some way of being in Harry's life but unfortunately a couple of days later my father had a stroke and was hospitalised. My next few months were filled with trying to look after him, and my mother who was distraught. He died early the next year and my mother a few weeks later, from a broken heart, I think."

"I'm sorry, Remus." Sirius said softly. He'd liked Remus's parents; they had been good people.

Remus nodded an acknowledgement. "I was a mess. I'd lost too much of my pack all at once. By the time I came out of the depression, Harry was six years old."

"But you tried to see him." Sirius said firmly.

"Both of you, actually." Remus smiled at Sirius's surprise. "The mind healer said it would be useful
to lay my ghosts to rest and I had so many questions, Padfoot, about why you'd done it. It didn't make any sense to me. I was very confused."

Sirius sighed at another lost opportunity for him to have seen someone; to have told his story sooner. "I'm guessing you didn't get permission."

"While I'd been wallowing in grief, there had been a backlash against werewolves including a new restriction that stated that we were not permitted to visit inmates of Azkaban." Remus shrugged. "I decided I had to leave you in the past and I'm sorry about that."

Sirius waved away the apology. "And Harry?"

"I decided to ask Petunia directly and managed to track her down through muggle means. I sent her a muggle letter reminding her that I was a friend of Lily's, and requesting to see Harry as he was of school age and possibly was curious about his parents. I offered to help her explain magic and the wizarding world to him." He harrumphed. "She actually did write back very politely telling me essentially to sod off. Harry was a normal child and he was going to a normal school, and any questions he had about his parents she would answer."

"Normal?" Sirius repeated. "Harry turned my hair pink at three months."

"I know." Remus sipped his tea. "I was concerned and wrote to Albus, leaving out that I had already approached Petunia. I asked for an update on Harry and requested again to see him. Albus…"

"Told you everything was hunky-dory."

"That was the gist." Remus gave a pained smile. "He reminded me he had promised Petunia minimal interaction until Harry went to Hogwarts. He suggested that it was not wise for me to dwell on the past and to focus on the present. He was certain I would be reunited with Harry in good time."

Sirius snorted.

"I know," Remus agreed mildly, "I had started to conclude that Albus had no intention of letting me near Harry. Well, on bad days when I couldn't find work or got heckled for being a werewolf it was me in particular and on good days it was anyone."

"You didn't give up." Sirius stated with a knowing smile.

"I did for a while," Remus conceded, "I had to go abroad for work, but I wrote to Albus in the June before Harry turned eleven. I offered to take him his Hogwarts letter, explain everything and take him shopping in Diagon Alley." He took another sip of his tea. "Again, he refused. Only Hogwarts' staff could inform students. I found out who he did send this year while I was teaching there. You know who Albus got to do it?"

Sirius shook his head. He hoped it hadn't been Snape.

"Hagrid."

"Hagrid." Sirius repeated numbly. He loved Hagrid, he did, but if he was asked to choose someone to send to introduce a child to the wizarding world… Hagrid would not have been on his list of candidates – even Snape would have been better. And Harry would have needed a proper introduction by the sound of it.

"Like I said, hexing Albus has been on my list of things to do this year." Remus put the mug down finally. "I wrote back to Albus once Harry began school suggesting perhaps I could begin a
correspondence with Harry. Again, the answer was no: Harry was just adjusting to his life in the 
wizarding world and his unique history. I tried writing to Harry directly anyway and the owl returned just as it always did. Of course, half our world probably tried writing to him in his first year."

Sirius frowned, concerned. It made sense for Harry to have had an owl refusal ward placed on him but clearly exceptions could be made since Sirius's mail had made it to Harry.

"Then out of the blue, Hagrid wrote to me. He was hoping to put together a photo album of James and Lily for Harry." Remus gestured. "I went through my albums and what I had taken from your place and sent them to him. I asked him to let Harry know I would be more than happy to spend time talking Harry through the pictures. Hagrid sent a thank you but nothing more."

Remus rubbed his forehead. "So, once again, I waited until school started and wrote to Albus requesting politely to allow my owl through to Harry."

"You are nothing if not persistent, Moony." Sirius commented dryly. Others would have given up.

"I had nothing to lose," Remus responded, "and I was hoping Albus had run out of excuses."

"But?"

"Albus hadn't run out of excuses." Remus said dryly. "It was another 'please be patient' reply. I probably would have pushed it but I lost my job a week or so later and had to go back to France for work."

Sirius wondered if that had been Dumbledore's doing but he shook the thought away. Surely, even the old man wouldn't have gone to those lengths to deny Remus a place in Harry's life.

Remus smiled and it was not a happy smile but rather a predatory one. "And then you escaped from Azkaban."

"And suddenly Albus needed you." Sirius concluded. He had suspected from his sneaky observations of Harry over the previous months as Padfoot that Remus hadn't been part of Harry's life prior to the school year but he had hoped… "Well, that explains a lot."

"Oh, it doesn't stop there," Remus said, "as soon as he made his offer of employment, Albus said I must promise to let Harry come to me first and not to say anything about his parents until he asked; that it could be upsetting for Harry for me to bring up the topic."

Sirius lurched to his feet, too upset to sit still. "You didn't promise did you?"

Remus held up a hand, "I promised with no real intention of keeping it. Once a Marauder…” he let his voice trail away but Sirius got the message; Remus had intended to find some way of circumventing Albus's wishes. "But then I met Harry and I…I couldn't bring myself to tell him."

"What?" Sirius snapped.

"I pretty much froze." Remus flushed with embarrassment. "I'd been fighting so hard to see Harry that I lost sight of the fact that he wouldn't be the same cheeky chap who called me Mooey and demanded cuddles as soon as I walked in the door. Instead there was this quiet intense thirteen year old boy who didn't know me from Merlin and…I hadn't considered until I actually saw him; what if he doesn't like me? What if he finds out about my furry problem and…” he stopped abruptly.

Sirius paused in his pacing and threw himself into the second visitor's chair opposite Remus. He could understand Remus's position. He'd had his own moments of disorientation with Harry; of
trying to reconcile the happy baby he'd loved so unconditionally with the teenage boy he was watching over, had talked to so very briefly; a teenage boy he didn't actually know and who didn't know him. "So you waited."

Remus nodded unhappily. "I realised that I should have just told him as soon as I introduced myself and bugger my lack of courage and Albus's well-intentioned concern." He sighed. "Because that's the thing, Padfoot: on the face of it, all of Albus's actions look like well-intentioned concern and a desire to protect Harry, especially when you consider Harry's role as the Boy Who Lived." He paused again. "Taken individually, none of Albus's actions are sinister."

"He circumvented the system and the will." Sirius pointed out.

"Yes, but did he know for certain the contents of the will? Do you remember if he was a witness?" Remus responded.

Sirius shook his head. He couldn't remember who had been the signed witnesses with any clarity.

"And, without the will, taking Harry to Petunia was probably what the Wizarding Orphan Office would have done anyway," Remus continued. "Petunia is Harry's closest living family. Add to that Harry was probably safer in the muggle world from the Death Eaters looking for revenge at the time, and I'm sure Albus keeping everybody else away from Harry was also meant to ensure that safety." He gave a small shrug. "And, from some comments Albus let slip, I think he hoped Harry would have a normal upbringing since our world had already given itself over to The Boy Who Lived madness."

"Exactly how did that get started?" Sirius asked. "Nobody really knows what happened beyond the bare facts and…"

"Probably a combination of Hagrid and Peter." Remus interrupted. "Hagrid was never the most discreet of the Order and I rather suspect Peter or rather Wormtail was there that night. I think he saw what happened and told the tale to whoever he could as soon as he could to ensure attention was on Harry and away from himself."

"Damn it." Sirius snapped. "If he was there when I was there…"

"Then he knew you would be searching for him." Remus smiled sadly. "It explains why he managed to get the better of you."

Sirius pushed the thought away and refocused on Harry. "OK," he said slowly, "so we provisionally accept that Dumbledore placed Harry with the best of intentions…" When he'd considered the matter alone, he'd reached that conclusion but it was somewhat comforting to know Remus was in agreement.

"But it doesn't explain why he's missed the abuse since." Remus interrupted.

Sirius stilled. "You know that for certain?"

"I ended up spending a great deal of time overseeing detentions for the Weasley twins, Fred and George." Remus began. "Minerva kept giving them to me as revenge for our school days, I think, and…"

"What does this…"

"You remember Ron is Harry's best friend." Remus interrupted. "The twins are in Gryffindor and on the quidditch team with Harry. They're very fond of him; consider him an honorary Weasley."
Sirius's confusion dissipated.

Remus folded his hands over his stomach. "Last week, at the beginning of their detention, I made a comment that I was worried about the home life of a friend of theirs and while I didn't want to put them in the position of breaking confidences, I would appreciate any information they could give me." He sighed. "They immediately knew it was Harry and were very reluctant to talk, but once they began…"

"They couldn't stop." Sirius finished.

Remus's eyes flashed angrily. "The summer after his first year, they found him locked in his room and barely fed. They recovered his trunk from a locked cupboard under the stairs which had an old picture taped up saying 'Harry's Room.' They said that they didn't think Harry had received Christmas or birthday presents. They know his muggle clothes are hand-me-downs. The rest, well, it's all speculative."

Sirius grabbed the arms of the chair, his knuckles turning white.

"When I resigned, I tried to talk to Albus about what the twins had told me and he didn't seem at all surprised." Remus said in a calm tone that belied the furious light in his eyes. "He claimed that while yes, Harry's relatives didn't provide the best care, the Dursleys continued to be the safest place for Harry. In my opinion, he's being wilfully blind not only to the mistreatment, but to the effect such mistreatment has on a child."

Sirius raised his eyebrows at the very evident snarl in the words. "Maybe we should drop this. Neither of us can afford to go after muggles or Dumbledore with murder in mind. We're going to get Harry away from them, I swear."

His friend stared at him for a long moment, but the heat in his eyes faded. "I never thought I'd see the day Sirius Black advocated caution."

"Harry," Sirius said firmly, "is more important than anything. I've learnt my lesson."

"Well said, Sirius." Remus reached over and patted his arm proudly. He hesitated momentarily until Sirius made a get-on-with-it gesture. "I'm just wondering if you want me to tell you about Harry's first two years at Hogwarts?"

"Of course! I want to know all about Harry!" Sirius responded immediately. Why would Remus be so hesitant? He froze. "Did…did something happen?"

Remus sighed heavily. "I'm afraid you're not going to like this."
"Remember," said Remus, once he'd gotten Sirius to calm down enough to continue, "I got most of this from the twins and some follow-up conversations with my fellow professors."

"You'd better just tell me." Sirius said. "It can't be much worse than what I'm imagining."

Remus smirked. "In Harry's first year Albus hired Voldemort to teach Defence of the Dark Arts."

Sirius's mouth dropped open. He snapped it shut. "He did what?"

"To be fair to Albus he hired a man called Quirrell; Voldemort just happened to be possessing him."

"And Dumbledore didn't know?" Sirius asked, shocked.

Kreacher popped in and delivered a tray with a bottle of Firewhiskey and two tumblers. He disappeared again.

Remus poured Sirius a drink and handed it to him before he poured himself one and retook his seat. "We'll come back to that excellent question later but let me explain properly."

Sirius nodded reluctantly.

"The first story the twins told me was actually about Harry getting on the Quidditch team. Apparently, in their first flying lesson, Malfoy stole something of Neville Longbottom's and took off with it when Hooch was absent. Harry went after Malfoy and when he tossed the item, Harry caught it. Harry has a very low tolerance for bullying."

His old friend gave Sirius a pointed look and Sirius had the grace to blush.

"I wouldn't call what we did bullying; it was pranking." Sirius muttered defensively.

"Pranking the whole school into being green for a day wasn't bullying," Remus agreed, "arguably, hexing Severus constantly just because he and Lily were friends and she wouldn't give James the time of day until our sixth year crossed the line. And I would very much advise that you confess to Harry. He'll respect you more for owning up than insisting that what you did wasn't bullying."

Sirius nodded slowly, although he chafed at both the criticism and the advice. "So, I saw Harry playing Quidditch," he said, changing the subject rather than arguing, "he is brilliant."

Remus's expression softened. "He is, isn't he? And apparently Harry almost falling off his broom is a tradition. In his first game, Quirrell, or rather Voldemort, jinxed his broom trying to kill him."

Harry had almost been killed by Voldemort in his first year? Sirius downed the Firewhiskey and coughed violently when it hit the back of his throat.

"Hermione Granger thought it was Severus and set fire to his robes..."

Sirius almost choked on the laugh that bubbled up. If he hadn't already liked the young witch who had helped Harry save him, that piece of news certainly would have done the trick.

"...and in doing so inadvertently stopped Quirrell – Voldemort." Remus gulped down his Firewhiskey. "The twins then told me it wasn't the only time Harry tangled with him."
Sirius reached over and poured them both another drink. "For the record, this is worse than I was imagining."

"Well, the second tale is worse than the first and it isn't even the last." Remus said, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "Apparently, Hagrid got a dragon egg and it hatched. Harry and his friends got Charlie Weasley who works at a dragon reserve to come and take the dragon in a midnight smuggling expedition. Unfortunately, they got discovered, lost a tremendous number of house points and had to serve detention. Minerva gave the detention to Filch who got convinced by Hagrid to give it to him – no doubt it was Hagrid's way of trying to say sorry for getting them into trouble."

Sirius waited for Remus to continue impatiently.

"He took them into the Forbidden Forest ostensibly to search for an injured unicorn. Harry came across the wraith of Voldemort drinking unicorn blood, and ultimately had to be rescued by a centaur." Remus said.

Sirius carefully downed his second drink. "Well, at least we know he's actually still out there. Voldemort, I mean."

Remus grimaced. "That's not the end of it, Sirius. Harry and his friends worked out that Albus had hidden Flamel's infamous Philosopher's stone in the school and that Voldemort would be after it to get immortality. When they realised Dumbledore was off the grounds at the Ministry, they went to check on Albus's protections, realised they had been breached and went after the potential thief."

"Don't tell me." Sirius slumped back and closed his eyes. He was getting a headache.

"Harry and his friends got past all of the so-called traps and Harry stopped him. The twins didn't know how Harry stopped him because apparently Harry has never talked about it and Hermione had stayed back to look after an injured Ron. What they do know is that at the end of it, Quirrell was gone – dead I suspect given the possession – and Harry…he was in the infirmary for days."

Sirius opened his eyes to see Remus downing his drink. "So, to recap, my godson goes to Hogwarts, supposedly the safest wizarding place in Britain, and survives three encounters with Voldemort in one year?"

"Not to mention, Albus bloody hiring Voldemort and hiding an artefact in the school that was bound to attract him." Remus added tersely.

It was a good point. It led to other good points such as whether Albus Dumbledore had lost the plot entirely…

"You'd better tell me about Harry's second year before I decide to just down the whole bottle." Sirius said, topping them back up.

Remus sighed heavily. "Well, firstly, I believe it relates to one of the items on your blackboard." He pointed his wand at the section entitled Horcrux Hunt and Destroy, and put a strikethrough one item. "Harry has already dealt with the diary."

Almost an hour later, Sirius finished listening to Remus telling the tale of Harry's rescue of Ginny Weasley and shook his head in disbelief. He took one deep breath after another trying to get hold of his whirling emotions. His godson had almost died – again!

"Are you OK, Padfoot?" Remus asked.

Sirius saw that he was regarding him with wary concern. He gestured vaguely at his friend. "I'm
"Trying not to freak out?" Remus completed. "I think I hyperventilated for a good ten minutes."

"About which bit?" Sirius asked tersely. "The bit where Harry is a Parselmouth like Voldemort? Or the bit where the whole school turns on him?" Although in the abstract the twins dubbing of Harry as a Dark Lord was slightly humorous. "Or the bit where he almost gets eaten by Acromantula? Or the bit where he almost gets eaten by a bloody great basilisk, saving some idiotic girl who should know better than to write in a diary that talks back to you! Oh and let's not forget battling with a soul remnant of old Voldepants himself! Again!"

He was yelling by the end of it.

Remus looked at him with raised eyebrows.

Sirius took a deep breath and rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Sorry, Remus. It's just…"

"No, your reaction pretty much mirrored mine after the twins finished telling me." Remus said with a smile. "I did however miss out the idiotic girl section since the idiotic girl in question was a Weasley."

"You always were the diplomat in the group." Sirius said, letting some of his anger drain away; the rest he refocused. "I can't believe Dumbledore wasn't aware of what was going on!"

"Ah, yes. It makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Remus said thoughtfully. "After all, as soon as Fred, or was it George, anyway as soon as one of them mentioned petrification, I immediately began thinking…"

"What creatures can petrify another living being?" Sirius nodded briskly. The same thought had occurred to him during Remus's retelling.

"Not to mention that Slytherin is associated with a snake mascot and since it was clear that the monster was hidden in Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets…" Remus sighed. "I got basilisk before the twins got to the spiders bit."

"Well, you were also the most intelligent of us in the old days, Moony." Sirius joked.

Remus smiled again and they shared a moment of camaraderie tinged with the sadness for all they had lost.

"Anyway," Remus cleared his throat, "I did question Minerva and Pomona after my session with the twins wanting to know why they hadn't discovered it was a basilisk earlier. Albus had told the staff apparently to focus on the students and their classes; that he had an investigation well in hand."

Sirius lurched out of his chair.

"They believed him and made no effort to investigate on their own." Remus frowned. "I don't believe Albus knew exactly where the Chamber was or how to get into it, but I do think he knew that the monster was a basilisk and that Voldemort must have possessed someone in his school again in order for the Chamber to be opened. In some respects, I think Albus was truly doing his best to solve the problem although I abhor his decision to continue as normal putting the students' lives at risk. So, do I think he set-up another showdown between Voldemort and Harry? No."

Sirius stopped pacing and faced Remus, realising what he had implied. "You think he deliberately set-up the showdowns in Harry's first year?"
Remus picked up his discarded Firewhiskey and sipped it. "I've had more time to think about this than you, Padfoot."

Sirius looked at Remus and recognised the look on his face all too well. "I'm not going to like this either, am I?"

"No," Remus said bluntly. "Perhaps you should sit."

Sirius glared at Remus but sat down again.

"Imagine for a moment that you're Albus. You know the common story of the Boy Who Lived told to every child; that Voldemort attacked the Potters, James and Lily died but Harry didn't; that somehow the Killing Curse rebounded off Harry and killed Voldemort. You believe the story to be mostly true but you don't know for certain how Harry survived the Killing Curse although you have theories, and you don't know for certain that Voldemort is dead although again you have theories."

"And if you have theories, you have to test them." Sirius mused.

"Exactly." Remus pointed at Sirius. "Ten points to Gryffindor. So, let's assume Albus keeps his ear to the ground and becomes convinced that Voldemort is out there in a wraith form but trying to find a body."

"The whole Philosopher's stone thing was a trap to establish whether Voldemort was alive or not, wasn't it?" Sirius put things together quickly. "Maybe it wasn't even the real stone."

"I doubt it was and I'm fairly certain the protections were more for show than anything else since, with respect to Harry and his friends, they were first years and able to overcome them." Remus said. "No, I think Albus's plan was fairly simple: bait a trap for Voldemort and see if he showed."

"Only he used both the stone and Harry as bait." Sirius felt his anger stirring again.

"Yes, Albus used Harry as bait." Remus agreed softly. "After all, why else would he wait until Harry was at the school before setting the trap?"

Sirius shivered, chilled by the thought.

Remus gave a huff. "I'm sure that Albus never anticipated Harry trying to protect the stone from Voldemort directly but I think he knew that there was a possibility that Voldemort would attack Harry if there was an opportunity – and if it happened it would allow him to assess his theories about Harry."

Sirius surged to his feet again.

"Sit, Padfoot." Remus ordered crisply. "I'm certain that Albus believed the risk was minimal – Voldemort certainly couldn't attack Harry too overtly without drawing attention – but if an encounter between them occurred..." he sighed, "I'm sure Albus thought in his arrogance that he had the advantage and would be there to step in before anything serious happened. And quite honestly, it isn't just Harry he risked; he placed an entire school full of children at risk with this scheme especially when you consider that Voldemort possessed a teacher."

"Do you think Albus knew it was Quirrell?" Sirius asked, throwing himself back in his chair.

Remus shrugged. "I find it hard to believe that he didn't suspect but I think Albus got too caught up in his grand plan. He wanted to catch Voldemort red-handed trying to get to the stone, fake or real."
"And because of that Harry almost ended up dead." Sirius muttered darkly.

"True and it brings us onto Albus testing theories about Harry and how he survived the Killing Curse." Remus said. "There are three which I'm sure Albus has considered: one, Harry was able to reflect the Killing Curse under his own power probably accidentally in self-defence; two, Lily did something just before she died to protect Harry; three, it was a combination of both."

"I'm going to say for the record that I'm not happy Albus tested Harry." Sirius stated indignantly. "He had no right…"

"I agree," Remus said soothingly, "but intellectually, I can appreciate Albus's curiosity. Aren't you curious?"

"I'm just happy he survived, Remus." Sirius said firmly. "Bollocks to how!"

"And there speaks the Gryffindor," Remus complained. "Honestly, if you can work out how Harry survived the Killing Curse then what can you do with the information?"

"Apply it to others if possible." Sirius replied promptly. "OK, OK, I see your point. So what did Albus conclude from his testing?"

"I don't know," Remus admitted, "but personally I think Albus ruled out number one fairly quickly after Harry's arrival at school."

Sirius frowned. "Why? Harry is a powerful wizard. He was doing magic as a baby! He has a corporeal patronus at thirteen, Moony!"

"Maybe but, DADA aside, he's a solid if unremarkable student for the most part." Remus asserted. "Some of that I think is the company he keeps; Ron is very average and Hermione is too good."

"You think he's deliberately placing himself so his friends don't get jealous?"

"I'm not sure it's deliberate per se, but yes. I would also say having worked one to one with him that some of his power might be suppressed." Remus sighed. "Probably because of the muggles. If he learned as a child that magic was bad and doing odd things was bad then…"

Sirius waved a hand to indicate he'd gotten the point. "So, you think Albus took a look at his grades and ruled out Harry himself as being the cause of his survival. You think Albus decided Lily had done something."

"I do," Remus coughed and looked slightly abashed. "And I know she did."

"You know how…what? What did she do?" Sirius demanded, leaning forward.

"I don't know exactly," Remus qualified, "but she wrote to me just before I left for my last mission, asking my advice on something she had found in an old Runes book covering Witch magic. It was a protection spell. It required the blood of the child and the blood of the mother to arm, and the mother's sacrifice of her own life in protection of the child to activate. It creates, for want of a better explanation, a protective blood ward around the child attached to its very skin. The one who killed the mother would never be able to touch the child without penalty."

Sirius stared at Remus shocked. "Merlin, Remus, that sounds…"

"Like borderline dark magic? That's what I wrote back to her. I told her it wasn't illegal as it wasn't on the list of banned magic but it wouldn't go down well if she used her own child's blood in a spell
outside of familial magic." Remus rubbed a hand through his hair. "There were specific conditions that had to be met regarding the sacrifice too – in particular, the attacker had to kill her in order to specifically get to the child. It was a long shot. Lily wrote back telling me that she would do everything she could to protect Harry. That was the last letter I received from her."

"Wait," Sirius said, "you said that the attacker – Voldemort – would have to kill her because she needed to be removed to get to Harry specifically?"

Remus's eyes widened, realising the implication immediately. "You think…well, it makes sense if the spell worked, but…Voldemort was after Harry?"

"Did they ever tell you why they went into hiding, Moony?" Sirius asked. "James just told me that Dumbledore had received some information and they thought it was a good idea."

"They told me the same thing but…" Remus tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. "The Longbottoms went into hiding at the same time didn't they? Because of the same intelligence? Neville was born around the same time as Harry…but why would Voldemort target the children unless…" he stopped abruptly, as the pieces of the puzzle slid together suddenly. "What if there was a bloody prophecy?"

"I know who could probably answer that." Sirius said dryly. "Not that he will."

"No, if Albus thought there was a prophecy, he'd keep it close to his vest." Remus growled angrily.

Kreacher popped back in with a tray of food for dinner and they both fell silent lost in their own thoughts as they focused on the meal.

"OK," Sirius said, pushing his plate away and reaching for the pumpkin juice, "so let's recap what we know."

Remus nodded. "James and Lily went into hiding because of information that Albus provided to them. We assume this is a prophecy probably concerning Harry." He pointed his wand at the plan on the blackboard and added an item 'Check with the DOM whether a prophecy for Harry is registered.'

"Peter rats them out and Voldemort tries to kill…" Sirius swallowed against the hard lump in his throat, "tries to kill Harry but Lily protects him with this old blood protection spell. Voldemort is…defeated but not killed."

"I don't think it was the blood protection alone," Remus corrected, "I think the curse hit the ward, and while it couldn't stop it, it slowed it down enough that it gave Harry time to reflect it back at Voldemort. The scar is where the curse effectively came into contact with the protection otherwise it shouldn't have left a mark."

"I thought you said Dumbledore ruled out Harry's power as a cause?" Sirius asked confused.

"I'm sure Albus did," Remus stressed, "I, on the other hand, take into account that Harry showed signs of being a very powerful wizard before that moment, and I take into account that he's likely repressed his power since in order to live with the muggles without further incurring their wrath. Of the three theories on why Harry survived the Killing Curse, I plump for the last, that a combination of Lily and Harry enabled it."

"Well, I would never bet against you so…" Sirius waved his hand majestically at Remus, "moving on, I stupidly give up Harry to Hagrid, get framed by the rat and hoisted off to Azkaban."

"And Albus places Harry with his aunt, his closest living relative." Remus shuddered.
"And the closest blood relative." Sirius added thoughtfully. "You know Lily placed blood wards on her sister's muggle house – said after the attack on her parents that she wasn't taking any chances with what little family she had left whether her sister wanted the protection or not."

"Really?" Remus blinked. "You're thinking something which is usually not a good thing." He prompted when Sirius remained silent.

"What if Dumbledore examined Harry and realised there was a protection based on blood surrounding him and got the wrong idea?" Sirius posited. "What if he assumed the blood wards around Petunia's house had been placed there for Harry in case something happened to Lily? An extension of the protection she'd already placed on him?"

"Magically it would work," Remus said, turning over the idea in his head, "Lily's blood in both wards...both protective in nature...possibly Harry residing within the house enabled the blood ward around it to be maintained otherwise it would have needed Lily renewing the protection every year. It's entirely possible that the Dursley house is the safest place for Harry from a magical perspective."

"Well, bugger that." Sirius said forcefully. "It obviously isn't the safest place for Harry from every other perspective."

"Agreed," Remus said. He narrowed his eyes as Sirius pointed his wand at the blackboard. 'Review wards' appeared.

Sirius got to his feet, restless again. "Where were we on our recap?"

"Albus placed Harry with Petunia..."

"And left him in exile in the muggle world for ten long years." Sirius shook his head. "I don't think I'm going to forgive him for that."

"I'm not sure I'm in a mood to forgive him either." Remus muttered. He pushed himself out of the chair and walked over to the blackboard. "Harry turns eleven, gets his Hogwarts letter and Hagrid reintroduces him to the wizarding world."

"Badly."

"Quite." Remus said. He added a section to the plan entitled 'Education' and wrote another item to the growing list: 'teach Harry wizarding culture, etiquette and his heritage.' He cleared his throat. "Harry goes to Hogwarts where Albus tests him to find out more about how Harry survived the Killing Curse and wrongly assumes it is down to Lily's protection rather than any outstanding ability on Harry's part." Another item appeared under 'Protecting Harry:' 'research Lily's spell.'

"Harry defeats Voldepants again," Sirius added, "and Dumbledore gets his proof that Voldemort is alive in some form." He walked up and tapped the horcrux section. "And we know why."

"Although probably at that point in the timeline, Albus doesn't as there are a number of dark rituals that could have anchored Voldemort to this plane." Remus murmured. "No, Albus doesn't find out until Harry's second year when Harry destroys the diary horcrux." He sighed. "It's possible Albus is out searching for others."

Sirius shrugged. "If he is he's not made much progress. I have the benefit of Reg's note so have an idea of the number. I have the locket horcrux and can get my hands on the cup one if I seize the LeStrange vault. We'll need help to find out how to dispose of them and track down the three missing ones but I'll be damned if I'm going to Dumbledore."
"You don't know how to dispose of them?"

"I know how to create a horcrux – that was part of the Advanced section in Dark Arts my father made me learn, but disposing of them... no. I guess I can ask Harry how he did it."

"The Unspeakables might know." Remus offered. "You have 'conquer the Ministry' under your 'Take Over the World' section. It wouldn't hurt to use them nor the DMLE come to that – they should be informed that Voldemort is still a viable threat and I suspect Albus hasn't said anything to them."

"Let's come back to that." Sirius said briskly, twirling his wand, "OK, so after Harry's second year, Albus knows how Voldemort stayed alive-ish. Then I realise Peter is at Hogwarts and, well, we know what happened next; I ended up having to be rescued by Harry and escaping on a hippogriff."

Remus patted his shoulder. "But you've stayed, Sirius. You haven't allowed Albus to run you off again." He pointed at the blackboard. "This needs some work but it's a solid plan to get Harry away from the Dursleys and try to protect him in the future." He turned to his friend, determination shining in his eyes. "I'm not going to let Albus run me off either. Whatever you need, Padfoot; I'm in."
"Brian!" Cornelius Fudge greeted the solicitor warmly. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too, Cornelius." Brian Cutter clasped Cornelius's outstretched hand and shook it firmly. They had attended Hogwarts together and had been dorm mates if not close friends. He knew in part, it was their old relationship which had helped Brian finesse getting an appointment with Cornelius so quickly. His eyes glanced towards the witch standing next to Cornelius in mute query as to why she was in attendance.

"Oh, this is Dolores Umbridge, my Senior Undersecretary; Dolores, I'm sure you remember Brian of Cutter, Glock and Baron." Cornelius introduced them absently, waving a hand as they made the necessary handshake.

"Of course," Dolores simpered, "although I must say I am surprised at the request to see our good Minister so urgently."

Brian smiled at her. "It's good to meet you, Madame Umbridge. I've heard many things from associates about your work at the Ministry."

It was the tone that flattered not the content and Brian only just stopped himself from smiling as Dolores blushed coquettishly.

"However," Brian continued, "I am afraid this is a matter of some delicacy and I'm sure you will understand that I need to speak with the Minister alone."

The brief flicker of anger across that passed over her features indicated otherwise and she looked at the Minister obviously expecting him to request her presence.

"It's fine, Dolores," Cornelius made a shooing motion at her towards the door, "I'll speak with you later if there is a need."

Dolores gave a sharp unhappy nod. She mouthed words of farewell to Brian and made her exit.

Cornelius sighed. "My apologies, Brian. She seems to think I can't function without her and truthfully she is very useful."

Brian raised his wand. "Do you mind if I secure the area?"

Cornelius raised an eyebrow. "My office is one of the most secure places in Britain, Brian."

"This is a matter of…"

"Some delicacy." Cornelius finished. "Very well."

Brian quickly set up the strongest privacy ward he could that would also render any listening or visual spying spells or artefacts useless. He took the seat Cornelius offered and declined an offer of refreshment. Instead he opened his briefcase and pulled out a single piece of parchment.

Cornelius accepted it with a frown and began reading.
Mr Cutter,

I wish to retain your representation in the matter of Sirius Black.

Upon recently taking up the Lordship of the House of Black, I was disturbed by his escape from Azkaban and more recently Hogwarts. Upon further investigation I have been more deeply disturbed at irregularities in his initial imprisonment. I now understand that there is a Kiss on sight order which if my concerns are warranted would mean a serious miscarriage of justice and one which would displease me greatly if proven valid.

To that end, I authorise you to approach the Ministry on my behalf to request a special investigation so this matter may be resolved to my satisfaction – either in clearing Sirius Black or placing him back into custody. Funds will be made available to the Ministry from the Black vaults if they do not have sufficient leeway in their current budget.

Yours faithfully,

Lord Black

Brian watched as Cornelius set the paper down carefully on his desk.

"There is a new Lord Black?" Cornelius asked.

"Yes," Brian confirmed, "the letters I have received have carried the legal seal of the House; Gringotts have confirmed payment of our retainer from the Black vaults."

"I'm surprised," Cornelius said grumpily, "it was thought that the title would go to Lucius Malfoy's heir upon his coming of age."

"It is possible the Malfoy heir could have claimed when he was old enough, but there are others already of age in lesser known lines who would have equal magical claim as they descend from daughters of the House just as the Malfoy boy does. It has never been publically known who the last Lord Black named legal heir." Brian informed him smoothly.

Cornelius made an unhappy noise.

"From our correspondence, I've ascertained that our client is abroad presently and wants this matter of Sirius Black cleared up before he arrives in England and presents himself to the Wizengamot." His client had agreed to allow that much about his identity to be shared and Brian didn't question his caution. "Not surprisingly when you think about it as Sirius himself is probably still the rightful blood heir as he is the issue of the primary male line."

"I'm not sure there's anything to be cleared up." Cornelius argued, sitting back in his chair. "Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban and is a dangerous criminal responsible for the deaths of the Potters, the hero Pettigrew and those muggles. Everybody knows that and I am certain Lucius will challenge, on behalf of his son, this new Lord Black's claim to the House."

There was a stubborn cast to his expression that Brian knew well from their school days. Brian figured he knew what the problem was; Lucius Malfoy had planned on gaining the House of Black's prestige and wealth for his son and undoubtedly had influenced Cornelius into a hard line position on Sirius who was the blood heir.

"Lucius can't challenge on Draco's behalf, Cornelius," Brian murmured calmly, "he has no legal or magical basis to do so as the Black family magic has clearly accepted someone else. I can't see the Wizengamot allowing a challenge against family magic to be heard – it would create too much of a
precedent. Additionally, Lord Black outranks Lucius. The Malfoys married into the Black family and so Lord Black has primacy under their marriage contract. Lucius will need to respect Lord Black's dictates including those about Sirius Black.

Cornelius assimilated that news with pursed his lips. Brian also knew the new Lord Black's political agenda could be guessed somewhat from Brian's appointment as his representation. Cutter, Glock and Baron generally represented neutral wizarding families. He could almost see Cornelius draw the correct conclusion that Lucius Malfoy was about to be neutered and removed as a person of influence in the political landscape; that the extreme pro-Pureblood agenda Malfoy espoused was about to be challenged. He had a feeling that Cornelius would see the way the wind was blowing and do the expedient thing: support the more powerful Lord Black.

"I assume Lucius has been informed there is a new Lord Black?" Cornelius inquired.

Ah, Brian thought, pleased; Cornelius was trying to establish when he could go against Malfoy's wishes and side with Black openly.

"Family members were to be notified today and I understand that there will be a family meeting once Lord Black returns to England." Brian said. "As I've said I believe that Lord Black wants this matter of Sirius Black cleared up by then so that he can take his position publically without having to comment on a situation he feels is ambiguous." He gestured expansively. "He can't make a statement supportive of the Ministry if he believes there is a potential miscarriage of justice in play."

Cornelius hummed and sat back, contemplatively. "There were questions raised when Black was captured at Hogwarts. I dismissed them at the time because it seemed so unlikely that he could be innocent, and the comments were made by children who had just undergone something of a traumatic event with a werewolf and a few Dementors." He peered at Brian. "Lord Black mentioned irregularities with the initial conviction?"

Brian hid his smile as Cornelius effectively asked to be given an excuse to open up an investigation. "I examined the official records. There's an arrest sheet and some witness statements taken at the scene of the explosion; the evidence of Pettigrew's finger. The witness statements confirm Pettigrew shouted something accusatory at Black about the Potters, and then there was a blast near to Pettigrew. Black's wand was taken from him but it was never examined. The arresting Auror, Moody, noted Black appeared to be in severe shock with emotional mood swings ranging from hysterical laughter to – and I quote 'agonised weeping.' He did note Black had been overheard to mutter 'it's my fault' in his hysterical state but Moody also explicitly stated that it couldn't be deemed a confession as Black was in no condition to understand his legal rights." He took a moment to pause dramatically. "The only other item in that file, Cornelius, is an order from Crouch, counter-signed by Bagnold, to transport Black to Azkaban. No charges were actually filed; no medical treatment was given; no interrogation record exists. I can't find a trial transcript and there is no record on the court register of a trial taking place even."

"He wasn't questioned or given a trial?" Cornelius looked suitably shocked.

"It appears not." Brian said solemnly. "Lord Black's concerns seem warranted."

Cornelius huffed, clasping his hands over his corpulent stomach. "I had no idea."

"Why would you?" Brian demurred. "It's the previous administration who is at fault."

Cornelius's eyes lit up. "Indeed, the previous administration."

Brian knew he'd taken the bait. He brushed the front of his robes in an absentminded gesture that
was anything but. "Far be it for me to advise you on the way forward, old friend, but…no, I shouldn't…"

"Please, Brian, if you can help me find a way through this difficult matter, I would be grateful." Cornelius said.

"I would hand this to Amelia Bones. She is in charge of the DMLE and the situation with Black is under her jurisdiction and the Auror office." Brian suggested calmly. "Tell her about your discovery of the irregularities in the original case and to verify the claims the children made at Hogwarts. Say nothing publically, or to anyone else, until she has completed her investigation and come to a conclusion. In the meanwhile, I will inform Lord Black you are moving forward with an investigation as he has requested."

Cornelius blew out a long breath and nodded. He tapped a interoffice communications mirror on his desk and looked meaningfully at Brian who hastily took down the privacy ward. "Amelia, can you come to my office immediately, please?"

"Of course, Minister." Amelia replied briskly.

Brian replaced the privacy ward as Cornelius tapped the mirror closed. "One more thing, Cornelius, I feel I should alert you to in regards to Lord Black."

Cornelius nodded eagerly for him to continue.

"He has taken control of Sirius Black's vault and has a copy of the Potters' last will and testament. Sirius Black is listed as Harry Potter's guardian in the event of their deaths should Frank and Alice Longbottom be unable to assume guardianship." Brian said crisply. "I've been instructed to prepare guardianship papers." He looked at Cornelius. "He believes as I do that Albus Dumbledore who organised the current guardianship situation for the Potter boy will seek to block any attempt to challenge it."

In Brian's opinion the sooner they got Harry Potter away from his muggle relatives the better. He had met with Petunia Dursley the day before and her willingness to sign away her rights to the boy on the promise of a bit of gold and a new house was alarming.

Cornelius's eyes sharpened. "Any guardianship claim would be judged on its own merits. Personally, I've never been happy that the boy was placed with muggles. You know there was an incident last summer that caused him to run away?"

Brian was about to reply when there was a rap on the door and Amelia entered with sharp efficient grace that spoke of her Auror training. "You wished to see me, Cornelius?" Her dark eyes landed on Brian. "Brian."

"Amelia." Brian stood and took her hand in his, placing a kiss against her knuckles. "Always a pleasure, but I'm afraid I'm here on business."

Cornelius waved Amelia into the second visitor's chair and handed her the letter from Lord Black. She took it and read it through her monocle. She glanced at Brian and back to Cornelius. "Well, a new Lord Black will certainly put the cat among the pigeons. What are the irregularities to which he refers?"

"Sirius Black never received a trial." Brian informed her.

"Indeed," Cornelius said, "which is most troubling." He clasped his hands together and looked at her sharply. "You see the problem?"
She pressed her lips together. "You're going to acquiesce to a full investigation?"

"Yes, under your personal jurisdiction given the sensitivity, Amelia." Cornelius cleared his throat. "When Black was captured at Hogwarts Harry Potter claimed Black was innocent and Peter Pettigrew was alive. Obviously I didn't take him seriously at the time because, well, I believed he had been traumatised by Dementors and a werewolf and confounded by Black because everybody knows Pettigrew died and Black was his killer. However, now that I understand there wasn't a trial…I'm forced to reconsider whether Potter was telling the truth."

"I see," Amelia said mildly, "I rather wish you had told informed me or the Auror office while school was in session. Hogwarts broke up for Summer last week. Potter's probably back with his muggle relatives and I can't see Albus Dumbledore giving up the address."

"Perhaps there were other witnesses present?" Brian asked smoothly. He didn't want to reveal his own knowledge.

Cornelius clapped his hands and pointed at Amelia. "The werewolf? And some other Professor – Snoop?"

"Severus Snape and Remus Lupin." Amelia noted. "My niece was most upset that Lupin had resigned from the school; said he was the best teacher they've had for DADA."

"There was also a boy and a girl with Potter, friends of his." Cornelius added. "I'm afraid I don't remember their names although the boy had bright red hair."

"That would be a Weasley then. Susan should be able to say which as she's in the same year." Amelia said. "I'll pull the original Sirius Black file and get started immediately." She handed the parchment back to Brian. "Perhaps, Minister, we could rescind the Kiss on sight order in the meantime? If Black is potentially innocent, we can't be seen to have executed him without a trial."

Cornelius nodded. "A wise precaution, Amelia. Get it done immediately." He leaned forward. "Amelia, if possible, I'd like this done without involving Albus. He seems to overreact to anything to do with the Potter boy and there seems some evidence that the House of Black could challenge for guardianship of Potter according to the terms of the Potters' will."

Amelia sneaked another look at Brian.

Brian nodded. "Sirius Black was named as a potential guardian in the event of the Potters' deaths. Frank and Alice Longbottom were first which at the time must have made sense – they were married and settled with a baby of their own unlike Black – but now…"

"Indeed," Cornelius said sympathetically, "they're hardly able to take Potter. But if the new Lord Black is suitable we would have to take a claim seriously."

"I understand," Amelia said dryly, rising to her feet, "I'll be discreet."

"Reports to myself only, Amelia." Cornelius waited until she was out of the door before he turned to Brian who had stood at the same time as Amelia. "I'll update you as soon as I receive news. Please convey my apologies to Lord Black for the irregularities and thank him for bringing them to my attention."

Brian shook hands with Cornelius. "I will, Cornelius, and thank you for your time and your efforts to resolve this. Should I arrange for the funds to be transferred?"

Cornelius smiled. "A donation to assist would be appreciated."
Brian left the Ministry smiling; Lord Black was going to be a happy man.

o-O-o

Reg swept into the dining room, did a fly over Remus, and landed next to Sirius. Sirius swiped his hand on a napkin and took the dangling letter.

"Lord Black,

Fudge has taken the bait.

Brian."

"Short, succinct and good news." Sirius passed the parchment to a tired looking Remus.

"Do you think Brian knows you're Lord Black?" Remus asked worriedly. He poked at the fish on his plate uninterestedly.

"Probably," Sirius demurred, "but he won't ask to give himself plausible deniability." He grinned. "I'm sure Fudge is clueless."

"Thankfully." Remus agreed dryly.

Kreacher popped in and slapped a letter beside the werewolf before popping out again.

"Good, the Gringotts mail diversion service is working." Remus said with relief. All other owls except Hooter, Reg and Hedwig would get diverted to Gringotts who alerted Kreacher to collect the letters. He opened the parchment and nodded at Sirius. "I'm to present myself to Madame Bones to give a statement about the events at Hogwarts concerning Sirius Black." He tilted his head. "Tomorrow – she doesn't waste time."

"Good," Sirius said, "because I've lost too much of it already."
Securing Guardianship of Pronglet:2

Amelia frowned at the diagram on the parchment in front of her – the Unspeakables' mock-up of the street and explosion that Sirius Black has supposedly caused.

The Unspeakable had noted that the spell Black had used would have had to travel through Pettigrew to impact directly behind him. Of course, perhaps the spell had been overpowered, obliterated Pettigrew – although the lack of physical evidence of his demise beyond a finger and a bloodied robe was bemusing – and then struck. But the angles were wrong; the impact suggested the spell had been shot from directly above.

Unfortunately there was also the small problem that Black's wand which Amelia had retrieved from evidence storage showed only a stunner, some disillusionment and stealth spells (which made sense if he was hiding from Aurors), and an infant healing charm (which she assumed he had used on the Potter child). According to his wand, Black hadn't blown anything up.

Nothing added up but especially that healing spell. The assumption in the statements was that Black had betrayed the Potters leading Voldemort to them only for Rubeus Hagrid to thwart Black's attempt to finish off the baby. Everyone assumed Black had panicked and given up the baby to Hagrid to make his escape (although contrarily he had also given up his best mode of transportation at the same time). But if Black had healed the baby…if his intent hadn't been to harm the child…

A knock on the door had her placing the parchment back into the file and calling for her first witness to enter.

Alastor Moody limped into her office. His scarred face creased happily as he grinned at her while his magical eye examined the room for hidden dangers. "Amelia."

"Alastor. How are you? Enjoying retirement?" Amelia shook hands with her old mentor and waved him into a seat.

"Albus has asked me to teach next year."

"Albus has asked me to teach next year." Alastor snorted, sitting down with a thump. He pointed at her badly hidden wince. "I did the same thing. Who wants to teach a school full of kids?"

"Although I'm sure you'd be good for them, Alastor." Amelia said with sincerity. Moody had been their best Auror instructor.

"Told Albus he was an idiot." Alastor said brusquely.

"Speaking of Albus, Alastor," Amelia said bluntly, "the rest of this conversation is subject to your Auror oath. He's not to be told about any of it and if I find that he knows something and he picked it out of your head, I'll have your head on a pike."

"Understood." Alastor said, his good eye gleaming with curiosity. "You're reinvestigating Black?"

She blew out a breath and nodded. "He didn't receive a trial, Alastor. Officially, I'm building the case for when we recapture him."

Alastor's eyebrows rose. "Well that explains why you rescinded the Kiss on sight." He shifted position slightly. "And unofficially?"

"Unofficially, it's beginning to look as though a giant cock-up was made." Amelia said simply.
"Most of the evidence of his guilt seems to consist of 'because we know he did it' hearsay."

He took a moment and sighed. "So I assume you want my take as Lead Auror at his capture?"

"Please." Amelia set up a diction quill and waved her wand to initiate it.

"On October thirty-first, nineteen-eighty-one, the Auror's office received a communication from Albus Dumbledore that James and Lily Potter had died in a confrontation with Voldemort. Their baby, Harry Potter, had somehow survived and Voldemort himself was dead. Black had arrived at the scene afterwards but found Rubeus Hagrid had already taken custody of the baby on Albus's orders. Hagrid left Black there, Black loaning him the use of his motorbike. At the time of Albus's communication, the baby was at Hogwarts receiving medical treatment while Albus sorted out a safe place for him – he'd sent Minerva McGonagall to do a recce of some muggle house."

Alastor recounted the events briskly. "I knew the Potters had gone under a Fidelius charm and believed as Albus did that Black was the Secret Keeper for the Potters and must have betrayed them. Albus confirmed the Fidelius was down so I took a team to Godric's Hollow and established that the bare facts as had been reported to us seemed to be in order. I left men securing the bodies and house from scavengers and gawkers while another team of us including a team of Hit Wizards from Black's own department picked up Black's apparition trail."

Amelia nodded. "And then?"

"The trail was a funny one." Alastor said. "Black was muddying his own trail enough to delay us but not to throw us off course. The techniques he was using are typical in Hit Wizard undercover work where it has to appear the undercover is covering up his trail but in truth they're leaving enough for us to follow. And he wasn't making for the Continent which would have been the obvious exit route for him." He sighed. "When we finally caught up with Black, Pettigrew was a finger, the street was filled with dead muggles and Black was on his knees, laughing hysterically. We arrested him, took his wand and put him in a cell – he was too out of it for questioning. Crouch refused to send for a healer."

"You noted Black was suffering from shock?" Amelia queried.

"And concussion, bruising and a variety of cuts and scrapes. He had a lump the size of a grapefruit on his head. I healed what I could but he was hysterical, laughing one minute, weeping the next." Alastor stated tersely. "I went home, came back the next morning and found he'd been transported to Azkaban overnight on Crouch's order. I wrote up my report and Crouch had me back out hunting Death Eaters again before the end of the day. You remember those days, Amelia, the department was chaos. I admit I forgot about Black and I just assumed he'd had his day in court at some point, been found guilty and thrown back to Azkaban."

"I think that was everyone's assumption." Amelia tapped her fingers impatiently on the file. "In hindsight, Alastor, what are your thoughts?"

"It never made sense to me that Black betrayed the Potters." Alastor answered after a long silence. "James Potter and Sirius Black were brilliant as partners through the Hit Wizard boot-camp training we did back then. The idea that one would betray the other was inconceivable. When Black muttered that it was his fault during his arrest, it sounded to me like he was taking responsibility for a plan that had gone wrong – I'd heard him say the same thing in the same tone when we lost a man on a mission he'd led."

"Black was a brilliant Hit Wizard." Amelia remembered. She hadn't known him well – she'd been a senior Auror with her own team and missions – but the scuttlebutt about him and Potter had been
"He was bloody brilliant," Alastor stated bluntly, "and his take-down rate was exceptional." He stabbed her desk with a finger. "If anyone had asked me who was the least likely to be a Death Eater, my answer would have been Black: he took out far too many of them to be one of them. The way he killed Pettigrew didn't make any sense because Black was skilled enough to make it a clean hit without blowing up the street." He sighed. "My immediate theory for Black's betrayal was the Imperius. That once he came back to himself, he went insane with grief and wasn't thinking clearly. That when Pettigrew caught up with him, he didn't know what he was doing and lashed out. It was the only thing that made sense to me."

Amelia mulled it over. It was a credible theory – explained Black's actions with the baby but not the lack of an explosive spell – and if true, it would mean Black heading for the secure ward at Saint Mungo's and not Azkaban.

"Of course my theory doesn't explain why Pettigrew went after Black on his own-some." Alastor continued. "I'd, uh, met him a couple of times and he was a good kid but he never struck me as the avenging angel type: Black, yes; Pettigrew, no."

Amelia made a snap decision and stopped the quill. "Alastor, there is new evidence about Black that has surfaced with his recent exploits at Hogwarts. It seems Pettigrew could be alive. I'd like you to sit in, disillusioned while I interview the witnesses. They're due to arrive in an hour."

Alastor agreed. They went over the little evidence they had and Alastor was as disturbed by the wand and forensic evidence as Amelia was. As the hour for the interviews drew close, Alastor sat out of the way, disillusioned with a silencing charm around himself.

Remus Lupin arrived five minutes early and Amelia allowed him entry, taking in the new, if simple, clothing he wore, the scars of his lycanthropy and the pleasant demeanour. She shook his hand and explained the procedure, made him take an oath of secrecy, and set the quill to record.

"Mister Lupin, you've been called here today to give evidence in the case of Sirius Black concerning events at Hogwarts. I'd like to focus specifically on the night Black was caught and escaped."

Amelia began. She motioned at him to speak.

"It was the night of the full moon and I was in my office when I happened to glance at a map of Hogwarts that I and some friends constructed when we attended the school."

"Friends?" queried Amelia.

Lupin's lips quirked. "James Potter, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew."

Amelia hadn't realised he'd known them, but then she was a good twenty years older than Potter and Black, and Lupin hadn't joined the Department as they had done. She nodded slowly. "You happened to glance at a map?"

"The map is charmed to show every individual and their position within the school and surrounding grounds. I noticed that Sirius and Peter were both on the map very close to Harry – Harry Potter – and his friends." Lupin winced slightly. "I was shocked to see Peter as I had believed like everyone else that he was dead."

"Your testimony is that he's alive?" Amelia asked pointedly.

"Oh, he's alive alright." Lupin growled. "I immediately realised that Sirius was innocent of killing him and if he was innocent of killing Peter then…"
Amelia inclined her head in understanding. "You wondered if he was also innocent of killing the Potters?"

Lupin gave a small nod of acknowledgement. "Yes, and why Peter had felt it necessary to lie about his continued existence. I ran out to the Shrieking Shack to confront Peter and Sirius." He picked up the glass of water Amelia had supplied and drank a sip. "When I got there, Peter was still in his rat form…"

"He's an animagus?" Amelia interrupted.

"Yes, and he'd been living for years as the Weasleys' pet rat." Lupin breathed in deeply, clearly trying to control his anger. "Severus Snape turned up and well, Severus has a history of bad blood between myself, Sirius and James; he was determined to capture Sirius and his behaviour alarmed the children. The children's disarming spells went awry and he got knocked out. We finally confronted Peter and the truth came out: Peter had been the Secret Keeper. Peter had known Sirius knew he had betrayed James and Lily and so set him up. It was Peter who cut off his finger and blew up the gas main in the muggle street. Peter transformed into a rat immediately to escape the explosion, disappearing into the sewers."

"What happened then?" Amelia prompted when he fell silent.

"We bound Peter and started back towards the school, only I'd forgotten about the moon and as soon as I got outside…" Lupin grimaced. "Sirius was able to run me off and ensure I didn't hurt anyone. It was entirely careless of me."

"But unintentional." Amelia noted. "I'll have to make a note of the incident in your official registration file as this statement will be a matter of public record but I'll also state that it has been explained to my satisfaction and you're cleared of intentional harm."

"Thank you." Lupin said somewhat embarrassed.

"Please continue." Amelia prompted.

"Well, I'm not sure what happened next as I was in my werewolf form but I've been told Peter escaped." He sighed heavily. "I woke up the next morning to the reports of Sirius escaping and the news that the Minister had refused to believe his innocence without Peter to prove it." He paused. "I was…am devastated about that; it was my fault Peter got free and to think Sirius has been innocent all this time and locked away in Azkaban…" His head snapped up and he looked at Amelia firmly. "I'm willing to take veritaserum to confirm my testimony and I can provide a memory if you have a pensieve."

"Thank you, that won't be necessary at this time." Amelia replied quietly. "Have you had contact with Sirius Black since your departure from Hogwarts?"

Lupin reached into his robes and pulled out a piece of parchment. He handed it to her. It was blank. She looked at him questioningly.

"Tap it with your wand and say 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.'" Lupin suggested, wrestling with a smile.

Amelia followed his instructions. A short number of words filled the page; Black was somewhere sunny, safe. He wanted Lupin to keep an eye on Harry. She waved her wand over the parchment but her detection spells for tracing came back negative: Sirius Black had done a good job of hiding his trail. She put the parchment down and considered Lupin carefully. "I'll have to keep this."
"I thought you might."

She reached over and stopped the quill. "Thank you for your testimony." She said. "If Black contacts you again, please tell him that we're investigating the original case and if he turns himself in, we'll make sure he gets fair treatment. The Kiss on sight order has been cancelled."

"I have to admit to being surprised that you're investigating at all." Lupin said. "From what I was told, the Minister was convinced Severus's version of events was the only one that mattered."

"New evidence has come to light that has made the Minister revise that opinion." Amelia said smoothly. "Hence the questioning."

"Will you be interviewing Harry and his friends?" Lupin asked as he got to his feet. "And Severus presumably?"

"Miss Granger and Mister Weasley are due in for questioning this afternoon and I decided to speak with you all first before bringing in Professor Snape." Amelia said. Susan's recount of the gossip from Hogwarts about what had happened had indicated a rift between Snape and the other witnesses. Moreover, it was a matter of public record that Snape had been Albus Dumbledore's spy in the Death Eaters and she was concerned if she contacted him, Dumbledore would get wind of the investigation and seek to poke his nose in it. Harry, however… "Unfortunately, I have no address for Mister Potter as that information is held by Dumbledore on a need to know basis only."

"I have the address if you want it." Lupin gestured towards some parchment and Amelia offered him a quill. He scribbled it down. "I would advise you that Harry's relatives deeply dislike the wizarding world. It may be better to write or telephone the muggle way to agree a suitable time." He motioned with his wand over the parchment. "It's charmed so only you can read it now. I agree with Albus inasmuch that Harry's whereabouts should be kept need to know but Harry would want to help Sirius."

"I assume Dumbledore gave you the contact details as an old friend of the family?" Amelia commented, thinking about Lupin's advice on Harry's family and what it meant for the Boy Who Lived's home environment.

Lupin shook his head. "Albus refused me access – for Harry's safety I'm sure. But I know Petunia's name – I'd met her through Lily of course. It isn't hard to track her down with muggle directories."

Amelia shook her head, trying to make sense of that. "I see."

She stood up and he followed her to the door. She shook his hand and kept hold of it when he would have pulled away. "My niece was most disappointed you left Hogwarts. I hope you've found a new position?"

"I have but my employment oath prevents me from saying anything further." Lupin replied without hesitation.

Amelia was intrigued but let him go. She was about to close the door when she saw Arthur Weasley walking down the corridor with his son. She waited and ushered them inside.

Ronald Weasley's story gave additional context to how they'd all ended up in the Shrieking Shack – Black ambushing him – and how they had all ended up in the infirmary – Dementors attacking which was a horror story all of its own. But it also substantiated the main part of Remus Lupin's evidence: Peter Pettigrew had lived as the Weasleys' rat for years; he was alive; he was responsible for the deaths of the Potters and the muggles not Black.
Arthur was pale after the boy's tale, his freckles standing out sharply. He had kept a hand on Ronald's shoulder throughout in silent paternal support.

"Does this mean Sirius will be set free?" Ron asked at the end of the interview.

"We're examining all the evidence." Amelia said kindly. "In the meantime, remember this is confidential and you can't discuss this with anyone, not even your friends or the Headmaster." She looked over at Arthur. "Do you want to press charges against Black for his assault on Ronald?"

"No!" Ron said loudly. He blushed bright red as his father raised his eyebrows at him. "Sirius was after the rat not me! Please, Dad, Harry will never forgive me and…" he shot Amelia a look and inched closer to his father, whispering in his ear.

Amelia caught the gist of it despite the attempt at low volume: Sirius was Harry's godfather and could get Harry away from the awful Dursleys.

Arthur considered his son seriously. He sighed and looked over at Amelia with a small shake of his head. "Since his intention wasn't to harm Ron, I'll decline, and besides, I think he's probably already suffered enough if he's spent twelve years in Azkaban as an innocent man. If that's all, Amelia?"

She nodded and Arthur nudged Ron into standing up. Amelia considered that it was going to be interesting to see Harry Potter's home and his relatives. She'd barely finished the muggle letter informing the Dursleys of her intended visit and arranged for her secretary to send it when the Grangers arrived.

Hermione Granger's testimony was the most comprehensive. She confirmed everything the others had said, and added a tremendous amount of detail that spoke to an eidetic memory. She also expressed hope of Sirius being cleared for Harry's sake.

It was late by the time they left. Alastor removed his disillusionment and took the seat opposite her again. Amelia sent for some tea. She poured Alastor's (black, no sugar) and sat back with her own (black with a squeeze of lemon).

"Your thoughts, Alastor?"

"Well, first things first: their story about Black and Pettigrew back in 'eight-one makes sense of the evidence." Alastor stated. "Black wasn't the Secret Keeper so he didn't betray the Potters and he handed over the baby because there was never any intent to harm the lad. He went after Peter knowing we'd be likely following him hence laying the trail for us. He never fired on Pettigrew so no spell registered on his wand. Pettigrew cut off his finger and escaped which is why we don't find a trace of the rest of his body." He sighed heavily. "Lupin's a good witness. I met him a couple of times back then and he was always the most serious of them. I feel I did Black a grave disservice in not following up on him after he was sent to Azkaban."

"You weren't one of the signatories on the order that sent him there, Alastor," Amelia reminded him, "Bagnold and Crouch are at fault. Dumbledore was Chief Warlock and also should have checked there was a trial. There's going to be plenty of blame to go around."

Alastor winced. "In everyone's defence, it was a chaotic time."

"I'm more concerned at the complete lack of adherence to procedure at Hogwarts a couple of weeks ago." Amelia admitted. "Cornelius doesn't surprise me but…"

"But why didn't Albus put Black under his personal protection? Albus has the authority as Chief Warlock to overrule the Minister on the matter." Alastor frowned heavily. "It makes you think,
doesn't it? Albus was the one who gave evidence that Sirius was the Secret Keeper; he was in charge of the Wizengamot when it all went down. He has motive for keeping it quiet."

It was so like Alastor to be so paranoid even about one of his old friends. "Perhaps he had something to do with the escape." Amelia mused out loud.

"Maybe."

Amelia nodded. Something didn't add up about how Black had managed to get free but she wasn't too worried about that since if he hadn't all indications were that an innocent man would have been Kissed.

"I'm not sure I need Potter's testimony," Amelia admitted, "although it would be good for completeness."

"And you want to take a look at the boy's living arrangements." Alastor said bluntly. "I know I would since a muggleborn witch and the son of the biggest muggle advocate in the Ministry indicate that they'd prefer the Boy Who Lived to be removed from his muggle relatives and live with a man who is a complete stranger to him."

Amelia nodded. She was concerned; she couldn't deny it especially since Weasley's and Granger's comments followed after Lupin's about the Dursleys hating the wizarding world. "I'd like you to come with me day after tomorrow, Alastor. If there are issues, I'll need an independent witness."

Alastor nodded. "I'm available." He eyed her speculatively. "Are you going to declare Black innocent?"

"Ideally, I'd like his veritaserum testimony."

"Or Pettigrew's."

"Or Pettigrew's." Amelia sighed. "From a prosecution perspective, I can't charge Black with killing Pettigrew and the muggles: his wand clears him of casting any kind of explosive spell, there's the lack of Pettigrew's body, and while witness testimony places him at the scene and casting a spell, there's nothing that points at Black actually causing the explosion. On the other hand, the idea that Pettigrew caused the explosion and escaped somehow to blame Black would fit with the evidence we have – the positioning of the blast, the single finger, the way Pettigrew yelled his accusation in front of muggles breaking the Statute of Secrecy."

"Which leaves the betrayal of the Potters leading to their deaths." Alastor said.

"And that all comes down to hearsay testimony that Black was the Secret Keeper. The strongest statement is Dumbledore's," she tapped the file, "as he recounts James Potter told him Black would be the Secret Keeper and Dumbledore cast the initial Fidelius that made him so."

"But the Granger girl gave a very nice recounting of how Black switched with Pettigrew behind the scenes, and they all determined to tell everyone Black was the Keeper as a bluff to divert attention away from the real one...that brings in reasonable doubt." Alastor said sagely.

"I know and a good advocate like Brian Cutter would tear a prosecution case apart in moments." Amelia said. "Truthfully, I can tell our esteemed Minister that what little evidence there is against Black is circumstantial and won't stand up in a court; that Black would never be convicted if everyone judged the evidence fairly."

"Not quite the same as clearing him." Alastor noted dryly.
Amelia shrugged. "It will be for Cornelius. Let's face it though; if we get the Boy Who Lived stating on record that he believes Black wasn't the Secret Keeper that will be more than enough for most people."

o-O-o

Remus stepped out of the floo and was almost assaulted by an anxious Sirius. Not for the first time he mused on the relative similarities between Sirius and Padfoot and wondered if a rolled up newspaper to Sirius's nose wasn't in order.

"Well?" demanded Sirius.

"She actually seemed to take me seriously." Remus admitted cautiously. "I caught sight of Ronald Weasley just as I was leaving and Moody was there." He commented as he led the way out of the reception room to Sirius's study. "He was disillusioned and in the corner but I could smell him."

Sirius did a little happy dance through the library and into the study.

Remus debated momentarily whether to tell Sirius about the note that would be going into his werewolf registration file and decided against. Sirius would only feel guilty and it wasn't truly his fault – Remus had been the one to forget to take his Wolfsbane. "I gave her Harry's address too."

"I don't see how it will make a difference to my getting custody." Sirius complained. He hadn't wanted to risk compromising Harry's location.

Remus poked his friend in the arm. "Trust me, it'll make a difference."

"Well in that spirit of optimism," Sirius pulled him over to the desk, "come and help me pick out a house."

"You do realise that it takes more than a month to exchange contracts on a muggle property?" Remus argued, exasperated.

"Muggle auctions, Moony, are a wonderful thing, not to mention money talks or it did with the house Brian is organising for the Dursleys." Sirius countered.

Remus looked at him suspiciously. "He used magic, didn't he?"

Sirius shrugged. "I ask no questions…"

"And he tells you no lies." Remus sighed but he set to the task of choosing a home for Harry with a rush of happiness that he hadn't felt in a long while.
The muggle house looked prim and proper with a pretty front garden filled with roses. It was not the type of place where Amelia had envisaged the last of the Potter line residing, never mind the Boy Who Lived. She would have wondered why none of the Potter properties had been used except there was an impressive set of blood wards surrounding the house singing with Lily Potter's signature and additional wards with Dumbledore's. It explained why Dumbledore had placed Potter with his aunt, and Amelia had always understood keeping the address need-to-know, but it didn't explain why there wasn't a record of visitations to confirm the child was safe.

Alastor had told her that he'd taken the precaution of 'offering' to check out the wards when he'd gone to talk with Dumbledore the day before about his Hogwarts job offer. Dumbledore had refused but as Alastor pointed out to Amelia, his old friend would not be surprised that Alastor had ignored him, tracked down the address and gone ahead with his offer anyway. It gave them a wonderful cover for their visit if Dumbledore had some means of monitoring the residence Alastor couldn't see.

Amelia glanced down at her smart brown pantsuit and nodded to Alastor who had actually taken the time to transfigure his usual garb into a badly fitting muggle suit and trench-coat; his magical eye had been charmed to appear normal to a muggle.

He rang the doorbell and they could both hear the echo in the house. A few moments later, Petunia Dursley answered the door.

Amelia blinked. Any resemblance she had expected to see between Lily Potter and her sister disappeared immediately; the horsey brunette in front of her could have been deemed handsome perhaps, if she lost the snooty air and sour expression. "Petunia Dursley? I'm Amelia Bones from the DMLE. I sent you a letter…"

"Yes, I received it." Dursley sniffed. She ran her eyes over them and peered beyond them as though to check if the neighbours had noticed them. "You'd better come in."

The inside of the house wasn't large but it was reasonable and not unduly small. Amelia noticed Dursley darting a glance at the cupboard under the stairs as she waved them through into a well-proportioned living room. The furniture was well-maintained although there were signs of aging in the sagging sofa and chairs. There were pictures everywhere of a plump blond boy at various ages; other photos of Dursley and an obese man who had to be her husband were in evidence. There were no photos of their famous nephew or his parents and Amelia's suspicions from the interviews with Harry's friends came raging back tenfold.

"Harry is outside in the garden doing his chores. I'll get him for you." Dursley left before they could say anything.

Amelia exchanged a 'this doesn't look good' gaze with Alastor. They remained silent and soon enough footsteps signalled someone coming into the room, Amelia focused on her first close-up look of the Boy Who Lived.

As reported, he was a miniature James Potter in features but his eyes were brilliant green. His hair was a dark mop, the fringe pulled down over his infamous scar. His clothing was scruffy; oversized t-shirt and shorts that were too baggy on his small frame – hand-me-downs, Amelia surmised, but Dursley was probably hoping to pass them off as gardening clothes hence Potter being in the garden when Dursley knew they were coming to interview him. He had nothing on his feet; probably whatever shoes he wore had been left at the back-door. His hands were wet, red and scratched; his
upper lip had a layer of hard-earned sweat; he'd barely been given time to clean-up.

Dursley frowned at them all. "I have appointments to keep. Our son is out for the day but my husband will be home in four hours. Make sure you lot are gone by then."

Amelia stiffened at the sharp tone and watched in astonishment as Dursley hurried from the room, a small bang from the front door underscoring her departure. What kind of guardian left a thirteen year old boy to be questioned by law enforcement on his own?

She turned back to see Potter swallowing nervously and gave him a reassuring smile. "Firstly, let me assure you that you're not in trouble. I'm Director Amelia Bones, Mister Potter, and this is my ex-colleague, Alastor Moody. Did your aunt explain our visit today?"

"Just that you were the police and wanted to talk to me." Potter replied politely. His eyes shone with curiosity as the concern over whether he was in trouble eased.

"Well, I'm in charge of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the Ministry," Amelia explained, "which includes the Auror division that is the magical equivalent of muggle policemen." She gestured at Alastor who remained silent. "Both of us were Aurors at one time. Alastor here actually worked with your father who was a Hit Wizard, a special kind of policeman, but Alastor is retired now, and I mainly deal with prosecutions and try to make my budgets add up these days."

Potter's face lit up. "My Dad was a Hit Wizard?"

"Yes, and a very fine one too until your Granddad died and he had to take over the family estates." Alastor said brusquely while Amelia assimilated that Potter hadn't known his father's occupation. "Maybe we can tell you a few stories after our discussion."

Potter beamed at them happily.

Alastor motioned at him impatiently. "Where's your wand, lad?"

"Upstairs in my room." He pointed upwards.

"You really should have it on you at all times." Alastor chided crisply.

Potter flushed. "My uncle…he…they don't like magical things."

He was clearly embarrassed and Amelia's heart went out to him; abuse cases had always gotten to her. She wished she'd thought to bring a young Auror along.

"Hnmph." Alastor said. "Amelia, you'll be setting up the privacy wards down here while I ensure the rest of the house is secured?"

In other words, she should do a full scan of the downstairs for evidence of mistreatment while he did the upstairs. She nodded sharply.

"If you're going to use magic, won't I get into trouble?" Harry asked. "Somebody's house elf used magic here once trying to get me expelled and I got a warning."

Amelia frowned. That explained the misdemeanour for underage magic she'd found on his file; she'd see about having it expunged. "Our magic will not register as under-age, Harry, but if there are any issues I'll take care of them."

"Well, lad, lead the way upstairs." Alastor ushered the boy out and Amelia immediately dived into
her bag, set up her quill and began casting her scanning spell, the results automatically recording onto the parchment.

She headed out into the hall and peered into the cupboard that had made Dursley so worried; the sight sickened her. There was some clutter of discarded muggle sports gear and cleaning equipment, but beyond that there was a stained children's mattress and an old taped up sign that read 'Harry's room.' She closed the door and moved into the kitchen.

It was immaculate; shining surfaces and a floor that gleamed. Amelia took a quick look at the neat back garden – shoddy trainers which she assumed were Potter's had been left on the back step along with gardening gear, but no gloves that would have protected Potter's hands.

She made it back into the living room and read over the parchment, frowning heavily at the results from upstairs that Alastor had directed to the quill. Her stomach churned at the litany. She called for her house elf and had her bring some tea, sandwiches, scones and cake. She packed the parchment away just before Alastor and Potter came back into the room. Potter's eyes widened at the sight of food.

"I hope you don't mind but I thought some afternoon tea would help make this a little easier." Amelia directed him to the sofa and he sat down gingerly.

Alastor sat next to him.

"Now, Mister Potter, as a minor you should really have a guardian present. As Alastor here knew your father, perhaps you'll allow him to stand-in?"

Potter's eyes went to Alastor questioningly.

"I'll be pleased to do it." Alastor said gruffly.

Potter nodded. "OK, then." He looked back at Amelia. "And it's Harry; just Harry."

Amelia smiled at him. "Shall we get the oath over with first then, Harry?"

"Oath?"

"All ongoing investigations require an oath to ensure information doesn't leak before it is officially released. It also ensures that witnesses cannot collude with each other." Alastor explained to him. "Have you got the written version for the lad?"

Amelia opened her bag and extracted a printed copy of the oath. "Here you go, Harry."

Harry read over the parchment. "What's the investigation you want to ask me about?"

"Sirius Black." Amelia replied bluntly. "Specifically what happened the night he escaped from Hogwarts."

His eyes darted to hers, and she caught the full weight of the worry, fear and hope in them before he dropped his gaze, and shifted to look at Alastor to check he should take the oath. Alastor nodded and Harry picked up the quill, signing his name quickly and without fanfare.

"Good. Tea?" Amelia poured him a cup, placed sandwiches on a plate and handed the lot over to him with a flick of her wand.

He tucked into the simple fare eating quickly and efficiently as though used to rushing. She knew he
had been deprived of food in the past; locked up and barely fed. She handed him another plate of sandwiches as she asked him to describe what happened in his own words.

His testimony married with the others but it was the most painful to hear; the personal aspect was too sharp to ignore – Pettigrew had betrayed Harry's parents and caused their deaths, Black was Harry's godfather. The horror of the Dementor attack had Amelia shivering and she was sympathetic when he expressed dismay and frustration at the Minister's initial decision not to believe him…

He looked over at her finally, his green eyes bright with curiosity again. "Can I ask why the Minister changed his mind?"

"He discovered that your godfather never had a trial." Amelia answered honestly. "It has shaken the Minister's conviction that Black is guilty and hence his request I investigate." She handed Harry a slice of cake much to Alastor's badly hidden amusement.

Harry swallowed some cake and waved a hand at her. "What about Snape's testimony?"

"From what we've heard there'd be no point asking him anything." Alastor interjected. "He only saw you three kids, Lupin and Black together, and was knocked out before anything of note took place."

"And the Headmaster?" Harry asked. "He talked to Sirius too, I think."

"But alone." Alastor commented. "No verifying witnesses except for Black himself unlike the four of you."

"So will Sirius be cleared?" His young face was so hopeful that Amelia felt regret at giving him the official answer.

"I can't say, Harry, until I've finished and submitted my findings to the Minister." Amelia said apologetically.

"Don't forget though that you're not to discuss this interview with your Headmaster or with your friends." Alastor said. "Or Black."

Harry nodded quickly, streaks of red across his cheeks giving away he probably was in contact with his godfather. Amelia knew she should probably ask for the correspondence but couldn't bring herself to deprive the child of anything positive in his life.

"Well, if Amelia's done," Alastor shot her a look and she gave a nod, stopping the quill, "how about I tell you a couple of stories about your Dad?"

Harry's demeanour brightened. Amelia watched as Alastor weaved a grand tale about James Potter's first training session and it was clear that Harry was starved for information about his parents and heritage. What was Albus Dumbledore thinking?

Three stories later and Amelia brought a reluctant halt to the afternoon.

Alastor paused on their way out and dug into the pocket of his trench-coat. He motioned for Harry to give his arm and placed a wand holster on it. He pushed Harry's wand into place. "Practice releasing it from the holster." He said roughly. "And remember to always wear your wand. You can hide it beneath your shirts now."

Harry grinned at him. "Thank you."

"Remember…" Alastor wagged a finger at him.
"Constant vigilance!" Harry replied back promptly with a cheeky grin.

Amelia rolled her eyes because Alastor had jumped on the opportunity to indoctrinate another person into his paranoia. "It's been good to meet you, Harry." She shook his hand as they said goodbye and left the house. Amelia couldn't help feeling wretched that she was leaving Harry Potter somewhere she was certain was completely unsuitable.

She and Alastor exchanged another look; they had a lot to talk about but none of it was appropriate for discussion on a public street. They walked down the road towards an alley where they could apparate without being seen.

A grey-haired woman hovered at the corner of Privet Drive and Wisteria Walk. She broke into a trot upon seeing them and Amelia noticed she was followed by a cat – no a kneazle. Amelia frowned at the tartan carpet slippers that the woman wore.

"Alastor Moody!" The woman called out in greeting. "Albus said you might be stopping by today."

And suddenly Amelia was very grateful Alastor had taken the time to provide them with a cover story. Obviously the woman was Dumbledore's spy in the neighbourhood.

"Arabella Figg." Alastor said politely. "It's been a while." He didn't introduce Amelia and she kept quiet.

"You don't really think Black's still a threat, do you, Alastor?" Figg asked hurriedly. "Albus said his sources place Black abroad."

"As do mine." Alastor answered. "But you know what I always say…"

"Constant vigilance." Figg said obediently. "Do you want to use my floo?"

"A private place to apparate would be appreciated, Arabella." Alastor said, glancing at Amelia.

They all walked briskly to Figg's house. It smelled of kneazles and boiled vegetables. Amelia found her nose wrinkling but otherwise hid her reaction. As soon as the door was closed, Alastor started with the questions.

"I take it you've been watching over Potter a while?" Alastor asked.

"Since December 'eighty-one." Figg replied. "Albus asked me to keep watch and report anything suspicious – wizards in the area, that kind of thing, give him any updates on Harry that I could gather. It was the least I could do for Albus after, well, you remember."

"We caught a glimpse of Potter in the garden," Alastor continued, "bit thin, isn't he? And I thought his folks left him money. You wouldn't know it by the way he dresses."

"Well, children can be fussy eaters, Alastor," Figg said, avoiding their eyes, "and who knows what the youngsters consider fashionable these days."

"Do you really believe that?" Amelia blurted out unable to stop herself.

Figg sighed and her mouth drooped. "The Dursleys are perfectly horrid muggles, I'm afraid. They've never treated Harry the same as their own son – although some might think that was a blessing. Albus warned me when I complained to him the first time I baby-sat Harry for them that they might not be as caring towards him as we would wish, but he was certain that they would do right by their nephew in the end."
"You baby-sit the boy?" Alastor shot Amelia a look that told her to keep quiet.

"Not very often these days – he's getting old enough to look after himself or so the Dursleys would have it. Obviously I follow Albus's instructions not to reveal I'm a squib or about You-Know-Who or about the wizarding world but...it's difficult and, well, I've thought it best that he didn't enjoy being with me too much otherwise the Dursleys probably would send him somewhere else."

Amelia badly wanted to hex the woman. She had lacked the compassion to make Harry's life better when he stayed with her, and followed Albus Dumbledore's word as though it was law. And why hadn't Figg reported any of the mistreatment she had to have seen?

"At least someone was making regular reports about the boy's welfare to the proper authorities." Alastor said briskly, obviously thinking along similar lines to herself.

"Oh Albus made the official reports. He and I didn't have anything formal, Alastor. I just contacted Albus every so often usually just after I'd baby-sat Harry." Figg's eyes crinkled as she smiled. "I always used to smile when I'd see the occasional photo I managed to take and send to Albus end up in the Prophet."

So that's how pictures of the boy had been released to the public; Amelia had always wondered. Amelia darted a look at Alastor – she wasn't certain she could stay another moment without yelling at Figg.

Alastor got the message. "Well, it's been nice chatting to you, Arabella, but we must be off. You can tell Albus the wards look fine."

Amelia smiled tightly as she offered her own terse goodbye and immediately apparated to the Ministry. Alastor was a moment behind her. They waited until they got to her office and under heavy privacy wards before she erupted.

"Did I just hear that right?" demanded Amelia. "Did that...that woman..." she was almost incoherent with anger.

Alastor pointed at her desk. "Get the Ogden's out."

She did and by the time she'd knocked back one drink she'd regained some measure of control.

"You have to understand Arabella's not been wholly with it since her husband and her son were killed standing right next to her in a Death Eater attack on Diagon Alley." Alastor said, nursing his own drink that he'd poured from his flask. "Her husband was a friend of Albus's so Albus looked after Arabella after his death, made sure she got her inheritance despite her being a squib, and set her up properly in her new kneazle breeding business."

"Hence her loyalty to him." Amelia sighed heavily, her ire slightly tempered with Alastor's explanation.

"Unfortunately Albus could tell her that grass was pink with purple dots and she would believe him." Alastor agreed. "So, having heard from Albus when she first got there that the Dursleys wouldn't treat the boy well, it probably never occurred to her to tell him again because she thought he knew." He sighed. "As for her convoluted thinking that giving the kid some affection when she watched him would mean the Dursleys wouldn't bring him back..." he grimaced, "well, your guess is as good as mine."

"She could be right." Amelia conceded. "The Dursleys would probably be that petty." She poured herself another drink. "The results from the scans are horrifying. He lived in that cupboard under the
stairs for years and there was a long list of verbal abuse and minor physical injuries. They periodically starved him, Alastor, sending a kid to bed with no food as a punishment but taken to an extreme."

He nodded. "He has the smallest of the bedrooms upstairs. There are locks on the door outside; evidence that there were bars at the window at one point. I would guess he's been locked in before. His furniture is broken, dilapidated. He barely has enough clothes to justify a wardrobe – all of them seem second-hand. His school clothes are good quality but they're in his trunk. He keeps his valuables under a loose floorboard under the bed. He has food stored there."

"In case they lock him in there again?" Amelia rubbed the back of her neck. "Any other child, Alastor, and I would have removed him from that house already."

"Even I know you're going to need to be politically savvy about this." Alastor comforted her. "Look, Albus and I have been friends for a long time and he is... a great wizard but he's not infallible even if he sometimes thinks he is." He sipped his drink. "He messed up. He obviously knew the muggles might have an issue accepting the lad as their own, he dismissed the first report of mistreatment from his agent who then failed to report further incidents, and he failed to check on the lad himself. Then, as the boy's Headmaster, he's failed to see the signs of abuse since Potter started at Hogwarts. The boy's far too thin for his age; somebody should have noticed."

"Or it's been ignored."

"Or it's been ignored." Alastor agreed dryly.

Amelia sighed heavily. "You know what else bothers me."

"That he didn't know his Dad was a Hit Wizard?" Alastor suggested. "It bothered me, I can tell you."

"Well, yes, that too," and Amelia, "but what I was referring to was something Brian Cutter said to me about the new Lord Black."

Alastor's eyebrows shot up is his grizzled forehead. "A new Lord Black? And he's hired Brian Cutter?"

She explained about the letter from Lord Black to Cutter, the meeting in Cornelius's office, and saw that he got the political implications immediately; Moody had never been stupid. "Cutter has a copy of the Potters' will and Sirius Black was named, after the Longbottoms, as guardian." She put her glass down and gazed at Alastor. "Albus Dumbledore took illegal custody of Harry Potter, placed him with the muggles, and failed to ensure that one of the named guardians on the will got a trial!"

"I can see how it doesn't look good, Amelia," Alastor admitted, "especially in light of the fact that he didn't place Black in protective custody at Hogwarts either, but I don't think Albus would deliberately keep a man in prison for twelve years if he knew he was innocent."

"Not even for his vaunted Greater Good?" Amelia asked pointedly.

Alastor conceded that with a huff. "Admittedly, Albus can justify almost anything to his greater good but not something unquestionably wrong. Keeping the boy behind blood wards where he might be unsafe from his relatives, no. Keeping the boy behind blood wards where he might be unloved, yes. Condemning an innocent man to Azkaban for twelve years, no. Not stepping in to clear Black's name because Albus thinks Potter will be safer where he is, maybe."

Amelia grimaced; the lines separating the statements Alastor had made into acceptable and
unacceptable were very thin but they were there. "You know him better than me." She allowed.

"And knowing him, regardless of my belief that I don't think Albus would keep the boy there if faced with all the evidence we have of the muggles' neglect of the lad, I would advise you to get Potter's new guardianship situation sorted out before Albus ever gets wind of it." Alastor said bluntly.

"Understood." And Amelia knew who she was going to call first.

o-O-o

Sirius reread the letter from Brian again. And again.

* Completely cleared subject to Minister's signature. *

* Did Lord Black have a way to contact Sirius Black? *

* The Ministry wanted to know if Sirius Black would be prepared to assume immediate guardianship of Harry Potter. *

He read it again.

Remus impatiently plucked it out of his numb fingers and read it. "Padfoot! We did it!" He slapped Sirius's back, jolting him forward. "Congratulations! Didn't I tell you sending Bones round to the muggles would increase your chances to get custody of Harry? You owe me five galleons! And don't think…" he suddenly looked at Sirius who hadn't moved. "Are you OK, Padfoot?"

No. Yes. He really had no idea. His emotions swung in a pendulum from crazed happiness to complete astonishment to total fear that he was going to mess up with Harry and – *what had he been thinking?*

Sirius rubbed his forehead and dragged his mind back into focus. Harry. Harry. Harry. He was doing this for Harry and it had worked. "Sorry," he said, realising belatedly that Remus was regarding him worriedly, "just," he flapped a hand at him, "surprised. I thought it would take more time or something."

"But you are pleased?" probed Remus carefully as though he was afraid Sirius would explode or break or something.

"Beyond happy." Sirius confirmed. He took the parchment back. "I'll write back to Brian. I guess it's time to come clean on my identity with him."

"Give me an introduction." Remus ordered. "I can liaise with him in future, and Merlin knows I need to go over some legal stuff with him as your steward. Your records are in a right mess."

"But I'm still rich, right?"

Remus sighed. "Let's just say you have enough to cover the five galleons you owe me."

"What five galleons?" asked Sirius innocently.

Remus's eyes narrowed dangerously.
The signature of Cornelius Fudge looped its way across the parchment. It was attached to the official investigation report that concluded Sirius Black was innocent of the arrest charges in 'eighty-one, and pardoned for escaping Ministry custody and his actions during his time as a fugitive. The statement acknowledged the Ministry's culpability and awarded compensation to Black to the tune of ten thousand galleons for every year of false imprisonment and an additional five thousand for the year he had been a fugitive.

"The press statement?" Cornelius asked briskly as he added the official seal to the parchment.

Amelia exchanged a look with Brian Cutter and slid it across the desk to the Minister.

"Following new evidence, a Special Investigation was made into the matter of Sirius Black under the jurisdiction of Amelia Bones, the Head of the DMLE. The findings of the Special Investigation are thus: Sirius Black was imprisoned without trial. Evidentiary and legal procedures were not followed and his guilt or innocence never established beyond circumstantial hearsay. A review of all the evidence gathered at the time of his arrest, and the subsequent addition of new witness testimony following recent events at Hogwarts, including a statement by Harry Potter, has concluded that Sirius Black is innocent of all charges. Given his twelve years of unlawful imprisonment, we have pardoned him for the lesser charge of escaping custody.

Additionally, we want to announce that Peter Pettigrew is alive and a suspected Death Eater. He is hereby stripped of his Order of Merlin and is wanted for questioning in the deaths of James Potter, Lily Potter, and thirteen muggles. He is also wanted for conspiracy to pervert the course of Justice. He is considered armed and dangerous. Citizens are advised to report any sightings to the Aurors immediately.

Clearly a gross miscarriage of justice took place under the previous administration and, although it was a chaotic time, the current peacetime administration is appalled. We apologise unreservedly to Sirius Black for his loss of freedom, damage to his reputation, and disregard for his basic legal rights. While it is our understanding that he is currently abroad, he is once again a free citizen and welcome to return to Britain and public life without fear of reprisal."

"Comprehensive." Cornelius looked at Brian. "Is Lord Black happy with the statement?"

"He is and he's very happy to have this matter cleared up so quickly." Brian said.

"It's a shame that we can't make a joint press conference." Cornelius said with a longing look at the statement.

"Lord Black wants full credit given to the Ministry." Brian said firmly. "He'll make a positive statement to that effect as soon as he claims his seat in the Wizengamot."

"Do we have a date?" Cornelius asked tentatively.

"Probably at the next session which is scheduled for a week on Thursday." Brian replied promptly. "He has expressed a desire to meet with you prior to that."

Cornelius smiled widely. "That would be lovely, Brian."

"Minister," Amelia cleared her throat, regaining Cornelius's attention, "there is another matter that has come to light during the investigation."
"Oh?" Cornelius looked dismayed and his gaze flickered to Brian and back to her. "Perhaps we should speak about this in private?"

"Actually, I'd like Brian to stay as the topic relates to the guardianship of Harry Potter." Amelia withdrew a second report from her bag and handed it to Cornelius. It had taken her the better part of the previous evening after her return from Surrey and most of the rest of that day to finish the report and get things sorted with Brian. "This report is highly sensitive and details findings related to Harry Potter's current situation. Broadly, it concludes that he should be removed from his current guardians due to evidence of neglect, emotional abuse and some additional minor physical abuse."

"My goodness! Surely not!" Cornelius didn't open the folder. "I mean, I know there was a problem last summer but I thought that was down to the stress of the situation with Black."

"That problem last summer, Minister, was indicative of the way his guardians treat him generally; without respect for Harry, for his parents or for our kind. The woman admitted she insulted the Potters before she was obliviated." Amelia said dryly. "Additionally, one of the Reversal Squad noted in his report that if it wasn't against the new Muggle Protection Act he would have been sorely tempted to blow the Dursleys up himself after being subjected to their prejudice and scorn."

"Amelia…"

"It gets worse, Cornelius." Amelia interrupted him. "Albus Dumbledore had Rubeus Hagrid take Harry Potter from Sirius Black on the night of the Potters' death. That was part of Dumbledore's own statement given to the Aurors. He was responsible for placing the boy with Lily Potter's muggle relations. Now, there is some evidence that he had good reasons, most to do with Harry's safety at the time, but he circumvented the system: the Wizarding Orphan Office wasn't apprised of the placement and so no follow-up visitations were performed."

"He also disregarded the will which a source today told me would have been challenged by the Longbottoms had they not been incapacitated in a Death Eater attack." Brian added. "Add to that the fact that Dumbledore was Chief Warlock when Sirius Black was denied a trial and placed in Azkaban unlawfully, and his recent unwillingness not to have insisted on due process when Black was captured at Hogwarts…one might surmise that he has ulterior motives."

"Additionally, Harry has all the signs of an abused child but the staff at Hogwarts seems to have missed them." Amelia said with exasperation.

Cornelius looked torn between panic at the Harry Potter had been abused, and glee at how badly Dumbledore had erred.

"And the Ministry doesn't come out of this smelling of roses either since the WOO should have followed up on Harry Potter's placement – regardless of Dumbledore's lack of notification, he's the most famous orphan in our world! Not to mention more should have been done to investigate the incident last summer." Amelia warned him. "Cornelius," she said strongly, "it would be a political nightmare for everyone if it came to the attention of the press that Harry Potter was mistreated by his muggle relatives and nobody in authority noticed or did anything to address the issue – especially when Dumbledore is in the thick of it and you've met the boy yourself."

Finally, Cornelius blanched as the potential ramifications for his own position hit him.

"If you would allow it, Cornelius, Amelia and I believe we have a mutually beneficial solution." Brian said quietly.

"Please elaborate." Cornelius rallied but a dull flush remained on his face.
"As you know, Lord Black was already planning to challenge for guardianship," Brian began, "and I believe his own investigations raised questions about the suitability of Potter's muggle guardians. Now that the investigation into Sirius Black has concluded and he has been cleared, Lord Black wants to push ahead with guardianship being awarded to Sirius Black as per the Potters' will."

Cornelius sat back surprised. "Lord Black will openly support Sirius Black then? As I recall Black – Sirius, I mean – was a Dumbledore supporter and considered persona non grata by the Black family."

"I think it's clear from Lord Black's initial actions here that he has a different political agenda than the family's previous reputation," Brian said, "and as Sirius is the boy's godfather, he has first claim."

"Executing the Potters' newly discovered will to reward guardianship to Sirius Black would be a relatively simple matter." Amelia pointed out. "My main concern, as I've expressed to Brian, is Black's health after his time in Azkaban and a year on the run. I would say that we would only award guardianship on the condition that he receives medical treatment."

"How do we even know the man wants to assume guardianship?" Cornelius asked, sitting back with a contemplative expression.

"Once Amelia contacted me, I immediately wrote to Lord Black. I received a reply from Sirius Black himself confirming his request that I represent him in the matter of the guardianship of his godson."

Brian explained.

A flicker of suspicion infused Amelia for a long moment, long enough that she only caught the end of Cornelius accusing Brian that Lord Black had harboured a fugitive.

"Under the old law, Cornelius, a Head of House could offer sanctuary to any member of his family." Brian said mildly. "But either way, there's no evidence that Lord Black knew where Sirius Black was at the time he engaged my services to approach you about instigating an investigation."

"It's all moot anyway," Amelia inserted before Cornelius got too wound up, "whether Lord Black was in contact with him before the investigation or not is completely beside the point; Sirius Black is innocent. We need to determine Harry Potter's guardianship. Brian, can you confirm Sirius Black's willingness to assume the role of guardian for his godson?"

"Yes, he's eager to look after Harry, and a week of healing in a private clinic abroad has been arranged for both Sirius and his godson." Brian said quickly.

Amelia nodded.

"I'm not sure this will be acceptable," Cornelius argued, "Sirius Black's reputation is destroyed – and yes, partly our fault, I know, but if we announce that Black is innocent and in the next breath give him immediate guardianship of the Boy Who Lived there will be an outcry."

"You raise a valid point, Cornelius."

Brian's words flattered the Minister and Amelia breathed a sigh of relief at Brian's ability to handle him.

"Perhaps a staggered approach is required publically," Brian continued, "especially as I think we all believe that Albus Dumbledore should only be informed once this matter is settled beyond his ability to affect the outcome."

They nodded in agreement.
"So, I propose that we sign the guardianship transfer today and allow Sirius Black to take immediate custody." Brian proposed. "The Ministry announces that he is innocent at a press conference tomorrow morning. I'll arrange some positive press for Black over the rest of the week, reminding people that he was a war hero before his arrest, for example."

"We can help with that to some extent," Amelia offered, "I'm sure Sirius's old colleagues would be prepared to support the work he did."

"And the story of his escape from Azkaban to protect his godson from Pettigrew would play well," Cornelius added. "Perhaps with the allusion he is seeking guardianship to return Potter fully to the wizarding world in line with the wishes of Potter's late parents that were previously ignored as the will was inaccessible to the Ministry."

Brian nodded and pointed at him with a smile. "Good suggestion."

Amelia hid a smile. Cornelius did have a talent for media spin. "So then we publically announce his guardianship at the end of the week?"

"I'll ensure we have a statement from Sirius Black readied as they could well be still abroad at that point in the clinic." Brian made a note on his legal pad.

"We should work closely on all press releases," Cornelius offered, "that way we can ensure both the Ministry and Black receive the greatest positive response to the affair."

"Agreed." Brian said.

"What about the muggles?" Cornelius asked suddenly. "We'll need to file appropriate records…"

"Already prepared," Brian assured him, "Petunia Dursley has already agreed to relinquish her guardianship subject to the investigation finding Sirius Black innocent. Lord Black's steward will handle the final signatures and take immediate custody of Harry Potter to deliver him safely to Black." He motioned at Cornelius. "If you're happy to proceed?"

Cornelius nodded.

Brian reached into his briefcase and handed over the guardianship documents. "If you could just sign at the bottom; Amelia, if you could witness."

The loopy signature was accompanied by the Minister's official seal. Amelia scrawled her own signature as witness and added the seal of the Head of the DMLE. Sirius Black was officially Harry Potter's legal guardian of record.

Brian handed Amelia one copy for the Ministry records. "I assume you'll register this with the WOO."

Amelia sighed and took the document. She could hardly complain.

"I'll forward a copy to Sirius and file my copy of the original in our legal vault." Brian retrieved another document for his briefcase. "A copy of the Potters' will for your records."

"That's very good of you, Brian." Cornelius said gratefully. "That will help ensure any complaints are quickly dealt with." He frowned again. "Amelia, there is one other question regarding the muggles and this abuse that was found…"

"I know," Amelia said sighing heavily, "I'd like to prosecute them but that's an impossibility." She
held up a hand when Cornelius would have jumped in. "The procedure when we find a muggle-raised witch or wizard is in an abusive situation is to involve the muggle authorities. Usually there is current evidence that is available. In this case, the vast majority of the abuse took place prior to last year and the worst of it when he was a young child. Our evidence, based as it is on magical means is not admissible. There is no case unless Mister Potter himself gives evidence." She took a breath. "If we prosecuted muggles through our legal system, it would be exceptional, create a precedent I don't think we want, and create the very storm of publicity that we're trying to avoid."

"So we let these muggles get away with abusing a wizarding child? A child who should have been treasured especially after getting rid of You-Know-Who and losing his parents?" Cornelius ranted, getting on his soapbox.

"We can honestly say that we've removed him from the situation as soon as we became aware of the abuse that was involved." Amelia stated firmly. "Any other legal action will have to be pursued with Mister Potter's agreement."

"I'll discuss the matter with Sirius Black." Brian suggested. "As his guardian, Black will have a say in this and will probably be the one that will have to raise it with his godson."

Cornelius barely looked mollified and Amelia had some sympathy, although she suspected Cornelius's frustration was rooted in his inability to exploit the political capital of muggles abusing the Boy Who Lived and Dumbledore's involvement, rather than her own outrage that the muggles wouldn't be justifiably punished for their actions.

"Well, if that's everything, I have to tell my client that he's now a proud father of a thirteen year old boy." Brian said briskly.

Amelia sighed in relief as Cornelius smiled and nodded.

"I'll see you at tomorrow's press conference?" Cornelius suggested.

Brian agreed and Amelia stood up to walk out with him. They stopped outside of Amelia's office and she prevented him from leaving with a hand on his arm, wanting to follow up on the suspicion she'd had that had flared to life during the discussion. She cast a privacy bubble and regarded him directly.

"Brian, would I be correct in saying that Lord Black's first name is Sirius?"

Brian smiled gently. "I'm afraid I can't divulge the identity of Lord Black."

"What I will say," Brian said a little hesitantly, "is that there is good reason why the House of Black has always been known for its cunning and regardless of his innocence Sirius Black is still someone it would be best not to anger."

"He realised his godson was being neglected when he saw him at Hogwarts, didn't he?" Amelia mused out loud.

"Yes, she thought decisively, Sirius Black had seen his godson, starved of love and affection for all that he was a nice kid, and had known. And he couldn't do anything, not as a fugitive, but as Lord Black...that he had taken the measures he had and devised a way to clear his name all to protect his godson impressed her anew and made her feel even more confident that her decision to award him custody had been the right one.

Brian smiled at her again and tipped his hat as he made to leave. "I think Lord Black is going to
shake things up."

Amelia let down the bubble and smirked back at him. "Tell your client I look forward to it."

o-O-o

Harry finished washing the baking potatoes and set them out on the counter to be pricked before they went into the microwave. Dinner was steamed chicken breasts (already cooked until shrivelled by his aunt), a salad (Harry had already prepared it) and the potatoes. It was not their usual fare and was only on the menu because Dudley was on a diet.

His relatives had been surprisingly polite to him since he'd gotten back. He believed in part that it was to do with his tale of his mass-murdering godfather on the ride home from the station but as the days had passed, he thought it was something else. Then there had been the surprise visit from the wizarding police-kind-of-ish Amelia Bones and Alastor Moody. He was still a little annoyed with his aunt that she hadn't warned him until she'd fetched him from the garden. He hoped, hoped, that it meant Sirius was going to get a trial or be declared innocent because then…

He stopped his thought before it could complete. He wasn't going to hope again that he could go to live with Sirius, with someone who actually wanted him. Although, in hindsight, he wondered whether Sirius did want him… the older man had looked somewhat surprised when Harry had agreed to live with him. But there had been the letter he'd received at Hogwarts (confirming Sirius was safe and Harry was more than a little annoyed that the Headmaster had prevented him from replying) and then another he'd received the day after he'd gotten home (a 'hope you're OK' message that Harry had replied to using the same owl Sirius had sent), and another (a 'glad you're OK and don't worry about me' message). For a godfather on the run, it wasn't too shoddy a showing of concern and much more than Harry could remember receiving from anyone else except his friends.

What had been a nice surprise was that his ex-Professor, Remus Lupin had also sent a very nice note welcoming Harry back from the holidays, reassuring him that he'd found an interesting job and encouraging Harry to stay in touch. Harry had promptly sent a reply with the rather majestic looking owl that had brought Remus's letter. He'd also sent a note to Remus after Moody and bones had interviewed him and asked for more stories about his Dad, but there hadn't been a reply and Hedwig hadn't returned. It didn't mean there wouldn't be a reply, Harry reassured himself. Remus had said to stay in touch and with Sirius out of the country…

Of course, Remus hadn't actually contacted Harry at all for most of his life and Harry got the impression that he had only let slip his friendship with Harry's father by accident. They really hadn't had a chance to talk about that and it wasn't something Harry wanted to raise in a letter. But it did mean that he didn't quite trust Remus to reply to him in the same way he trusted Sirius. Although even his trust in Sirius probably floundered on the thought that Sirius, if given a choice, might continue to chase the rat rather than actually stick around for Harry.

Harry shook away his insecurities not wanting to dwell on them. Sirius had written; Remus had written. He had people who cared for him at last. His jaw set in all too familiar stubbornness that both Sirius and Remus would have recognised instantly although Harry didn't know it.

His mind travelled back over his third year at Hogwarts idly as he prepared the potatoes. It had been a strange year with the Dementors and Sirius. Better than the first two years – no Voldemort to battle – but odd in other ways. He really owed Hermione for helping him rescue Sirius. He flushed as he remembered what a prat he'd been to her about the Firebolt. Yes, he'd had cause to be angry but… she'd meant well. If only she hadn't gone behind his back…

Ron hadn't helped with his anger over it either. And then there had been Ron's constant battling with
Hermione over Crookshanks and the rat all year. Harry had spent most of the time feeling like he was being pulled between them and forced to choose constantly.

Ron had been Harry's first friend of his own age and Harry knew his strong attachment to Ron was primarily because of that. And Ron was funny and loyal, if glued to his beliefs and prejudices, surprisingly smart in his own way under the laziness that even Harry could see. But in considering the previous year, Harry had become aware that he'd let Ron dictate a lot of their friendship – things like being mad with Hermione, who else they talked to outside of classes, and their subjects like taking the horrendous Divination because it was easy.

Maybe he could try for a little independence from his first friend, Harry considered; he trusted Ron not to drop him just because Harry made a few decisions for himself – like giving up Divination so he didn't have to hear about how horribly he was going to die every week, and taking a different subject, maybe Ancient Runes or Arithmancy. He should send a note to Professor McGonagall and ask if it was possible. Hermione would probably appreciate having him take one of the subjects she was interested in.

And he did owe her.

Besides, Hermione was his second closest friend and really Harry had no idea how he would have gotten through his studies for the past three years without her. Not to mention the traps around the Philosopher's Stone; not to mention working out it was a basilisk that was petrifying people; not to mention rescuing Sirius. She really was amazingly smart. He should appreciate her more even if her bossiness sometimes drove him round the bend. He could try to be a better friend to her.

He wouldn't mind making more friends, Harry mused absently. Oh, he liked to think he was friendly with most people in Gryffindor – when they weren't considering him the Heir of Slytherin – and he was mates at least with the Quidditch team, especially Fred and George, and with his dorm mates. But he knew he wasn't the easiest of people to be friends with between his unwanted fame and the trouble that seemed to follow him around. At least Ron and Hermione had stuck with him through thick and thin. Quality was more important than quantity, Harry determined, but still…one or two other people to hang around with wouldn't be a bad thing.

Before he could set the microwave's timer, the telephone rang. Harry didn't investigate – his chore was dinner and it was more than his life's worth to deviate from it, not to mention the call was unlikely to be for him. He could hear his aunt answer, her strident voice carrying down the hallway.

He found his mind wandering to the interview with Moody and Bones. Bones had been nice; strict but kind. She kind of reminded him of McGonagall. Moody though had been bloody brilliant. He hadn't made a fuss over the locks on the door or the pathetic bedroom Harry had. More importantly, he'd told him stories of his Dad. He couldn't believe that his Dad had been a Hit Wizard. He wondered what career his Mum had chosen. He'd ask Sirius or Remus; asking his aunt was an invite to trouble.

Speaking of said aunt, she suddenly poked her head through the kitchen door.

"Leave that and go and pack all your things in that trunk of yours." Petunia snapped. "I'll explain on the way."

On the way to where and what about dinner, Harry grumbled to himself as he went up the stairs to his bedroom. He hadn't been refused lunch but the meagre sandwich and apple had been hours before, and his breakfast had been minimal – a quarter of a grapefruit. He packed his trunk quickly – he hadn't truthfully unpacked a great deal of it. He picked up Hedwig's cage – she'd find him wherever he went. He struggled down the stairs and was briskly directed by his aunt out to the car.
He put his trunk and the cage in the boot of the car, and had just closed the boot lid just as his aunt came out of the house.

Betty Doon called out a greeting from the other side of the street and hurried over. "Why Petunia, wherever are you off to at this late hour?"

"Family emergency." Petunia said crisply, putting the keys into her handbag.

"Oh you poor thing!" Betty said but her eyes gleamed more with glee at having some gossip than genuine concern. "Is there anything I can do?"

Petunia shook her head. "Thank you anyway, Betty. We must be going." She speared Harry with a look. "Get in the car and none of your nonsense."

Harry made his way around the car and climbed into the back seat - he wasn't actually allowed in the front. He waited until his aunt had taken the driver's seat and put her seatbelt on before he cleared his throat nervously.

"Um, if this is about Aunt Marge perhaps I should stay here?" Harry offered. He couldn't think what other family they had who could possibly have had an emergency.

"This isn't about your Aunt Marge." Petunia said. "Now be quiet. I need to focus on driving." She rarely drove anywhere preferring his uncle took the responsibility.

Harry thought about asking what was going on again but decided it was probably best to keep quiet. They drove out of Little Whinging and took the main road towards Greater Whinging, the neighbouring town that was more affluent. His aunt had always wanted to live there. They took another turning, then another. They passed through the centre of Greater Whinging and made towards the countryside outskirts. At the end of one long winding road, his aunt took a left into a shady street with old trees weighed down with heavy branches of bright green leaves. They pulled into the driveway of a large house.

Petunia ordered him out. Harry went to get the luggage. He wasn't certain what was going on and keeping calm seemed like a good strategy.

The large green front door opened and Harry froze at the sight of Remus.

"Ah, good! You're here." Remus waved at him. "Leave the luggage, Harry. It'll be taken care of."

Harry obediently set down Hedwig's cage and his trunk back in the boot. "Uh, Professor Lupin…"

"Remus, please, Harry." He smiled at him. "Inside and I'll explain everything."

Petunia ushered Harry into the house ahead of her.

"In the front room to your right, Harry, if you wouldn't mind." Remus pointed at the open door.

Harry stepped through into a comfortable looking sitting room. It was chintzy but suited his aunt's tastes perfectly.

"Your aunt and I thought you might like to join me dog-sitting, Harry." Remus offered as Harry opened his mouth to demand an explanation.

Harry gaped at him and then at his aunt. Dog-sitting? Did that mean they were going to spend the summer with Sirius? His mouth snapped shut. "Really?"
"Really." Remus smiled at him. "I just have a couple of things to clear up with your aunt and then we'll get going." He picked up a stack of documents from the coffee table. "I just need you to sign these, Petunia."

Petunia sniffed, ignored the quill Remus offered to her and drew a pen out of her bag. She quickly signed the papers.

Remus sorted them into two stacks and handed her one. "These are your copies. Harry and I will use this room for another ten minutes and then we'll be on our way. You should collect the rest of your family and stay here until your things are moved magically by our house elf tomorrow."

"Very well." Petunia sniffed. She darted a look at Harry and made for the door.

"Aunt Petunia," Harry said impulsively, "thank you." He really did mean it. He didn't know how Remus (and, or Sirius) had convinced her but he did appreciate her agreement.

She stopped in the doorway and gazed at him with a strange expression. "You'll be better off with your own kind." She looked over at Remus and almost looked as though she wanted to say something else but if she did, she thought better of it and walked out, pulling the door shut behind her.

"Well," Remus pulled his wand out, "stand still a moment, I just need to check…yes, here it is; one tracking charm." He plucked a mouse from his pocket, tapped Harry and then the mouse.
"Kreacher!"

A house elf popped into the room and Harry took a startled step backwards.

"Kreacher, can you take this mouse to…I don't know…York, and leave it there, please." Remus asked politely.

Kreacher nodded sharply, took the mouse and disappeared again.

"Right. Now, Kreacher's already delivered your trunk and Hedwig's already there so it's just us."
Remus grinned at him and handed him a piece of blank parchment.

The blankness disappeared as soon as Harry touched it, words scrolling across the paper. "Mr Padfoot invites Harry Potter to 12 Grimmauld Place."

"Now, keep the address firmly in your mind, Harry." Remus said. He held out a dog's chew toy. "Take hold of the toy. It's something called a portkey and will transport us to the address when I give the activation code."

Harry did so, repeating the address silently in his mind.

Remus grinned at him again. "Padfoot."

The world around them disappeared and Harry felt his stomach lurch as something tugged him. His landing was awful – he ended up in a heap on the floor.

"Harry!" Sirius's concerned voice had Harry lifting his head quickly.

"I'm OK." Harry claimed as his godfather helped him up off the floor.

As Sirius briskly checked him over, Harry couldn't get over how different Sirius looked; his hair was cut, his facial hair neatly trimmed, he had clean clothes and looked as though he'd put on some
needed weight. There were traces of Azkaban still in his grey eyes and sharp cheekbones but he looked better, much better. Sirius hesitated for a moment before pulling him into a hug.

Harry tensed before he returned it, letting the older man's genuine affection wash over him. "I can't believe I'm here."

"We couldn't tell you just in case things didn't go to plan; I didn't want you to get your hopes up and be disappointed." Sirius apologised. He rubbed Harry's back briskly and stepped away but kept his arm around Harry's shoulders.

Harry looked around the room eagerly noting the crest on the wall and the functional furnishing of what seemed to be a waiting room with a floo. "Is this your house?"

"Yes, well, my family's really," Sirius explained, "otherwise known as the London residence of the House of Black."

"The house is under a Fidelius," Remus explained, gesturing absently with the chew toy he still held, "so Sirius can hide without anyone knowing where he is."

Sirius guided Harry over to the sofa and pushed him into it gently. "My family and I didn't get along because they were heavily into the Dark Arts and bought into the whole pureblood agenda. Most of my cousins and my late younger brother followed Voldemort." He sat down next to Harry and Remus sat opposite in a comfortable looking chair. "Anyway, I inherited the family title, wealth and estates when my grandfather died, but obviously I was in Azkaban and when I got out, I didn't want to have anything to do with any of it. But I realised when you helped me escape from Hogwarts that I should swallow my pride and accept my inheritance so I could get things done like hiring a solicitor and," he waggled his eyebrows at Harry, "clearing my name."

"I gave an interview but they wouldn't tell me," Harry couldn't help the surge of hope that rushed through him, "did you…are you…"

"Yep," Sirius smiled widely back at him, "as of this evening I am an innocent man according to the Ministry."

"It's going to be announced tomorrow." Remus added. "Full pardon and compensation. Wormtail is going to find himself a wanted man."

"That's brilliant!" Harry said and tried to ignore the rattling nerves in his gut as his mouth dried up. And it was brilliant: Sirius was free and that was fantastic but maybe Sirius hadn't meant his offer to live with him if arrangements had been made just for the summer so…

"The other thing," Sirius said roughly, his eyes raking over Harry as though he'd read his mind, "is that I'm hoping you still want to come live with me because, uh, we managed to get the Ministry and your dear aunt to agree that, um, as of this evening I'm your guardian."

Harry stared into the anxious eyes of his godfather. "You are?" He barely got the words out, his chest was so tight and he thought he might not be able to breathe. Sirius really wanted him?

"I am." Sirius confirmed more confidently. "Remus has the paperwork if you need proof. So, living with me?" He nudged Harry's shoulder. "That's OK with you? Because, as much as I want you living with me, I really, really, want you to be OK with this too."

He nodded quickly. "It's…it's…" Everything he had ever dreamed about when he was in his cupboard.
Harry felt his throat close up and his eyes prickled with sudden tears. Sirius wanted him. He was free of the Dursleys and could live with Sirius who actually wanted him, cared about him enough, maybe even loved him enough to arrange it so he would be Harry's guardian, and who hadn't run off and left Harry alone again…Harry had no idea what was going on as his emotions raged and his magic responded, flaring up and rattling the ornaments.

Sirius immediately tugged him into another hug and Harry stiffened again before he went with it, trying hard not to cry as he pressed into the unfamiliar sensation of the warmth and security of someone, a parent type person, holding him.

"It's OK, Pronglet." Sirius whispered. "Let it go. I've got you."

And Harry felt the first sob wrench out of him sharply before he surrendered and gave into the need to cry.
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Sirius had once been a thirteen year old boy and he knew that Harry, who was currently crying his eyes out into Sirius's increasingly wet and soggy shoulder would be mortified as soon as the storm of weeping stopped. Sirius also knew Harry needed the release though. Sirius knew all too well the emotional shock of having someone care after years of being told you were worthless. He had never wanted his godson's childhood to be anything like his own and that it was made his heart ache and took him far too close to shedding tears himself.

No more Dursleys though, Sirius reminded himself as he rubbed soothing circles on Harry's back with one hand and stroked his fingers through his mop of dark hair with the other. Harry was under his protection finally and Sirius would make sure that the remainder of Harry's childhood would be exactly what it should be: filled with love and happiness and fun and security…

He glanced over at Remus who looked devastated at Harry's breakdown. He mouthed that it was OK and Remus nodded slightly, easing back from his hovering uncertain position on the edge of his chair.

Harry sniffled and Sirius realised he'd come back to himself.

Remus handed over a handkerchief. Sirius eased back and handed Harry the cloth with the no-nonsense instruction to blow his nose. Harry followed the order, swiped at his damp cheeks and absently handed him the handkerchief back; Sirius banished it. Harry was bright red and wouldn't meet either of their eyes.

"The summer before my sixth year, I ran away from home and ended up at your Dad's." Sirius said quietly.

Harry looked over at him, curiosity getting the better of his embarrassment.

"Your Granddad Potter told me that it was all going to be OK, that they loved me and I was already part of the family. I was sixteen years old and I spent the better part of an hour crying my eyes out on his shoulder." Sirius said. "So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that you're in good company."

Harry flushed but nodded slowly in acknowledgement that Sirius understood.

"He also told me just as I'm telling you now that we have a lot of getting to know each other to do and at some point we're going to argue, and disagree, and do things or say things that test our patience with each other," Sirius continued, keeping hold of Harry's gaze determinedly, "because parents and kids do that, and although I'm new at this I consider myself your parent now, kiddo." He poked Harry gently in the arm. "OK?"

Harry nodded again.

"So, we're going to do all of those things, but, and this is the important thing: I'm always going to love you." Sirius said, fervently. "I loved you from the moment I held you just after you were born and I loved you when you broke me out of Hogwarts and I love you right now this minute and I am always going to love you and want you in my life. Understand?"
"And that goes for me too, Harry." Remus added softly.

Sirius could see the hope that flared to life in Harry's eyes as he gave another nod but he could also see fear that it wasn't true or real. It was going to take time, Sirius reminded himself. He patted Harry on the shoulder softly.

"Now, we have lots to tell you," Sirius said changing the subject and brightening his tone, "but Remus told me you haven't had dinner, so why don't we get something to eat?"

Harry's stomach growled in response.

"Food it is." Remus declared cheerfully. He stood up, and Sirius and Harry followed him out of the room and down the corridor.

Sirius couldn't help smiling as Harry gazed around wide-eyed. "The house has been in my family for generations. My grandfather preferred the country estate and hated London so when my father married my mother he gave it to them. My mother was nuts, and she was restricted to the house by my grandfather." Namely after she'd tortured Sirius, a recognised heir to the line, for refusing to follow Voldemort and driven him to the Potters – but Harry didn't need to know that part of the story.

"Are we going to live here?" Harry asked as Remus led them into the dining room.

"Nope." Sirius guided Harry into the seat on his right as he took his usual chair at the top of the table. Remus sat in the seat to his left, opposite Harry. "I'm going to need this place for business – I have a seat on the Wizengamot – so it's going to be too visible despite the Fidelius. We will live somewhere else." He touched the table and the food appeared – plates of shepherd's pie with peas and carrots. "Tuck in."

Harry immediately began and something uncoiled in Sirius's gut at the sight of his godson eating at a table in a house Sirius owned. He picked up his own cutlery as Remus passed a bread roll to Harry.

"Thank you, Professor." Harry said automatically.

"Professor." Sirius snorted.

Remus shot him a look. "It's Remus, Harry, or Moony, if you'd prefer that. I'm not your professor anymore."

"You used to call him Mooey." Sirius slid in teasingly.

Harry's eyes lit up and a smile flickered over his lips. "Really?"

"Yes, Unca Mooey to be exact." Remus recalled fondly. "As you were only a baby we forgave you the lack of enunciation."

"Prongs thought it was hilarious." Sirius said, remembering the scene in the Potters' kitchen and James chuckling away. "But his face when you called him 'dada' for the first time..." he smiled at his godson's rapt expression, "he was the proudest man on the planet that day."

"Floo called me especially," Remus agreed, "but then you'd been calling your Mum 'mama' for at least a month and I think your Dad was just thrilled you'd finally recognised his part in your parenting."

Harry scooped up more of his pie. "I wish I could remember."
Sirius exchanged a sad look with Remus. "Well, we can share our memories with you so you can see for yourself."

"And tell you lots of stories." Remus added. "I've been saving them up for years and now I finally get the chance to tell you them, since I no longer need permission from either your aunt or the Headmaster to see you or to talk with you openly."

Something eased behind Harry's eyes and Sirius mentally applauded his old friend for letting Harry know simply and quickly why he hadn't been in his life to date.

"We do have a lot to tell you, Harry," Sirius said, "everything from your Mum and Dad and your Potter heritage to what happened after you rescued me at Hogwarts to what happens next…but I don't want to overwhelm you with information, and I would like your agreement on some things that are already in motion so I think we need to prioritise for tonight – agreed?"

Harry nodded and swallowed down his mouthful of food quickly. "OK."

"Well, as we will have plenty of time in the future to tell you about your Mum and Dad and your family, how about we focus on the urgent things?" Remus suggested, spooning more shepherd's pie onto Harry's plate.

"Like what's happened since Hogwarts and what happens next?" Harry asked, smiling a thank you at Remus.

"Exactly." Sirius said, picking up his glass and taking a long sip of water.

"We should do this logically and start from what happened when you, Sirius, left Hogwarts." Remus instructed.

Sirius rolled his eyes but complied. "Well, like I said, before I realised I needed my inheritance to get things done so I came here and assumed control of the family magic; that essentially made me Lord Black." He restrained the urge to tell Harry he would need to do something similar and become Lord Potter. "Kreacher, the old house elf, is giddy at the thought of restoring the family's reputation so he has helped with getting money from Gringotts, doing the shopping, cleaning this place up." Which was a relief and a shock because he and Kreacher had never had the best of relationships when Sirius was a child. "Then Remus sent me a note so we met up and he agreed to help me with getting you away from the Dursleys. He's also agreed to come live with us and keep us out of trouble."

Harry darted a pleased look at Remus who smiled back at him.

"What next?" Sirius asked himself. "Oh, right, we hired a solicitor, Brian Cutter, who's very good at what he does. He investigated my arrest, found there wasn't a trial and approached Fudge on behalf of Lord Black about investigating whether or not Sirius Black was innocent."

"The Minister knows that Lord Black will be very powerful politically when he takes up his position in the Wizengamot, more powerful and wealthy than the Minister's current advisors." Remus jumped in. "So he agreed to the investigation, and ultimately your guardianship, not wanting to annoy a new potential ally."

Harry looked at them both with a grin. "So you essentially pranked the Minister into doing his job?"

"Yes." Remus and Sirius replied in unison unashamedly.

"There will be some feathers that have to be smoothed," Remus acknowledged, "when it's announced that Sirius is Lord Black."
"Fudge won't be able to get too annoyed with me though," Sirius reassured Harry, sensing his
godson's unease at the idea of an angry Minister. "I am Lord Black, Amelia Bone's investigation did
clear my name, and my guardianship of you is based on the legally acknowledged wishes of your
parents." He darted a look at Remus; a signal for help at explaining about the rest of what had
transpired around the guardianship.

Remus stepped in immediately, gentling his tone. "Not only that but when Amelia Bones came to see
you at Privet Drive she wasn't impressed with the standard of care that you were receiving from your
aunt and uncle."

A crease appeared in Harry's forehead and he stared down at his meal, embarrassed.

"She supported the change in guardianship especially when she did some digging and realised you
hadn't received any official visits to check up on you." Remus continued. "It would be very
embarrassing for the Ministry if that came to light."

Harry's gaze remained affixed to his plate.

"Harry," Sirius said softly, "we don't know exactly what your aunt and uncle have done or not done
in taking care of you, but we can guess and we do know that Director Bones believed that you might
have a case to bring charges against them."

"It would go through the muggle system," Remus explained, "however, Brian has said that it would
probably come down to your word against theirs."

Harry had stopped eating and his features had taken on a pensive look similar to Lily's. "I…I just
want to be shot of them."

"Well, you don't have to have anything more to do with them." Sirius declared fiercely. If there was
any other business with the Dursleys he and Remus could take care of it – probably Remus as Sirius
was likely to hex the hell out of them.

"Your aunt relinquished all rights to you," Remus said carefully, "in exchange for the protection of a
new address so wizards can't find her."

"You mean she happily gave me away for a new house?" Realisation dawned and Harry's face grew
red. "That house where we were at – that's their new house?"

"Uh, yes." Remus glanced over at Sirius, the need for help written all over his face.

"Great, that's just great." Harry muttered pushing his plate away. He took a breath and met Sirius's
gaze. "I'll pay you back, I promise."

Sirius's eyes widened at the offer. "You don't need to, Harry, I have plenty of money and, quite
honestly, I'd happily have given every knut to the woman if it meant I got you in exchange."

Stunned didn't even begin to describe Harry's face. Sirius bridged the gap between them and placed a
hand over Harry's clenched fist.

"Harry, we understand if you don't want to talk about your time with your aunt and uncle. But I want
you to keep two things in mind; firstly, that we will be here when you are ready to talk about it; and
secondly, however they treated you was not your fault and whatever they told was a lie."

Harry nodded slowly. "Sorry, I just…"
"Believe me, I know." Sirius said sincerely, letting go of Harry reluctantly.

"You should also keep in mind, Harry, that while the new house was in some ways a bribe, there was a valid reason for giving your aunt a new address above and beyond getting you out of their clutches." Remus said, easing the topic down another path and away from sensitive issues. "Your Mum put up some very impressive blood wards around the house at Privet Drive. Now, they kept both you and your aunt safe while you resided there, and your magic helped to keep the wards in place. However, with you no longer there…"

"The wards will eventually collapse." Sirius explained. "After Brian's initial discussion with your aunt, with her permission we had an expert from Gringotts check them out. He said with your immediate removal, and as you've been away at Hogwarts most of the year already, he would give it a month or so before the wards fall."

"The new house doesn't have the blood wards but it does have an impressive set of security wards that will keep out wizards." Remus said.

Sirius checked Remus and Harry were done with the main course and tapped the table. The dishes disappeared and dessert shimmered onto fresh plates in front of them.

Harry enthusiastically reached for a spoon to delve into the ice-cream. "I guess I'm OK with them having the house." He said after his first bite. "I don't like that they've got it but…I don't really want them dead and Voldemort…" he looked up at them suddenly. "You know he's alive?"

"Yes, I might have learned a great deal about your first two years when I was teaching." Remus confirmed. "You encountered a wraith of Voldemort in your first year? And in your second encountered an object that could have brought him back to a corporeal form?"

"A diary, yes." Harry said. "Lucius Malfoy gave it to Ginny."

Sirius glowered. "The family meeting is going to be a doozy." He shook himself and caught Harry's inquisitive look. "Malfoy is married to my cousin, Narcissa. As the Malfoys petitioned to marry into our family, the Black's have something called primacy. Lucius is subject to the will of Lord Black."

A mischievous grin spread across Harry's face and he looked so like James for a second that Sirius's heart almost stopped.

"I'm going to have to a family meeting soon to sort some things out. As you're my heir, I want you to have input on how we handle the family matters," Sirius forced himself to continue, "but that's a discussion for another day."

"OK," Harry said easily, "although I know exactly what I want to do with Malfoy."

Sirius and Remus exchanged a knowing look at the tone. James had always used that particular tone for Snivellus.

"Getting back to Voldemort," Sirius said quickly, "yes, Remus and I know he's out there. Thanks to a letter my brother Regulus wrote to me and which Kreacher gave to me when I arrived here, we also know there are other objects like the diary that are also out there that we believe are the reason why he's a wraith and not completely dead."

"So what are we going to do?" Harry asked, far too enthusiastic for Sirius's liking.

"We aren't going to do anything. Remus and I will be bringing the matter to the attention of the Ministry, the DMLE and the DOM, and will work with them to track these objects down and see
about kicking Voldepants into the great hereafter." Sirius said. "You are going to go to school, study, have fun and enjoy yourself."

"But..." began Harry.

"It's not that I don't think you're a capable wizard, Harry," Sirius reassured him swiftly, "after your amazing rescue of me, how could I think otherwise? And I know from the tales of your exploits that you've faced Voldemort down more than anyone else alive and lived to tell the tale. But, Harry, and it's a big but, you should never have had to face him. You were eleven and twelve and should have been thinking about pranks and fun not how do I survive a basilisk or a possessed professor? The adults around you should have done much more to protect you – and I will be having words with Dumbledore believe you and me – and now you're under my protection, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you're safe, and that means ensuring that Voldemort or anything to do with him doesn't come within a hundred miles of you!"

His heart was racing as he ended his speech.

Harry was looking at him wide-eyed.

"As you can see, your godfather feels rather strongly about the matter." Remus said mildly.

"I don't want anything to happen to you." Harry blurted out. "Either of you."

"Neither do we, nor do we want anything happening to you." Remus replied as Sirius struggled to get the lump in his throat to disappear. "Which is why Sirius and I will involve the people who should track these things down and fight Voldemort; namely not us. I was thinking we would be more like..."

"Ringmasters." Sirius offered.

"I was going to say Generals." Remus countered. "A Ringmaster is in charge of a circus."

"Well, it is the Ministry, the DMLE and the DOM." Sirius pointed wryly. "They are a bit of a circus."

A genuine chuckle from Harry brought a smile to Sirius's face only for it to be wiped out by the next thing his godson asked.

"What about the Headmaster?" Harry waved his spoon. "He could help."

Sirius growled before he could stop himself.

"What Sirius is trying to say is that while we both think the Headmaster is a great wizard to whom we owe a great deal," Remus said diplomatically, "we have some concerns about the decisions he's made."

Harry frowned. "What decisions?"

Remus and Sirius exchanged a concerned look; neither of them wanted to disillusion Harry about an adult authority figure, someone he respected, but they also knew they needed Harry to start questioning his Headmaster's motivations and actions.

"Harry, you play chess, right?" Remus asked, putting his own spoon down.

"Yes."
"Imagine that the chessboard is the wizarding world. On one side of the board is Voldemort." Remus gestured with his wand and a black King piece sprang into being on the dining room table. "On the other, the Leader of the Light, Albus Dumbledore." A white King piece appeared.

Sirius was sure Remus had been a brilliant teacher; Harry was paying attention, his brow lowered in concentration.

"But there are many pieces on a chessboard." A third gesture had the actual board arriving. "Some people in the wizarding world might be important like the knights, rooks, bishops and Queens." Pieces arrived to fill the squares. "The Minister of Magic might be one of those pieces, for instance. And I think you, Harry, would probably be one of the more important pieces. Some of us though might merely be…pawns."

The word impacted with the force of a bludger as the minor chess pieces arrived. Sirius could see Harry's internal flinch as clearly as if he'd done a full body jerk.

"Now what's the first lesson you learned about chess?" Remus asked softly.

A series of emotions ran across Harry's face but he raised his eyes to meet Remus's bravely. "That you may need to sacrifice a piece."

"And you might risk others." Remus gestured until the board transformed into a half-played game. "See, your rook is at risk because you've decided to protect your knight. Now, remember the wizarding world is our board, so Albus is risking his rook, and let's say that's Sirius, because he's decided to protect his knight, let's pretend that's you. Do you think Sirius would argue with that decision?"

Harry darted a look at Sirius. "No?"

"No." Sirius stressed immediately. "In theory, I have no trouble being put at risk if it means that you're safe."

Harry looked as though he wanted to argue the point but Remus jumped back in.

"Only Albus doesn't ask Sirius because Sirius is only a chess piece and Albus has control of his side of the board, even though the decision he's made – that he won't offer Sirius his personal protection so Sirius gets a trial but he will allow Sirius to escape – means Sirius doesn't get his name cleared and remains on the run as a fugitive, and you're still stuck at the Dursleys."

Harry frowned heavily as he absorbed Remus's words.

"But say there was a different move that could have had both pieces safe." Remus made another motion with his wand and the pieces changed to safe positions. "With this move – offering Sirius the personal protection of the Chief Warlock until Sirius can be questioned under veritaserum – Sirius is a free man able to provide you with guardianship and you're free of the Dursleys. However, this move means the whole game is a bit more difficult."

Harry looked over at Sirius, his eyes guarded. "Could he really have put you under his personal protection?"

"He could have," Sirius replied calmly, "but no doubt it would have created difficulties between him and Fudge politically, and potentially that could have ramifications for legislation in front of the
"Wizengamot or things that Dumbledore needs Fudge to do as Minister." He pointed at Harry's ice-cream and got his godson eating again. "To keep with the chess theme, he was probably thinking several moves ahead with his ultimate endgame in mind when he made the decision not to offer me protection."

"Ron says I need to think ahead more when I play." Harry commented, stirring the slush that his ice-cream had become. "He says that I see a piece in danger and automatically move to save it without thinking about the rest of them."

"So I guess we know which move you would choose if you were controlling the board." Remus continued.

"This one." Harry admitted.

"Of course you would and so would Sirius, and so would I." Remus agreed brightly. "But none of us are in control of the board, we're…"

"A chess piece." Harry said, disgusted.

Remus cleared his throat, a little chagrined. "Ah, well, yes, but I don't mean to imply that in real life Albus considers you or any of us with the same cold objectivity that he would an actual chess piece. He does care about you, Harry; don't forget that in both moves we've talked about he's protecting you. And I'm sure in real life the decisions he makes weigh on him."

Sirius wasn't so sure about that but he appreciated that Remus wanted to reassure Harry that Dumbledore cared about him, especially since Harry believed so few people in his life cared about him.

"However, when Sirius and I got together and talked, we realised that Albus has made quite a few decisions like this one," Remus gestured towards the chessboard which went back to the previous play, "decisions which on the face of it are well-meaning but frustrating for the chess pieces – uh, the people involved."

"And really unfair if he's deciding without asking them what they want." Harry interjected fiercely.

"Exactly. So Sirius being Sirius, or should I say Padfoot, decided to mutiny and take over the whole game." Remus made a gesture at the chess piece and the rook changed into a small dog which began running around the chessboard barking at the other pieces forcing them to move back to the preferred play.

Harry gave another small laugh at its antics. Sirius was glad Remus had found a way to lighten the mood.

Remus gave it another moment and then had the dog change back. "And now we're deciding the moves rather than Albus."

There was silence and Sirius could almost see the wheels in Harry's head turning as he took on board everything they'd said.

"So what do you think?" Sirius asked impatiently.

"I think I hate chess." Harry wrinkled his nose as Sirius gave an appreciative bark of laughter. "But I think I see what you mean. I mean, I think the Headmaster could still help with the Voldemort thing but I can understand wanting to make your own decisions."
Sirius breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Talking of which," Harry said slyly, "I know you don't want me to be involved – and I understand that," he said hurriedly, "it's just…"

"You're not sure Voldemort will leave you alone." Remus finished.

"I asked the Headmaster why Voldemort was so interested in me after first year." Harry licked his spoon. "He said he'd tell me when I was older. Maybe I should ask him again."

Sirius hummed caught between wanting to keep Harry out of it and yet unwilling to outright lie to his godson. He capitulated to the need for honesty. "We think there's a prophecy involved but you and I will need to investigate with the Department of Mysteries."

Harry looked at him eagerly. "Us?"

"Yes, us." Sirius conceded. "Look, if I had my way you wouldn't be anywhere near the fight with Voldepants until you're of age and trained and wrapped in several layers of dragonhide and maybe several more protective layers of bodyguards and possibly a dragon or two, but...as you say, it's obvious that he has an interest in you." He grimaced. "So, maybe we can agree a compromise."

His godson perked up considerably at that.

"Remus and I will handle searching out these objects with the help of others – which may or may not include your Headmaster," Sirius said, holding up a hand before Harry could argue the point, "but we will keep you in the loop, and you will help in searching out if there is actually a prophecy."

Harry smiled happily.

"You will also start learning something called Occlumency to help us keep these things secret and we will train you in some defensive magic so if you do end up facing Voldepants again, you have some tricks up your sleeve." Sirius tried to sound parental. He figured Remus was trying not to laugh at him. "How does that sound?"

Harry beamed at him and Sirius couldn't help the warm rush of affection that rose up in response.

"This is kind of the way I want this to work, Harry," Sirius admitted, "we talk, and we agree together what we want to do. What do you think?"

"I like that I get a say." Harry admitted. His eyes lit up mischievously. "I guess it's like you said about Dumbledore, it's a bit frustrating if people make decisions for you without asking what you want."

Sirius inclined his head at the acknowledged hit for his previous 'you will stay out of it' position. He gave a mischievous grin of his own. "I'm glad you want to be involved because the other thing we'll use to fight Voldemort is politics."

A look of uncertainty crossed Harry's face. "Politics?"

"We need to ensure his followers or people who follow his agenda don't have the political power to help him," Remus said, "which means building alliances with the other Ancient and Noble families."

"And we need to shut down his access to money." Sirius added, wielding his own spoon through the air like a sword.
"Uh, maybe I'll leave this bit to you guys." Harry suggested.

Sirius smirked at him and Harry inclined his head as he acknowledged that a point had been scored by his godfather.

"Actually, you will need to be involved with politics. The Potters are an Ancient and Noble family, and you personally have the potential to have a lot of political influence because of your celebrity no matter how much you might dislike the idea." Sirius commiserated. "We'll add it to your training."

Harry sighed miserably. "I guess."

"But not tonight." Sirius added. "We should probably discuss what's going to happen in the immediate future."

Harry brightened.

"So first things first," Sirius said, nerves attacking him again, "as part of the guardianship deal, I agreed that I would get some medical treatment."

His godson looked alarmed and concerned.

"I'm fine," Sirius hastened to reassure him, "but I was exposed to Dementors for a long time in Azkaban and on the run eating out of dustbins for a year, so I can't say I necessarily disagree that I could do with a check-up."

"You're really OK though?" Harry asked, dropping his spoon into his bowl.

"Really." Sirius said firmly. And he was – yes, his emotions were still unsteady, his mind sometimes foggy and he hadn't yet regained all of his physical strength – but he was OK. "I could be better," he allowed, "and I am concerned about your exposure to Dementors so I've arranged for us both to take a trip to the States to The Valley Clinic."

Harry squirmed and grimaced.

"I expect," Sirius continued as though he hadn't noticed Harry's silent response, "that we'll go in, they'll give us a check-up and then we'll have a bit of a holiday while they feed me some nutrient potions."

"A holiday?" Harry stopped squirming and started looking interested.

"Hmm-hmm," Sirius agreed, finishing his ice-cream and setting the bowl aside, "I understand from my Uncle Alphard's journal that there's plenty of space for flying, a swimming pool and some great hiking trails."

"Flying?"

Sirius struggled not to smile at Harry's hopeful expression; he couldn't look at Remus because he figured the two of them would break down laughing if he did. "Yep. So how about it?"

"I'd like to go on a holiday." Harry admitted shyly.

"Good, well, that's settled then. We'll only be gone for a week in normal time but the clinic is in a time bubble to provide people with as much time as they need to heal, so we'll probably stay a bit longer than that." Sirius said cheerfully. "We should talk about disguises."

"Disguises?" Harry repeated warily, getting diverted from the topic of why it might take more than a
week for them to heal and whole complicated magic of the time bubble as Sirius had intended.

Remus cleared his throat drawing their attention. "As you've pointed out, Voldemort has an interest in you. One of the reasons Albus placed you with your muggle relatives was the protection provided to you by the blood wards left by your mother. Now you're safe here but we need to make sure you're safe when you travel."

"We'll be going muggle." Sirius said brightly. "I've never been on an aeroplane before."

"Neither have I." Harry's face was alight with excitement. "And you think we should be disguised too?"

"We have two choices for you, Harry." Remus clasped his hands on the top of the polished table. "The first is that we put a glamour charm on you, turn your hair blond, your eyes blue, for example. But you'd still be thirteen years old and so if anyone was looking for you, you'd fall into the age group they would watch for."

"And if they're magical they'll know I might be wearing a glamour charm." Harry surmised very quickly.

"Exactly." Sirius said proudly. "So there is another option: we use a de-aging potion on you. You'll be five years old for twenty-four hours. Nobody will be able to tell you're really thirteen and you can have some carefree fun as a five year old."

Harry considered it carefully; Sirius could see he was weighing the benefits of being safe and five against losing his thirteen year old intelligence and want to be treated like an adult.

"I guess I should choose the de-aging potion." Harry said finally. He glanced at Sirius. "What about you?"

"I'll take a de-aging potion too." Sirius said. "I'll be in my twenties but old enough to have a five year old son. You'll be Harry Evans and I'll be Jack Evans – Jack was your grandfather's name."

Harry nodded slowly. "What about you, Remus?"

Remus started in surprise. "Me?"

"You're coming with us, right?" Harry asked urgently.

Remus smiled at Harry. "Thank you for thinking of me but not this time." He waved at Sirius and Harry. "You both need to time to get to know each other and I'll need to coordinate things here in your absence. I have our new house to prepare, your finances to sort through, overseeing the press announcement of you as Sirius's ward…” his smile widened, "I dare say I'll have enough to keep me busy during the week you're away."

"Our new house?" Harry asked, his eyes widening.

"We've bought a place in Hampshire, out in the countryside." Sirius explained. "It was muggle but we've made it unplottable, warded it to the hilt and put it under Fidelius too."

"We have some pictures we can show you." Remus said. "But, why don't we show you around here first?"

The tour was a good idea. Harry was most impressed with the duelling room in the basement, proclaimed Hermione would love the library, and was reintroduced to Kreacher in the kitchen before
the house elf chased them out. They informed him briskly that they'd hired another elf for the new house as Kreacher had enough to do with 12 Grimmauld Place.

They finally climbed the stairs and Sirius explained the first floor bedrooms were for guests as he nudged Harry up another flight of stairs. The second floor had three bedrooms, each with an adjoining bath. Each glistening white painted door had a gold plaque. The first door had 'Steward of the House of Black' on it and Remus explained it was his room. Sirius's was engraved with 'Lord Black.' He let Harry have a quick look inside before hustling him down the corridor to the next room where the sign read 'Heir of the House of Black.'

"Here's your room for when you do have to stay here." Sirius said brightly. He nervously ushered Harry in.

The walls were a pale cream. He'd had Kreacher furnish the place with Gryffindor red on the curtains, bed-linen and the upholstery of the chairs. A gold and red tapestry rug depicting a lion softened the newly sanded and polished hardwood floor. The furniture was good quality oak but not polished antique as Sirius wanted Harry to be comfortable.

Harry circled the room, taking in the bookcase and desk where he lingered over a photo of his parents, the dresser and wardrobe, the bed and bedside table, the squishy chair by the window where his trunk had been placed along with an owl perch for Hedwig who hooted a welcome to him. He explored the small bath through a side-door and came back in with a wide smile. "This is…great." His eyes met Sirius's across the room. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you like it." Sirius said, pleased. "We won't be living here but you should feel free to put some posters up and make it your room whenever we do."

They smiled giddily at each other.

Remus cleared his throat. He was leaning up against the doorjamb, indulgence oozing from his own smug smile. "Your flight is very early so you and Padfoot should have an early night. There are some new pyjamas in the dresser, Harry, along with underwear and other things. We'll leave you to get ready for bed. Give a yell if you need anything."

"What about packing for the holiday?" Harry asked.

"Already done – we took the liberty of buying you some new clothes – although set anything you want to take with you on the desk and I'll add it to the suitcase in the morning." Sirius replied. "I'll wake you when it's time to get up." He made to follow Remus out but stopped as Harry looked around the room as though lost. "You OK?"

Harry blushed. "Just a bit overwhelmed, I guess."

Sirius nodded understandingly. "Like Remus said, we're a yell away if you need anything." He forced himself to continue walking out.

"Sirius…"

Harry stopped him just as Sirius made it to the door. He glanced back questioningly.

"Moody mentioned my Dad was a Hit Wizard and I was wondering…" Harry fidgeted with the edge of his shirt. "What did my Mum do?"

"Your Mum signed up straight after school to do a Mastery of Charms with Professor Flitwick. Your Mum told me that when she completed the Mastery she wanted to teach. Then you came along – a
very wanted but unexpected surprise, and then your folks had to go into hiding so…she never got the opportunity but she would have made a great teacher. She was the brightest witch of our year."

"Thanks, Sirius," Harry said sincerely, "for everything."

"No need to thank me, Harry. You get some rest." Sirius finally made it out of the door and closed it, laying his head against the wood to catch his breath.

Harry was home; he was safe.
Remus swallowed the urge to yawn and tried to focus on his meeting with Brian. They were in Brian's office in a wonderful old building just off Diagon Alley. The office was large but unpretentious, it suited Brian. There was a large bay window letting sunlight flood across the sturdy desk and comfortable chairs, the bookcases that lined the room were filed with legal books and journals.

"Everything go as planned with obtaining custody of the boy?" Brian asked as he reviewed the parchments in front of him.

"Pretty much." Remus replied, recalling the previous evening with satisfaction before his mind drifted to earlier that morning.

He'd bundled a newly de-aged Sirius and Harry into a car they'd hired at five o'clock to drive them to the airport. They'd both tugged at his heartstrings; it had been like looking at what could have been had Sirius taken guardianship when Harry was a baby. Harry had made a very cute sleepy five year old; Sirius had made a very dangerous looking twenty-seven year old. Remus had insisted on taking a photo.

"He's a remarkable thirteen year old boy if he didn't kick up a fuss about being sent to a health clinic." Brian said dryly, setting the parchments aside.

Remus grinned. "Ah, well, we might have led him to believe it's mostly for Sirius's benefit, and the most he'll get is a check-up and then he can have a holiday."

"Sneaky."

"It was a bit of a conversational landmine." Remus recalled. Sirius had handled it well. In fact, Sirius had handled the whole evening with remarkable skill only faltering over the topic of Dumbledore momentarily. Remus was proud of him. When Sirius was healed, he was going to be a fantastic father to Harry.

And Sirius did need healing. Remus had caught him drifting mid-sentence; staring off into space with a haunted expression. He was skin and bones despite Kreacher's cooking and the nutrient potions the house elf insisted Sirius drink every morning. But for all that Sirius was surprisingly focused on one thing: Harry.

James would be proud of Sirius and how he'd embraced his role as Harry's godfather, Remus thought fondly; Lily, on the other hand, would be open-mouthed in disbelief at Sirius's transformation from a somewhat reckless youth. Remus was only saddened that Sirius hadn't been given the opportunity to transform twelve years before.

The confirmation that there had been no trial hadn't been a shock to them but it was still a blow. Sirius had spent the day after hearing the news in a fury. Remus had channelled his anger into going over their plan with a fine toothcomb so nothing could go wrong. It had been hard the previous evening trying to explain to Harry their anger at Albus without listing the growing complaints they had against him – the primary of which was Harry's treatment at the hands of the Dursleys.

Remus had a feeling that Harry needed to be healed as much as Sirius. His size and stature spoke of malnutrition and given the way he had broken down when Sirius had confirmed he was Harry's guardian and wanted him...Merlin. Remus had never felt so useless.
"Did you get a chance to ask the young man about prosecuting his relatives?" Brian asked.

If Remus hadn't known his lycanthropy blocked mind-reading of any description he'd have been worried that Brian had picked the topic straight out of his head. He sighed and nodded. "He said and I quote 'I just want shot of them.' Sirius and I are agreed that they won't come near him again so that's done."

"Ah. Well, can't blame the boy, and it's probably for the best; a prosecution would have been an ordeal for him." Brian murmured. "I assume you looked at the report compiled by Amelia Bones?"

"Actually, no." Remus shook his head. "Sirius took a copy for the healers at the clinic but he wouldn't read it. He said Harry would talk to us when he was ready. I won't read it because I fear if I do I'll hex the Dursleys if I have to deal with them again."

Brian raised an eyebrow. "Some would say they deserve it."

"They'll get their comeuppance eventually." Remus promised fiercely. "Sirius and I will ensure it once Harry is of age and Petunia can't even remotely threaten to take Harry away from Sirius."

"You think they'll try and reverse the guardianship?"

"It's unlikely but I'm not ruling it out," Remus said, "mostly because I wouldn't put it past Vernon Dursley to realise that if they got a new house for Harry that they could potentially extort more."

"I assume that Black would prosecute them for extortion in that case." Brian said, picking up the cup on his desk.

Remus nodded, draining his own cup of tea. Sirius would if Remus had anything to say about it. "A topic for another day," he said, knowing they'd meandered from the purpose of the meeting. "Are we organised for the press this week?"

Brian nodded. "Everything's been arranged. There'll be a press feature tomorrow reminding people of Sirius's efforts during the last war, his friendship with the Potters and hopefully various statements from friends and supporters once the news breaks today about his innocence. The day after that, the press will have the escape story emphasising the want to protect Harry, and the day after that; the Ministry will announce its decision that Sirius has been awarded guardianship."

"Good." Remus said, relieved everything was in place.

"Yes," Brian brushed off his robes absently, "and don't think I won't be charging Black danger money for having to go into the Ministry every day."

Remus smiled at him. "Well, I could do it but his Senior Undersecretary is likely to panic when she realises I'm a werewolf."

Brian harrumphed with laughter. "Merlin, but she's a toad. How Dolores ever got that position..." he shook his head. "You know it's going to cause a bit of a storm that Lord Black has a werewolf as his steward when your condition leaks out to the press? The Light will assume that it's a confirmation he's Dark because he's hiring a Dark creature, and the Dark will assume that it's a confirmation that he's Light because he's not discriminating against werewolves."

Remus's lips twitched. "Sirius is looking forward to confounding people, I think. I won't care for the publicity although it will help promote Sirius's political agenda, but frankly, making sure Sirius and Harry have a good life is my only objective."
"And a good objective it is too." Brian agreed, raising his cup in a silent toast. "Moving on to other legal matters, I've spoken with Liam Arkam and we've come to a gentleman's agreement over the Potters' will as they were the original solicitors of record. He has submitted the paperwork we completed when Amelia agreed to act as executor to get the guardianship through. The outstanding bequests will go through within the next couple of days, and there'll be a will reading. He gave me a letter to forward to Sirius; I assume it's a proposal for resuming their role as the Potter solicitors. You obviously have our proposal. Mary Baron is very good and we can maintain separation to ensure there is no conflict of interest."

Remus took the letter and popped it into his briefcase. Arkam and Arkam was a good firm but Sirius hadn't been impressed that they'd allowed the will to go missing in the first place and effectively condemned Harry to the Dursleys. Regardless of Sirius's situation and the Longbottoms, Minerva McGonagall, who had been a close friend of James's mother, had been named as an alternative guardian for Harry as had Andromeda Tonks, a distant cousin to James as a former member of the House of Black before her marriage to a Muggleborn but one who he had known through Sirius. However, Sirius was determined that Harry needed to have input into who would represent him and so had decided Harry would meet with the candidates and they'd discuss it – something Brian already knew.

"Anything else to discuss today?" Remus asked, glancing towards the clock. He wanted to get to Gringotts before the Ministry press conference.

"Just a reminder that we need to confirm Lord Black's plans for the Black family meeting if he wants to go ahead with his schedule."

Remus grimaced. "The LeStranges are a certainty. You can prepare the dissolution of the marriage and disownment papers. The Tonks are also a certainty to be reinstated."

"And the Malfoys?"

"That's the difficult one." Remus confessed. "Do we leave Malfoy in place and use the Black primacy to keep him in line, or take him out of the equation and risk someone else manoeuvring into the vacuum Malfoy leaves?"

"Better the devil we know?" Brian questioned with a nod. "I can understand that."

Remus pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Prepare dissolution of marriage and disownment papers. Sirius may use them, he may not...but at least they'll be ready."

Brian nodded. "And adoption papers?"

"Prepare them." Remus said simply. He rather thought Harry would want the security of being adopted by Sirius.

Brian made a note and Remus got to his feet, straightening out his robes. Sirius had insisted on buying Remus some new clothing and Remus had acquiesced knowing he needed to look the part as steward for Lord Black.

He bade farewell to Brian and made his way out of the building and down Diagon Alley towards Gringotts. He was actually surprised how much he was enjoying his new position – he and Sirius had worked out the details the day after they'd been reunited. In truth although Remus held the title of 'steward,' his responsibilities would be fluid dependent on Sirius's and Harry's needs. Primarily, Remus was going to be taking care of the financials and estate management while Sirius took care of the politics. Sirius had also made it clear that he expected Remus to help him protect and guide
Harry, to resume his place as Uncle Moony. Remus was thrilled.

Remus had moved into Grimmauld Place for convenience and rented out his old flat in Oxford to two very nice students who were beginning their Masters in the autumn at the University and wanted to stay over the summer. The new house in Hampshire would be ready by the time Sirius and Harry returned from the States, and Remus was looking forward to moving into their new home. He'd spend the full moons locked away in his room at Grimmauld Place though. Despite Sirius ensuring Remus had the money to buy Wolfsbane, Remus wouldn't be anywhere near Harry when he transformed and he'd made Sirius promise not to argue with him about it. The last full moon had almost been too close as it was.

Gringotts was buzzing with people and Remus made his way to a teller. He informed briskly that he was there for a meeting with the Family accounts manager and a goblin was called to take him. They made their way the stairs to the offices and Remus found himself ushered into a large room where Kipbold awaited him. They'd already been through the process once for the Black accounts.

"Documentation." Kipbold said crisply.

Remus immediately drew out the relevant parchments from his case and handed them to the goblin; the Potters' will, the guardianship award of Harry to Sirius, and his own appointment as steward.

Kipbold grunted. "Gringotts acknowledges that you or Lord Black will represent the Potter heir in financial dealings concerning his estate going forward." He reached into a box on the desk and drew out a bronze key. "You should present this in future."

Remus carefully pocketed it. "I want the current records and the portkeys to the various properties."

Kipbold harrumphed but walked over to the large filing cabinet and withdrew a file. He handed it to Remus. "Same procedure as Black; tap the parchment with your wand and request details of the vault or property. Current information defaults to a summary."

Remus nodded and placed the file in his case as Kipbold went over to a safe and pulled out a box with the portkeys. He handed it to Remus who stowed it away.

"They won't work until Potter claims his ring to lift the Death Fidelius." Kipbold said bluntly.

"Arnold Askwith is the Wizard Financial Manager of record. Will you want to fire him?"

"I'll want to meet with him once I've reviewed the records, say tomorrow at one." Remus said. They'd already fired the Black Financial Manager and replaced him with a goblin called Poon on Kipbold's recommendation. Poon was a genius with figures and a voracious appetite for profit. Sirius was liquidating any investment that looked the least bit shady and reinvesting in better businesses.

Kipbold grunted again. "I'll inform appointments."

"Good profit to you." Remus said politely and left without further pleasantries. He made his way to the Leaky Cauldron to get to the Ministry of Magic.

The atrium was heaving when Remus stepped out of the floo. He could see the raised dais which had been put up ready for the press conference, and the milling press already taking their seats. Amelia Bones was chatting to Brian and Alastor Moody in a corner. Remus unashamedly hid behind a pot plant not wanting to call attention to his presence.

Fudge entered and Remus's eyes widened at the sight of Albus trailing after him. If Albus had screwed up Sirius's freedom in anyway, Remus would kill him. Fudge ignored the Chief Warlock and walked up the steps to the dais. His entourage of the Department heads stopped at the foot of the
steps with the exception being Amelia Bones who made her way up them to stand just behind Fudge. The Head Auror, Rufus Scrimgeour, hovered just at the other side of the dais; other red-robed Aurors patrolled. Many of the Ministry employees gathered for the show.

"Hello, Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, concerned citizens." Fudge began pompously from the lectern. "I have a statement to read and then you may ask questions."

Remus wasn't surprised as the crowd erupted in whispers after the first few sentences; Fudge had to call for order after declaring Sirius innocent, and again after declaring Wormtail alive and wanted. Remus glanced at Albus and found a stunned expression adorning the face of the Headmaster. He had evidently not known what Fudge was going to announce.

"Questions?" Fudge asked, placing the statement down. He pointed at a reporter in the first row.

"Rita Skeeter, Minister, for the Daily Prophet," Rita said loudly, "are you absolutely certain Black is innocent?"

Fudge leaned over the lectern and nodded gravely. "Director Bones conducted a thorough investigation. The physical evidence clears Black of the explosion that killed the muggles. Pettigrew was seen alive by witnesses including Harry Potter at Hogwarts at the time of Black's capture there. Further they heard Pettigrew confess to betraying the Potters to You-Know-Who. Sirius Black is innocent."

"But what about his reputation as the right hand of You-Know-Who?" Another reporter shouted.

"Unfortunately, articles and books written after the end of the war assumed facts not in evidence based on Black's arrest for the deaths of the Potters, Pettigrew and the muggles." Fudge replied carefully. "In fact I was reminded that as a Hit Wizard in the employ of the Ministry, Sirius Black was responsible for the arrest and take down of many Death Eaters before the defeat of You-Know-Who. Not only that but he was a most trusted friend of James and Lily Potter who made him the godfather of their only son, Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. The Ministry shares its part in the horrendous damage done to Mister Black's reputation and has made reparations."

"Where is Black now?" asked a male reporter from the front row.

"Our sources place him abroad." Fudge said simply. "We reiterate that we would welcome him back to Britain should he choose to return."

Rita stood up to regain the Minister's attention. "Will actions be taken against those in the Ministry and Wizengamot who oversaw this terrible miscarriage of justice against former Hit Wizard Black?" Her gaze shifted to Dumbledore and then to Barty Crouch who glared at her.

Fudge cleared his throat. "We have to remember that it was a time of war and chaos. The Ministry was operating under special authorities. Of course, Mister Black should have had a trial where his innocence could have been established – absolutely no question about it – but we understand that it was overlooked because of circumstance." He paused. "I believe we should focus instead on two things: firstly, trusting that the current administration has seen to it that justice has prevailed, and secondly, placing our efforts into capturing the real traitor and murderer, the rat Peter Pettigrew. That will be all for today."

He gave a nod and exited the dais.

A smattering of applause followed in his wake. Remus let the crowd drift into a mass before he sneaked out from the pot plant and started to make his way to the floo.
Albus appeared so quickly in front of him that Remus almost charged into him. "Remus! How delightful to see you here!"

"Albus." Remus smiled politely and caught his breath. "How are you?"

"Fine, my dear boy." Albus said, waving away the question even as he cast a privacy bubble. "I didn't realise you'd been invited…"

"I wasn't," Remus hastened to correct that idea, "I heard about it though and…well, I couldn't not be here." He winced at his ungrammatical statement.

"Of course you couldn't," Albus agreed, "and it is a remarkable turnaround by Cornelius," for the first time ever Remus heard Albus sound somewhat bewildered, "that has to be seen and heard to be believed. I assume though that you were interviewed?"

"Under the usual oath of confidentiality." Remus confirmed smoothly. "I doubt the Ministry will let anyone but Harry's name be released."

"Possibly not," Albus demurred.

"Talking of Harry, I should write to him and let him know. I know he was interviewed so he's probably champing at the bit to know the result." Remus said brightly and somewhat mischievously.

"Let me handle that, dear boy," Albus said quickly, "Harry is currently away with the Dursleys due to a family emergency and they won't appreciate owl posts in the presence of other muggles."

"I'm sure you know best." Remus said dryly, silently celebrating that their cover story for the Dursleys departure from Privet Drive had worked.

Albus smiled, apparently satisfied with Remus's compliance. "I don't suppose you know where Sirius is? I'd be happy to collect him and let him know he can return."

"Somewhere abroad but I don't know the exact location." Remus replied promptly. Which was the truth; he had no idea where the plane was at that exact moment.

"Ah." Albus didn't seem that upset and Remus knew Albus was weighing searching out Sirius and convincing him that he knew best where Harry was concerned, with waiting until Sirius surfaced. "Well, perhaps with all the foreign press Cornelius has arranged he will be in touch sooner rather than later."

Remus inclined his head.

Albus suddenly turned to his left and Remus saw Alastor Moody gesturing at Albus to take down the bubble. Albus did so quickly.

"Albus." Alastor growled.

"Alastor!" Albus greeted him warmly. "It's good to see you. May I introduce the outgoing Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts with the incoming? Remus, you remember Alastor Moody?"

"Pleased to meet you again," Remus said automatically, "it's been some time."

"A long time." Alastor regarded him stiffly before relaxing and taking his hand. "Are you free to go over the details of what you covered in class and where you think the students are at with me?"

"I can't today and my new job keeps me busy," Remus replied, "but I could spare a lunch, say, the
"day after tomorrow, one o'clock at The Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade?"

"Agreed." Alastor said.

"It's good to hear you found something so quickly despite how things ended at Hogwarts." Albus said warmly. "I'm certain Severus didn't mean…"

"Albus," Remus cut across him sharply. "Severus has never acted without knowing exactly what he means to do." He took a breath as Albus blinked in shock at Remus daring to speak out. "I will admit I deserved to lose my position after forgetting my Wolfsbane, but one can only hope that ousting me from Hogwarts is enough vengeance for him. As it stands, I can assure you that Sirius, when he does return, will not take kindly to Severus's treatment of Harry – and please don't deny it – Severus's unprofessional behaviour is common knowledge among the students and staff, and frankly, Severus will deserve everything Sirius will do to him and I hope I get to watch." He turned to Alastor. "I look forward to our lunch."

"As do I," replied Alastor dryly.

"Good day, Albus." Remus said politely. He sidestepped his old Headmaster and strode towards the floo, feeling liberated.

o-O-o

Sirius struggled with juggling the backpack, Harry's backpack, the documentation the muggle customs wanted, and Harry who was fast asleep. They were meant to be disembarking.

"Here, let me help you," Cheryl, the elderly woman who'd sat across the aisle from them in the plane, reached over and took Harry's backpack before the hovering air stewardess could intervene, "Basil, take the other bag."

Her husband smiled at Sirius. "You might as well give it to me otherwise she'll just punish us both."

Sirius gave away the bag and adjusted his hold on Harry as they made their way off the plane and down a sterile corridor. "It's very kind of you both."

"Nonsense." Cheryl stroked a hand over Harry's head. "He's a lovely boy."

Five year old Harry had charmed the pants off every woman in the first class section where they'd been seated. He had been polite and adorable. He'd loved the children's movie they'd played, had loved the food, and had taken great enjoyment in the children's play-pack that the stewardess had given them a few minutes into the flight. In truth, Sirius had enjoyed the play-pack too and watching Harry enjoy it; it had felt like something they'd both missed out on had been returned to them. There was also a plush soft teddy bear wearing the airlines colours that Harry hadn't let go of when he'd fallen asleep. Apparently being five was tiring – which made sense because taking care of a five year old was exhausting.

Before he knew it, Cheryl and Basil were helping Sirius through customs and into baggage where Harry woke up. They finally separated as they walked into arrivals – Cheryl and Basil being greeted by their daughter – while Sirius caught sight of a sign for his alias.

He pushed the trolley holding their luggage and walked Harry over carefully, ensuring his body was between him and the middle-aged bald man holding up the placard. "The Valley Clinic?"

"Indeed." The driver's blue eyes twinkled. "And you must be our new client," his gaze flickered to Harry, "or should I say clients?"
Sirius automatically tensed.

The driver's gaze returned to him with a twinkle in the depths. "Your Uncle Alphard was quite the character. What was his motto again…something about being up to no good?"

Sirius relaxed slightly at the mention of his uncle and his trademark saying that Sirius had stolen for the Marauders. "Sorry, it's been a long trip."

"Yes, travel by plane is tiring I'm lead to believe. Call me Mick." The driver subtly pushed Sirius aside and took ownership of the trolley.

They walked out into the windy city of Chicago and Sirius was glad he'd thought to put on his jacket. He paused and crouched down beside Harry. "Cold?"

Harry nodded, ducking his head shyly. Sirius helped zip up the jacket Harry wore and took Harry's hand as they caught up with the waiting Mick. The car was a luxury sedan. Mick wasn't surprised to see Sirius take the back seat with Harry. Sirius helped Harry into the seatbelt and ensured it was secure.

"The Valley is a good three hour journey." Mick said.

Sirius entranced Harry with the 'who can spot the most red cars' game by telling him Lily had made him play it when they'd gone muggle travelling. When Harry got tired and grumpy, Mick pointed out the water and food for them stored in a cooler. Harry was asleep again as soon as he'd eaten.

Sirius resisted the urge to pull him out of the seatbelt and into his lap. He settled for stroking a hand through Harry's hair. Five year old Harry was happy to hold Sirius's hand or be held by him for a cuddle. But the potion would run out shortly and they'd be back to their usual ages and Sirius didn't want to be. He wanted the years back; he wanted his godson to have his childhood and he wanted to watch Harry take all the important milestone steps just as Sirius had sometimes dreamed in Azkaban. He took deep breath after deep breath to centre himself again.

He also recognised that thirteen year old Harry was in some ways much more challenging to deal with; harder to get to know. He'd thanked Remus profusely for helping with Harry the night before. Thirteen year old Harry, almost fourteen, was right on the precipice that separated the child from the man; he needed the love of a parent, the security of one, but he would rebel quickly at being restricted by one even for his own protection. Sirius knew they'd have to navigate some compromises between Sirius's need to protect Harry and Harry's need to assert his independence.

The car pulled into off the highway and into the countryside. Sirius watched carefully, alert to anything suspicious. A set of gates seemed to appear from nowhere and Mick drove through them and into a beautiful estate of lush green grass, leafy woodland and perfect blue skies just as his Uncle Alphard had described. Sirius knew Alphard had been fascinated by the history and the time bubble magic.

The Valley belonged to a tribe of Native American wizards. It had been originally believed that the time bubble had been created as a response to the invading European armies; men went into the Valley and returned a week later as old men or didn't return at all. But Alphard had learned from the tribe elders that the time bubble had always been there and the tribe had settled within it to safeguard it, eventually being able to overcome the temporal effects themselves through amulets that kept them temporally in synch with the outside world.

Ultimately they had specialised in healing magic and welcomed others of all faiths and backgrounds who wanted to do the same. The Valley had become known as a place where if someone was badly
injured or diseased they could seek treatment, spending days healing but only losing a week in normal time. As the world advanced, the Valley became an exclusive healing clinic that specialised in difficult cases and catering to people with money to spare.

They pulled up in front of a tall white building with a glass front. Sirius woke Harry and Mick swiftly escorted them inside to the waiting healer.

He bowed in front of the grey-haired Native American man. "Healer Blackhawk."

Blackhawk's gaze raked over Sirius. "Lord Black, I will reverse the de-aging potion on you and your charge with your permission."

Sirius nodded quickly. Blackhawk quietly radiated power in the same Dumbledore did. He felt the wash of magic and his skin rippled uncomfortably for a moment before it resettled. Beside him he felt Harry morph back into his teenage state, clothes transfiguring along with him.

Blackhawk smiled kindly at Sirius. "Your uncle was a good man and I very much enjoyed our time together. I knew then you would one day seek our help."

"Thank you for welcoming us." Sirius said, uncertain what else to say.

The healer turned his attention to Harry. "It is good to meet you, Harry Potter." He said solemnly. "We have long expected you."

Sirius frowned at Blackhawk's greeting and moved closer to his godson. Harry didn't object and he smiled uncertainly at the healer.

"Uh, hello?" Harry said politely, fidgeted with the backpack he held.

"You understand you are now within the temporal bubble?" Blackhawk informed them briskly. "However much time you spend here be it five minutes or five months, a week will have transpired in the outside world when you leave."

Sirius nodded along with Harry. "We understand."

"Good," Blackhawk led them through the reception area and through a door which opened up into a wide courtyard. Sirius was a little wary at the lack of any other people.

Blackhawk saw him looking around and smiled. "In the clinic, you will see and hear no-one but those assigned to your care and no-one else will see you and hear you."

"Wow." Harry said, impressed as Sirius was.

"You are entitled to your privacy, Mister Potter."

"Thank you." Harry was sincere and his words heartfelt.

"Yes, thank you." Sirius echoed because he was pleased at the protection of Harry's identity.

Harry grinned quickly at Sirius in a shared moment of satisfaction.

Blackhawk led them into the building to their right and into a warm and friendly room; a sitting area was off to the left, and a table set out with food to the right. "This is my consulting room. Please both of you take a seat and have some refreshments; you have had a long journey. There is a bathroom if you wish to freshen up."
He left them to it and they made short work of the sandwiches and juice. Sirius urged Harry into cleaning up and then made use of the bathroom himself. He felt grimy. He wanted a shower and bed. He made do and went back into the room just as Blackhawk rejoined them with a woman who reminded him of McGonagall and was introduced as Doctor Helen Jordan.

They sat on sofas facing each other; the healers on one side, Sirius and Harry on the other.

Blackhawk gestured at Sirius. "We will discuss your treatment afterwards, Lord Black. I would like to first discuss your ward's."

"Shouldn't there, uh, be scans first?" Harry asked perplexed. He instinctively shifted closer to Sirius. Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder, reassuring him. "I have to admit to the same question."

"All the scans were performed passively during the time you've already spent in this room." Jordan said kindly.

"Saves time," quipped Sirius, a little disturbed that they'd been monitored and assessed without his knowledge.

Blackhawk returned his gaze to Sirius. "It is normally our practice to discuss treatment with the child present if that's OK with you."

Sirius could almost feel Harry bristling at being called a child. "Harry's a young man rather than a child, I think." He looked at his godson. "Are you OK with staying?"

"I'll stay." Harry said immediately.

They both turned back to Blackhawk with expectant looks.

"We'll start with the minor and work our way up to the major." Blackhawk explained. He indicated that Jordan should take over.

Sirius felt Harry tensing under his hand but he didn't remove it. He kept it there, a silent sign that he was there for Harry.

"Mister Potter…" Jordan began.

"Harry, please." Harry interrupted.

She smiled gently. "Harry. You have some malnutrition and physical weakness caused by poor diet. We can easily fix this with potions and a better diet going forward. We also incorporate muggle techniques in our healing hence why I'm a Doctor as well as a Healer. We want to build up your physical fitness so there'll be an exercise programme for you to do. It'll get you in tip top shape for Quidditch. How does that sound so far?"

"OK." Harry said warily and Sirius knew that he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jordan smiled kindly. "We also believe that it would a good idea for you to see a mind healer and learn some defensive mind magic."

Sirius had to hand it to them; Harry would have protested at the words 'mind healer' but for that last dangling carrot.

"Defensive mind magic?" Harry asked eagerly.
"An art called Occlumency." Jordan said. "It helps to keep your secrets and your mind safe. It would offer another layer of protection against Dementors."

"Brilliant." Harry proclaimed with relief. He shared a glance with Sirius, an acknowledgement that Harry would be learning something they had already discussed.

Sirius squeezed his shoulder a touch as Jordan glanced at Blackhawk.

"There is also something our scans found we need to discuss with you to determine a path forward." Blackhawk said solemnly.

Harry tensed straight back up and Sirius's eyes narrowed on Blackhawk.

"I do not know if you are aware but your father and mother invoked a spell that placed a protective barrier around you." Blackhawk began.

"Yes, that is…I was…attacked in my first year and the Headmaster said my mother's love protected me." Harry said quietly. "Is that what you mean?"

"In part," Blackhawk agreed, "the spell is powered by your father's – your – family magic so he must have called it forth and sent it to your mother somehow."

Sirius's eyes widened. Family magic was used to bind oaths and judge the breaking of them. It was an additional power source but only for the Head of House – it had been the reason why James had been able to ensure he and Lily survived three encounters with Voldemort. How had James convinced the magic to power a spell Lily had cast?

"However," Blackhawk continued, "the spell itself works only if a mother sacrifices her own life for her child and her love for you was the reason she could make that sacrifice."

Sirius watched anxiously as Harry considered Blackhawk's description, Harry's hands twisting anxiously in his lap.

"When the Dementors…I hear them; Dad telling her to take me and run, and Mum begging Voldemort to leave me and kill her instead." Harry said softly. "He told her to stand aside but she wouldn't…"

Sirius's heart just about broke. "Of course she wouldn't," he said gently, "she loved you very much." He pulled him into a half-hug, and was surprised when Harry didn't resist the comfort.

"Your family magic must be very powerful," Jordan offered, "because the magic invoked is incredibly complex. All around you is a magical barrier. The one who tried to kill you would never be able to touch you."

"He couldn't," Harry admitted ruefully, his eyes downcast, "a couple of years ago Voldemort possessed someone who attacked me and I think…I think my protection killed him…the man even though the Headmaster said it was the possession that did it."

"Possession is a tricky business," Blackhawk jumped in before Sirius could, "it is likely that Albus Dumbledore was correct that this host would not have survived no matter that your protection did what it was meant to do and saved you."

"Think of it this way, Harry," Sirius said, ignoring the look of alarm that Jordan wore with Harry's claim that Voldemort had possessed someone, "you're Hogwarts and your folks surrounded you with a Forbidden Forest to protect you. Just because the Forest did its job and kept someone from harming
you, it doesn't make it your fault that they came to harm. Understand? It was not your fault."

Harry drew in a deep breath and nodded shakily. Sirius wondered if it was the first time he'd talked about his experience and glanced over at Jordan who nodded in understanding; it would be addressed in Harry's treatment.

Sirius turned his attention back to Blackhawk. "You're concerned about the protection in some way?"

"No, not at all," Jordan hurried to reassure him. "The protection actually increases his natural healing abilities and helps his magic."

"What we wished to discussed is the crack in the protection." Blackhawk explained, his eyes shifting to Harry's forehead.

Harry lifted up his fringe and fingered his scar. Sirius was beginning to regret giving Harry the option to stay.

"Exactly," Blackhawk said approvingly. "This is where Voldemort struck you with the Killing Curse, yes? Unfortunately, nothing can stop the Killing Curse except dodging it, or a heavy object thrown into its path, or a huge wave of raw magic that throws it off course. Most wizards do not have the power required for the latter two defences."

"The curse came into contact with the barrier, and where it impacted it heated up the barrier and created your scar. Because you were scared and hurt, we think you must have sent out a huge wave of accidental magic which combined with the protection pushed the curse back towards Voldemort and destroyed his body." Jordan continued.

Sirius rubbed Harry's back to soothe him as his godson shifted restlessly, agitated by the discussion.

"So what's the problem with my scar?" Harry asked bluntly, wanting to get to the point. "Can you get rid of it?"

"We have detected a dark residue of magic around your scar with the signature of your enemy." Blackhawk admitted.

"It's OK, Harry." Sirius kept his arm around Harry who had flinched and glared at Blackhawk who looked back serenely. "You can rid of him of this residue?" He had a horrible suspicion of what it was exactly but Harry did not need to know that he could be carrying around a part of Voldemort's soul.

Blackhawk inclined his head. "We will need to drain his magical core to a low level to pry the residue free. Once it is gone then we can clean the scar with healing and restore his magic. However, there is the consideration that it provides a connection to the enemy." He paused. "I believe if your enemy is weak the connection is dormant but perhaps you would feel pain around your scar in your enemy's presence?"

Harry nodded swiftly.

"If your enemy were to grow stronger, the connection may expand and provide you with visions of your enemy's movements." Blackhawk said. "It could provide an advantage. It is also an area of vulnerability because just as you see him, he may see you."

Sirius felt Harry tremble against him and shifted so he was facing Harry fully, his hands over Harry's. "Harry, look at me."
Harry lifted his eyes slowly until they met Sirius's.

"I said we would discuss important things before making a decision, didn't I? What do you honestly want to do?" Sirius asked simply.

"Get rid of it." Harry blurted out and Sirius felt a rush of relief. "I don't...I don't want any kind of connection to him but..."

"No buts." Sirius said firmly. "We're in complete agreement." He squeezed Harry's hands and despite wanting to pull Harry into a hug regardless of their audience, he knew the thirteen year old boy would hate it if he did. Sirius moved back to his previous position, but put his arm around his godson's shoulders. "We'll do the procedure to cleanse his scar."

Blackhawk nodded and Sirius could see the approval in the old wizard's eyes.

"There is one other additional problem we have and that is a childhood binding on Harry's magical core." Jordan added.

Sirius frowned. "James placed one when he was about four months old, I think. Lily didn't want to but he was displaying a lot of magic, doing spontaneous transfigurations actually, and James eventually convinced her that if they didn't Harry might harm himself or them accidentally."

Harry perked up at the story of his babyhood but he was too pale and Sirius could see the fear in his eyes – the connection business scared him and Sirius couldn't blame him, it was scary.

"The Healer who oversaw it said that the binding would fade around the time Harry turned ten." Sirius added, confused.

"That binding has indeed faded." Jordan replied. "No, there is a second binding which was performed when he was fifteen months old. It restricts the power he can consciously access."

"This binding has ensured the dark residue would not grow stronger than the child." Blackhawk explained. "It has the magical signature of Albus Dumbledore."

_Dumbledore._ Sirius gritted his teeth and tried to control his rising fury. Remus had been wrong, he realised. Dumbledore didn't think Harry was average and had nothing to do with getting rid of Voldemort. No, Dumbledore had known Harry had power but the meddling old coot had found the soul fragment and rather than getting rid of it, he had bound Harry's core, presumably because Dumbledore had wanted the advantage of the connection. Sirius felt his control slipping and wrestled it back. Harry, he reminded himself; Harry needed him to be calm.

"But it needs to be removed," Blackhawk continued, "so we propose to remove the binding once the cleansing is complete."

"Agreed." Sirius said quickly.

"We'll assess any power issues after the binding is taken away." Jordan said.

Blackhawk regarded both Harry and Sirius thoughtfully. "You must be exhausted from your journey. Perhaps we should discuss your treatment tomorrow, Lord Black."

"It's Sirius," Sirius answered, "and yes; resting and settling in sounds like a good idea." He gave Harry a reassuring smile as they got to their feet.

Everything was going to be OK. They'd get rid of the dark stain of Voldemort and get Harry his
power back, get him healthy.

And then Sirius was going to think of a suitable way to totally destroy Albus Dumbledore.
**SIRIUS BLACK: OUR FORGOTTEN HERO**, Rita Skeeter

With yesterday's shocking news that Sirius Black is innocent, we at the Daily Prophet have returned to the beginning to find out who the real Sirius Black is and what might have motivated those in power to incarcerate an innocent man.

Black was the eldest son of Orion and Walburga Black, the first Black in history to be sorted at Hogwarts into Gryffindor. There, he made friends with James Potter, a distant cousin through Dorea Black. He and Potter were considered inseparable throughout their school days. Head of Gryffindor Minerva McGonagall recalls that 'it was as though they shared the same brain.'

At the age of sixteen, Black left his family after a disagreement over their open support of You-Know-Who and was given sanctuary by the Potters, a family that had always stood for the Light. Another friend of the Potters, Amos Diggory, notes 'Black was Potter's brother in all but blood.'

After graduating overall top of his class, Black joined the Hit Wizards, partnering with Potter during training. Ex-Senior Auror Alastor Moody, his training instructor, remembers 'Black was a great Hit Wizard; the best. There was nobody better at taking down Death Eaters.' Indeed, Black was so good, he was promoted quickly and is the officer of record for eighteen Death Eater executions in battle.

In his personal life, Black was linked with several witches. Polly Bell remembers fondly; "After James and Lily wed, Lily went on a bit of a match-making exercise for Black trying to get him to settle down. I think he went on the dates to make her happy – he'd stood by James as his best man you see.'" Black had a bit of a reputation as a rake but the ladies we spoke to recalled a perfect gentleman.

In late 1980, Black was captured by Death Eaters while undercover abroad. His rescue was shrouded in secrecy (although ten of the executions mentioned above are listed around the same time) and he was badly injured. He recuperated with the Potters and after the birth of their son, Harry, was named as godfather. Healer Clarence Abby told the Prophet that Black was actually present at the birth and it was he who handed his godson to the proud mother and father; 'He doted on the child, anyone could see it.'

It is on this latter point that one wonders if Black's swift exile to Azkaban following the events of October 31st 1981 was less to do with his guilt and more to do with determining the future of the Boy Who Lived. With Black removed from the equation, the orphaned Harry was placed in the muggle world, and strangely, Black's sacrifices during the war, his long stand against You-Know-Who, and his deep friendship with the Potters were all swept under the carpet.

Rumours abound that now that Black has been declared innocent he will sue for the custody of Harry Potter and return him fully to our world. We at the Prophet wish him every success and welcome our forgotten hero home.

Remus wondered if he should feel slightly nauseous at the outpouring of simpering as he folded the paper and tossed it to the side. Brian's press strategy was going well though and the seeds had been planted for the announcement of Harry's guardianship. He wondered if Albus had felt sick reading the Prophet that morning. He hoped so.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He really had to get over his anger at Albus.
He did owe the old wizard for providing him with a magical education, and Albus was a great wizard who was deserving of his respect.

Except in the matter of Harry and Sirius.

He wasn't sure that he'd ever be able to forgive Albus for the Dursleys, and for not checking whether Sirius had received a trial and condemning him to twelve years of hell.

Yes, Remus thought dryly, he was doing really well at getting over his anger at Albus. He glanced at the clock and pulled the Potter file back towards him.

He'd fired the Financial Manager earlier that afternoon and put Poon in charge. The good news was that the main bulk of the estate had gone into lockdown; monies were supplied to the various caretakers of the properties for maintenance but nothing substantial. The investment portfolio though had been left to rot from what Remus could gather. A lot of money had been lost. The outlook wasn't too bad – Harry was still wealthy – but if it had been left until Harry had reached seventeen, Remus believed Harry's estate would have been halved in value. Kipbold had been as unimpressed as Remus when he had explained the reasons behind the termination.

He put the Potter file aside and started to go through the mail that had arrived. It had been almost a week since Sirius had informed the Black family members that there was a new Lord Black. They had been told to reply back care of Gringotts and Remus had collected the mail while he'd been there. Most of the distant relatives already had a Head of House in a good position to serve them, such as the Weasleys, and so Sirius had ignored those for when his identity would be announced. But Remus had been impressed at how he'd tracked down other relatives who were not so lucky, or who had been blasted from the tree.

"Dear Lord Black – or should that be Cousin?

Thanks for the recent letter to touch base and see what the Hitchens clan is up to in Canada. There's just me and my sister Fiona now.

Fi married last year to a woman called Ola; they're both happy and thinking of adopting a baby.

I'm married to a beautiful woman myself – Joanne. We have three rugrats – Amy, and twins Billy and Ray. Amy is twelve and attends a special school for the gifted in Vancouver – we're very proud of her. Billy and Ray are still in kindergarten but are great kids.

We'd love to stay in touch – Jo's thrilled at the idea we're related to an English Lord!

Cheers,

Rob Hitchens"

The marriage of Isla Black to a muggle man called Hitchens had started the line from the Black perspective but it hadn't produced a magical offspring as far as Sirius could tell. Rob Hitchins, Isla's descendent, was a muggle working for a consultancy firm but it hadn't stopped Sirius from sending his 'are you OK?' letter. As Sirius pointed out, his mother was probably rolling in her grave. Remus read over the letter again and noted the phrasing around the girl's schooling. It was the usual cover story for magic. Sirius would want to investigate more.

"Sirius,

You old dog you can't fool me! The news of your innocence just reached me via international law enforcement channels. I'm glad you're the Lord and I expect you'll redecorate the whole House."
Australia is great – Uncle Alphard was right about that – you really should have come with me! I'm a respectable Senior Auror here in Sydney these days, married Anna, a muggleborn, two years ago and she just gave birth to my firstborn Jason.

My sister Emile is still in France, married a pureblood bastard, and gave birth to one – let's say no more about that. I should warn you that she may approach you for a rapprochement.

My younger half-sister Suzie is a squib like old departed Dad and looks after the Evil Step-Mother who is still alive more's the pity and living at the old place just outside Paris. No hubby on the horizon but Suzie's a good girl.

Yeah, we should probably arrange a call to discuss matters – now you've pointed it out to me I wouldn't want someone like Malfoy getting hold of anything if you were to unexpectedly die either. Give me a shout when you're available.

Simeon Black."

Remus laughed out loud and set the letter aside for Sirius to read. He knew Simeon, Marius Black's son, was Sirius's choice to become regent of the House of Black in the event of his untimely death – separate arrangements would be made in respect of Harry's guardianship and the House of Potter, but Simeon would effectively take financial and political control until Harry, Sirius's legally declared heir, came of age. It sounded like Simeon and Sirius were fairly similar. Sirius had admitted that they were about the same age and Alphard had introduced them when Sirius was eight. Simeon and he had apparently been on-off pen-pals until Simeon had left France just after Sirius had graduated from Hogwarts.

"Lord Black,

My thanks for your recent announcement and enquiry.

I do not require the assistance of the House of Black. My great-nephew, Cletus Polt, will assume the House of Burke on his majority.

Your cousin, Beatrice."

Remus grimaced Beatrice Burke was a hundred and two years old, set in her ways and considered a harridan. Sirius hadn't known about the great-nephew or Remus was sure he'd have skipped telling her.

"My Lord Black,

Thank you for your recent letter. My situation is comfortable. My husband Theodore and I take great joy in our daughter, Nymphadora. We have no immediate need for assistance.

We would be delighted to attend a Family Meeting at your convenience.

Your cousin, Andromeda"

Remus knew Sirius would be pleased with that as he wanted to bring the Tonks back into the family. He picked up the final letter.

"My Dear Lord Black,

I offer thanks and appreciation for your recent announcement and enquiry."
My marriage to Lucius is successful and our partnership influential in British politics. You will find us a boon in navigating current waters. We have increased the Black wealth endowed to us. Our son, Draco, is at Hogwarts and performs well in most subjects, excelling at Potions and winning the role of seeker for his house team. You will find him a delightful addition to the Black family. We have no immediate need for assistance but welcome the return of the protection and patronage of the House of Black.

We are at your service and will be delighted to attend a Family Meeting at your convenience.

Your cousin, Narcissa.”

Remus stuck his tongue out childishly at the letter. He clipped his notes to each letter and filed them away for Sirius to review when he got back.

He checked the clock, drank down his tea and quickly made his way to the floo in the reception room, summoning his briefcase along the way. He'd almost forgotten the interview he was due to perform. He flooed through to the Leaky Cauldron and took a key from Tom. It led to a private sitting room just off the main area. Remus checked the room thoroughly and put up a privacy charm.

The knock came almost immediately and Remus called for the applicant to enter. Penelope Clearwater walked in and stopped in surprise at the sight of Remus.

"Please take a seat, Miss Clearwater." Remus motioned at the chair across from him.

"Professor," Penelope said, "I didn't realise you would be interviewing me. Professor Flitwick didn't mention it when he informed me of the opportunity."

Remus studied her nervousness with a regretful sigh. "If you're too anxious about interviewing with a werewolf, Miss Clearwater, you're probably not right for this job as it involves working with me."

"Oh no, that's not it," Penelope apologised immediately, "I'm so sorry! I'm just…” her hand flailed weakly.

"Nervous?" suggested Remus dryly.

"Yes," Penelope said, "I've had plenty of interviews but I just don't know why I don't get the job and it's made me…well, shall you just give me the bad news now?"

She looked totally miserable and thanks to Filius, Remus understood why. Penelope had been a prefect, aced her NEWTs by all accounts and yet she'd been turned down for position after position – Remus assumed because she was muggleborn. Filius had heard from Albus about Remus's good fortune in securing a new position and had sent a note asking if Remus knew if there was any work suitable for Penelope.

"Take a seat, Miss Clearwater." Remus said with more authority and was pleased when she hurried to the chair and sat down, placing her bag on the floor.

She straightened her tidy navy robes. "Thank you, Professor, I mean, Mister Lupin."

"Did Professor Flitwick tell you what the opportunity was?" Remus asked hoping Filius had shared that much with the girl.

"A secretarial position." Penelope said. It was obvious she was attempting to sound excited about something she thought was dreadfully dull.
"A little bit more than that." Remus said. "What I'm going to tell you needs to remain confidential whether you take the position or not."

She nodded hurriedly.

"I'm the steward to an Ancient and Noble House, meaning I look after the financials and the estate management. The Lord has just taken over the Head of House duties and will be assuming a seat in the Wizengamot which will mean meetings and social events. We need an executive assistant to deal with the scheduling, organising the events we hold, corresponding with quite senior figures, taking minutes, and generally dealing with all the things that we won't necessarily have time to deal with. All of which I'm sure you're more than capable of handling given your academic expertise." He paused. "What was the first position you applied for?"

"An administrator role in the Department of Magical Transportation." Penelope said. "I had hoped to begin a career in the Ministry."

"An admirable goal," Remus said. "What this opportunity would give you is the political exposure, contacts and sponsorship you need to get into the Ministry as a muggleborn."

Penelope's eyebrows shot up at the blunt truth. "You mean I didn't get a position because of…but that's discrimination and…" she stopped abruptly as she recalled who she was complaining to and her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, I'm so…"

"No apologies necessary," Remus waved her off, "the truth is we're both discriminated against – myself officially under law and you unofficially under tradition. The Ministry prefers positions are appointed to purebloods first."

"I think Mister Weasley tried to warn me." Penelope admitted ruefully. She took a breath and fixed Remus with a determined look. "I'm happy to take the position if you'll have me."

"Good," Remus said, "when can you start?"

"Tomorrow." Penelope offered.

"You'll need to come to the house. Shall we say ten o'clock?" Remus gestured with his wand over a slip of parchment. She frowned as she took hold of it.

"My steward Remus Lupin invites you to 12 Grimmauld Place"

"The Fidelius charm?" Penelope asked excitedly.

"He's quite protective of his privacy. The parchment will be blank for anyone but you." Remus said dryly. "I'll explain everything tomorrow. You should be prepared to take an employment oath and we'll go over your duties and salary then." He got to his feet.

Penelope got to hers, stuck out her hand and offered a bright smile. "Thank you for the opportunity, Mister Lupin."

"Call me Remus. We will be colleagues." Remus offered, shaking her hand.

"Oh, well then you must call me Penelope." She said, letting go and picking up her bag. "Thanks again, Remus." She bit her lip. "Lordy, that was weird."

"Think how I felt when I called my old Head of House Minerva for the first time." Remus commiserated cheerfully and laughed at her horrified expression as she realised he meant Professor
McGonagall. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He waited until she was gone before he took down the privacy charm, grinning to himself all the while. A muggleborn assistant for Lord Black. Sirius's ancestors would be disgusted at letting a muggleborn have such a prestigious position.

And Sirius was going to be delighted.

o-O-o

"We're losing him!"

Sirius felt his heart stutter in his chest but he refused to be removed from his place by Harry's side as the healers bustled around him, trying to save his godson.

Neither he nor Harry had slept well in the cabin they'd been appointed the night before. It was a great cabin; it had two bedrooms, a shower room, a large den and a small kitchenette. There was even a private pool attached. But they hadn't been able to appreciate it fully after the news about Harry's scar.

Sirius had gotten up half-way through the night to find Harry sat in front of the fire in the den. He'd changed into Padfoot and offered doggy comfort, feeling that Harry would pretend he was fine to a worried and panicking godfather but might open up to his alter ego. As Harry had petted him and slowly started confiding in Padfoot about his fears over the treatment, over the residue and the connection, Sirius figured he'd made the right call.

The morning though had seen Harry scared but resolute; Sirius had never been so proud of him. Harry had asked him tentatively if he would stay with him during the procedures and Sirius had immediately reassured him that he would be there every step of the way.

He was not going to be moved. His hand tightened around Harry's.

His godson had been given a potion that rendered him unconscious. A metal bracelet had been placed on one wrist, draining Harry's magic away from him. A balding middle-aged Healer called Darcy was perched at Harry's head with strange aura tracing goggles adorning his face, a magical wand fashioned like a muggle scalpel in his hand, prying the dark form of the foreign soul-piece away from Harry's scar.

Everything had been going well until the dark blob caught on the end of the medical wand had begun to fight back, additional tendrils snaking out towards Harry faster than Darcy could cauterize them.

Harry had begun to thrash violently. Jordan and another female healer, Gargou, had stepped into hold him down. And now…

Harry had stopped breathing!

Blackhawk stepped up and waved his wand furiously over Harry's form; breathing apparatus appeared over Harry's mouth and nostrils, sending oxygen into his body.

Sirius could breathe again too; his heart pounded loudly in his chest.

"We need to drain his magic more! This bastard is fighting tooth and nail here!" Darcy snapped, his blue eyes flashing imperiously at Blackhawk.
"If we drain anymore of the magical core, we'll kill the boy!" Jordan argued.

"She is right." Blackhawk said. "We did not anticipate the soul piece being so strong; it must have fed a great deal on the boy's magic despite the binding."

Gargou snapped her fingers, her dark eyes darting towards Blackhawk. "We need to give Potter power without giving the soul piece any!"

"How?" Darcy demanded even as he severed another tendril that tried to make its way from the dark shape at the end of the wand back to Harry. There were several tendrils still attached, clinging with all their might to the scar.

"The only magic that answers to the boy alone would be his family magic." Blackhawk stated swiftly. He looked over Harry's prone form to Sirius. "Can you call it through the godfather oath?"

Sirius had no idea – he'd never heard of family magic being called that way – but he nodded sharply. "I can try." He cleared his throat, brought Harry's hand to rest against his heart and placed his own remaining hand over Harry's thin, naked chest. "I, Sirius Orion Black, godfather to Harry James Potter in heart, in magic, in oath. This son of the House of Potter has need of you – familius magicus protectus!"

Suddenly, a golden mist sprang up from Harry's skin and formed a fierce griffin who gave a wild cry.

The griffin looked towards Sirius and somehow Sirius knew what it wanted…what he had to do…

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, call forth the magic of the House of Black – familius magicus protectus!"

The silver snake of the House of Black poured out of the House ring. For a long moment, snake and griffin looked at each other before the snake dived into the griffin, merging with it.

The griffin doubled in size and roared.

"Dear Merlin!" Jordan gasped.

Darcy's brow ran with sweat as he lifted his eyes momentarily to the frightening sight of the griffin – he had continued his work throughout the calling, focused on trying to remove all the tendrils of evil from Harry. The griffin roared again and dived for Harry's scar, finally sending Darcy scuttling back, losing the dark soul on the end of his wand in the process.

But the griffin was suddenly there; one claw drove into the boy's head and emerged with the last of the tendrils while the other caught the dark soul fragment in its talons.

For a second, there was silence and then the dark form screamed as the talons shredded it to nothing.

The griffin gave a satisfied roar and settled back to sit on Harry's chest. The silver snake of the House of Black slowly reformed beside the griffin and the two totems bowed to one another before the snake disappeared. The griffin shape shimmered and destabilised, returning to a golden mist that sank back into Harry's skin.

James hadn't sent the magic to Lily, realised Sirius half-hysterically. He'd sent it to Harry! And somehow as a baby, perhaps because of the sheer terror of that moment with Voldemort and the trauma of seeing his mother killed in front of him, Harry had used the magic and helped power his mother's spell so much so that his family magic had become part of the blood protection Lily had
given him. No wonder Voldemort couldn't touch him; not only was there the blood ward itself but it was merged with the purest Light magic of the House of Potter.

Blackhawk tapped the metal bracelet and Harry's magic began to return to him. Sirius dropped a kiss on Harry's palm, rubbed his thumb over the kid's knuckles.

"Almost done, Harry." Sirius whispered soothingly to the unconscious boy.

Darcy had swapped to a normal wand and was busily magically cleansing the freely bleeding scar on Harry's forehead. Gargou stood poised with salve and bandages to move in when he'd finished. Jordan banished the apparatus, satisfied that Harry was breathing on his own again.

The bracelet fell away, signalling that Harry's magic was returned and Blackhawk moved immediately, his wand weaving over Harry's form in a delicate pattern to remove the binding that had been placed on him.

Harry started to glow with each swish of the wand and Sirius raised anxious eyes to Blackhawk. Blackhawk's face grew grave but he continued to work and Harry glowed brighter with each swish.

"Healers! Move back!" Blackhawk ordered as the light became blinding.

Darcy, Gargou and Jordan hurried to obey.

Another swish…

There was a flash like a camera which made Sirius blink…

A rush of pure power slapped into him…backlash from the binding coming free…

He threw himself over Harry without a second thought, protecting his godson…

And silence.

Sirius looked up and saw Blackhawk picking himself up off the floor. He limped back to Harry and began a diagnostic while the other healers returned to their former positions. Sirius felt Harry's racing heartbeat under his palm and slowly eased back to stand beside him again.

Blackhawk began another set of wand movements. "I am effectively bandaging Harry's magical core in healing magic; it is wounded after the removal of such a powerful binding."

Sirius nodded, relieved. Darcy moved back and Gargou smeared salve into Harry's forehead before she picked up her wand and had the bandage wrap itself around Harry's head.

Jordan brought over three vials, spelling the contents straight into Harry's system. She caught Sirius's worried gaze and smiled reassuringly. "One potion was a nutrient and strengthening potion to help his body recover. One was a pain potion and the other was a sleeping potion. He needs to remain calm and still while his core heals."

"We will wake him tomorrow." Blackhawk said, finally stepping away. "Remarkable."

"I'll say," Darcy agreed, "I've never seen any as powerful as that soul fragment." He sighed. "Evil things. Haven't seen one since I returned from service in Korea."

"I've never seen family magic work that way." Gargou said, sending a questioning look towards Sirius.
"Me either." He said, stroking Harry's sweat soaked hair away from his bandaged scar. Family magic wasn't supposed to act with sentience the way the griffin had; it wasn't supposed to combine with another's family magic to assist it the way the snake had. He had no clue how it had happened, if it had something to do with what Harry had accidentally done to incorporate the magic into his protection; Sirius didn't care in truth, he was only thankful it had worked.

"I have often thought that what we know about magic is far overshadowed by what we do not." Blackhawk said wisely.

They left him then, and Sirius sat by Harry's bedside and held onto his godson's hand, content to watch Harry take breath after beautiful breath. Sirius felt like he'd lost a good decade of his life and he figured as soon as he got to a mirror he'd discover every single hair had turned grey.

The worst was over, he reminded himself. Harry was safe and on the road to recovery. Sirius still had no intention of moving until Harry woke up though. He was vaguely aware of the passing of time – as Jordan came by and spelled more pain potion into Harry and checked his vital signs, as the shadows crept from one side of the room to the other.

It was late when Blackhawk entered the room and checked on Harry with a grace that spoke of his years of practice; Sirius ignored him for the most part.

"We should discuss your treatment." Blackhawk said when he was done. "We delayed it because of the urgency in dealing with your godson but you are also here as our client."

"I'm not leaving Harry." Sirius replied automatically.

"I would not ask such a thing of you." Blackhawk swept his wand around the room and a table replete with a light dinner appeared at the end of the bed. He motioned at it. "You must remain strong if you are to take care of your godson."

Sirius accepted the blatant manipulation with a sigh. He rubbed his thumb over Harry's knuckles one last time, stood and dropped a kiss lightly on Harry's bandaged forehead. "I'll be right at the foot of your bed, Harry." He walked over and dropped into a chair.

He massaged his forehead and looked tiredly at the food in front of him; chicken broth of some kind with fresh bread. He picked up the roll and tore a piece off to nibble on while he picked up the spoon half-heartedly. He realised belatedly Blackhawk was weaving a privacy charm so that they could talk without disturbing Harry but would still be alerted if he so much as twitched.

"Thank you," Sirius said and he knew the thanks were for more than the charm.

Blackhawk inclined his head and sat down. He began to eat and they concentrated on the food until the broth was gone. Steamed fish, greens and rice followed it.

Sirius declined a platter of fruit when it appeared, instead settling for strong black coffee. They rarely drank the beverage in the British wizarding world; tea was preferred, pumpkin juice as a soft drink. He'd forgotten how much he liked it. Maybe he could introduce it properly, Sirius considered; it would be a good investment. His eyes flickered to Harry checking on him – his godson hadn't moved.

"You love him very much." Blackhawk said.

"Yes." Sirius replied without pretence.

Blackhawk hummed. "And yet you know so little about him."
Sirius's gaze snapped to Blackhawk. He swallowed the first retort that came to mind. "Do you have children, Healer Blackhawk?"

"Seven." Blackhawk answered. "And I have been blessed with twenty grandchildren and three great-grandchildren."

"Congratulations," Sirius said dryly, "now imagine due to your own stupidity you lost one when he was but a baby. For years you don't see him but you think about him when you can. And then, you find him, only he's thirteen, not quite grown up but not quite a child anymore either, and no; you don't know him." He held Blackhawk's gaze. "But do you still love him?"

The old wizard inclined his head conceding the point. "You consider him blood?"

"Yes." It was another answer that Sirius gave without hesitation. "He's actually a cousin though distant but James, his father, was also my brother in spirit, in heart, in magic." He could see the old terms registering with Blackhawk and wondered idly if that was why the Black magic had been able to assist the Potter magic; Harry's blood held both after all.

Sirius let his mind drift back to Harry. "I was with Harry's mother, Lily, when she went into labour, and stayed with her through most of the childbirth while our other friends went to find James who'd gone for a meeting at Gringotts. He only got back ten minutes before Harry made his appearance and Lily refused to let me leave. I got to hold Harry first. I was the one that handed him to James and Lily."

"You say you lost him through stupidity?" Blackhawk asked.

Sirius huffed. "I trusted the wrong person to see to his safety. And I thought my letting him go was temporary, just until I caught Peter, the one who betrayed them."

And he wouldn't make that mistake again. He shifted position and took a sip of coffee. He kept his gaze on Harry.

"Harry and I...we don't know each other, I know that. And he doesn't consciously remember loving me so I know if he were to consider the matter, he would believe he doesn't yet, but I think he believes he could love me and wants to love me. I know he loves the idea of me, someone who loves him and who will be there for him, but he doesn't trust that I do and I will yet." He tilted his head. "I won some ground by getting him away from Lily's sister and her family; by keeping my word and ensuring he could come live with me instead."

"For a man whose mind is shrouded in clouds, you see remarkably clearly." Blackhawk said finally.

"Your mindscape is badly torn." Blackhawk acknowledged. "You require a great deal of mind healing. Your Occlumency has helped you regain some measure of control but you require additional support to regain the rest."

Sirius nodded slowly.

"I would thank you for the report you provided to Doctor Jordan of Harry's childhood. It will help her avoid some pitfalls in his mind healing." Blackhawk paused. "I don't suppose you have one for your own."

Sirius's free hand clenched into a fist and he forced himself to take a breath. "I'm afraid no-one investigated my childhood." There was a keep-out message in his tone and he wasn't surprised when..."
Blackhawk backed off.

"Your body also requires healing." Blackhawk continued. "In that, you and your godson are remarkably similar. You both suffer with malnutrition and physical weakness. I believe it would be best for much of your treatment in this regard to be together." His eyes twinkled. "It will aid in your getting to know each other."

Sirius felt his lips twitch, reluctant amusement swelling at the comment.

"We should speak of Albus Dumbledore." Blackhawk said finally. "You have a lot of anger towards him about the binding on Harry."

"I have a lot of anger towards him full stop." Sirius admitted with frank honesty. "He was primarily responsible for Harry ending up in the custody of the Dursleys. He failed to check on him and failed to ensure Harry was safe with them. He's used Harry since in regards to Voldemort." He gave a sigh. "And I'm not exactly thrilled that he left me to rot in Azkaban without a trial or a visit when I worked as part of his Order against Voldemort." He motioned with his cup. "The binding is just the latest item on my list of things to be angry at Dumbledore for."

Blackhawk nodded slowly in understanding. "The problem with great men is that everyone looks to them to know everything, and quite often they themselves fall into the trap of believing that they do. I believe it so of Albus's actions in regards to the soul anchor and binding. I don't believe he knew how to solve the problem of the soul piece without killing Harry, and thus believing there was no solution, he did the binding to keep the remnant weak."

"Do you know him?" Sirius asked a little rudely.

"We are acquaintances not friends." Blackhawk said. "We met when I toured Europe some years ago." He picked up his water. "Albus is a true master of transfiguration and potions. He made a fascinating dinner companion, and is somewhat useful as a correspondent when we require an expert opinion on spells in order to heal damage such as your uncle's, but we have little else in common. I have dedicated my life to healing just as the rest of the people of the Valley; we learn more and more every day; we learn from the muggles as much as we do from other healers around the world."

Sirius appreciated Blackhawk's honesty. "My apologies for my abruptness." He murmured. "Perhaps you're right and he didn't know how to deal with it. I just…I worry about his motives."

"Consider this," Blackhawk said, "that Halloween night, Albus had reason to believe that this soul hook within Harry was the only anchor to life that Voldemort had. He could have killed the child, believing that to do so would eliminate Voldemort as a threat."

Sirius frowned, his blood running cold at the thought. Merlin, it could have happened too because Dumbledore hadn't known about the other horcruxes at that point.

"Instead, he chose to keep the child alive." Blackhawk said. "However, I admit it is confusing that he has never sought to find a solution in the years since although he may have done with other healers who may also not have known a solution."

"I don't think he did." Sirius said. "We think there may be a prophecy involved."

Blackhawk frowned heavily. "Such things should always be treated with caution. I should know."

Sirius looked at him with interest. "Are you a Seer?"

"Not truly." Blackhawk said eventually. "I always See my clients but that is the extent of my gift. I
Saw the image of you and Harry arriving when your uncle shook my hand in farewell. Of course, I thought you would be twenty-seven and Harry would be five when you arrived; when the time passed and you did not come...I believed my Sight had failed for the first time." He smiled ruefully. "I didn't take a de-aging potion into account." He motioned at Sirius. "And so you see why visions and prophecies require careful handling. It is all too easy to discover that what you think they show or mean is something else entirely."

Sirius nodded slowly, his attention shifting again to the boy in the bed. "I just want to keep Harry safe."

"Then we must get you fit enough to face the challenge." Blackhawk stood up.

Sirius followed, stretching to get the kinks out of his back.

"Your other form will be more comfortable for sleeping, I feel." Blackhawk smiled. "Be warned that my colleague takes a dim view of dog hair." He vanished the table and left.

It only took a moment for Sirius to shift into Padfoot. He jumped up on the bed and sidled up to nudge Harry's hand with his cold nose.

So, maybe he wouldn't kill Dumbledore, Sirius mused, mulling over Blackhawk's words; Dumbledore had kept Harry alive and maybe the binding had been to help not hurt so...maybe Sirius would only maim him a little. He closed his eyes and let the warmth of Harry beside him, the sound of Harry's wonderful breathing, lull him to sleep.
June 27th 1994

The Three Broomsticks brought back a lot of memories of various Hogsmeade weekends as a student and a few as a Professor. Remus smiled happily as Rosmerta winked at him from the bar and pointed him towards a table at the back.

Moody was waiting for him, back to the wall and at a seat which afforded him a complete view of the rest of the tavern. It was a beautifully defensive position. Remus shook Moody's outstretched hand and subsided into the opposite chair.

"Thanks for meeting with me," Moody said briskly, "I really have no idea why I agreed to the job so anything you can tell me about how to survive it would be appreciated."

"It's not a problem." Remus said amused. "We need to be finished by three though as I'm meeting Minerva then."

He noticed the discarded paper on the table with a half-smile.

Brian's press offensive had continued that morning with the exclusive story of Sirius's escape from Azkaban all to save his godson from the traitor Pettigrew. There had been more quotes from various important people suggesting that such an act surely should be rewarded with guardianship. Fudge had gone on record as saying that he was in support of a wizarding guardian for Harry Potter. The paper was also full of various sightings of Sirius from France to the Caribbean as the question of Sirius's whereabouts vexed the press and the public.

"Have to admit Cutter's doing a good job for Black." Moody said noticing the direction of Remus's glance. "Although I suspect you already know that."

"I couldn't possibly comment." Remus said as Rosmerta came over and took their orders for lunch.

Moody waited until the innkeeper was well away from them before he erected a privacy bubble. "You know I know you know more than you can say. I won't ask you about Black's whereabouts – I don't deserve to know since I was one of the idiots who dropped the ball where he was concerned – but I would appreciate knowing the kid is safe and away from the muggles."

Remus regarded him, faintly stunned. He cleared his throat. "Harry is safe and away from the Dursleys."

"Good." Moody took down the privacy bubble with a swish of his wand. "Now, about this bloody school business…"

It was a good lunch. The food was excellent, and Moody was entertaining and frighteningly good at deconstructing Remus's old lesson plans into real life stories. He made meticulous notes of the students and Remus could see that he already had a copy of the final exam results.

Moody was appalled at Albus's choices of DADA instructor before Remus calling Lockhart 'a slimy fraud' and Quirrell 'a blithering idiot.' Remus also took it upon himself to inform Moody of the events of Harry's first and second year. Moody was about as impressed with what had happened as Remus was.

"What were they thinking?" Moody grumbled as Remus finished up the story of the basilisk.
"Anyone with an ounce of common sense would have known it was a basilisk after the ghost got hit."

"Beats me." Remus agreed amiably.

"The lad's got a penchant for being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Moody said thoughtfully.

"Or the right place at the right time." Remus pointed out.

"No, I think my version is more apt." Moody argued.

Remus laughed. "It probably is at that."

Moody suddenly looked towards the front of the inn and gave a snort. "Heads up. Albus has entered the building."

Remus turned and found an annoyed looking Minerva marching up to him with Albus walking serenely behind her. "Minerva."

"Remus." Minerva glared at Albus. "I apologise but when I mentioned I was meeting you, Albus insisted on coming along."

"Albus." Remus greeted him politely. He felt a little nervous; he had taken the Headmaster to task at their last encounter.

Albus smiled at him. "Remus, forgive the intrusion but I wished to apologise for the other day. You are quite correct and I promise I will caution Severus before the next school year."

Minerva harrumphed. "As if that has ever done any good."

"Minerva…" Albus began.

"I have been telling you for years that his behaviour as a professor is unacceptable and you assure me you talk with him but then he carries on regardless." Minerva argued fiercely, her Scots brogue thickening with her anger.

Albus looked completely taken aback at her outburst and Remus fought the urge to applaud.

"What did Severus do now?" Remus asked, getting to the heart of the matter as he saw Moody erecting another privacy charm. It wasn't like Minerva to be so indiscreet about a colleague.

Minerva grimaced. "I don't wish to say, Remus." But her eyes fell to the copy of the Prophet and Remus guessed that Severus had said something about Sirius.

"I see." Remus could hear his inner wolf growling and breathed in deeply. "I expect Sirius would be rather unsurprised at Severus's attitude." He glanced at Albus. "I'm sure you'll agree, Albus, that if Severus were to make any derogatory remarks to Harry about Sirius that he would be acting very unprofessionally."

"It seems I will be having a rather long conversation with Severus." Albus conceded with a sigh. "Have you heard from Sirius yet, Remus?"

"Not since you and I last talked, Albus." Remus said truthfully. "Have you sent word to Harry?"

"Alas, he and the Dursleys have not yet returned to their home." Albus informed him with what looked like sincere regret.
Remus pushed himself out of the chair. "Alastor, it was good to see you." They shook hands and Moody thanked him again as he undid the privacy charm he'd put up. "Minerva, we should leave or the goblins will get upset at our tardiness."

"A meeting with goblins?" Albus's eyes twinkled. "It sounds very mysterious."

"It's a will reading, Albus," Minerva snapped, "and I'll thank you not to hold us up any longer."

"Albus." Remus said by way of farewell and offered Minerva his arm. She took it and they headed over to the floo. As he followed her into the flames, he could hear Moody in the background…

"What the hell is this I hear about a bloody basilisk?"

Remus fell out the other end, laughing. Minerva fixed him with a glare that had him sobering swiftly.

"Apologies," Remus said, "I overheard Alastor berating Albus about the business with the basilisk just as I flooed."

Minerva sniffed. "We were very fortunate that all of the students were lucky enough to survive the whole affair."

"You won't get any argument from me." Remus concurred.

They made their way into Diagon Alley and down the street to Gringotts. They were shown into a back room and Remus was unsurprised to see Brian, Liam Arkam, Amelia Bones, and Kipbold waiting for them, along with Augusta Longbottom and Andromeda Tonks.

Everyone exchanged minor greetings before Arkam, a blond portly man with a moustache, got on with the business.

"I thank you all for coming at such short notice and apologise for the lack of details in your invitation beyond that this was a reading of a will and you had been named as beneficiaries or were required to be here." Liam began pompously. "We are here to read the joint will of James and Lily Potter."

Remus wasn't surprised but he heard Minerva's sharp intake of breath.

"I thought it was missing?" Minerva asked.

"Clearly, Minerva, it has been found." Augusta said crisply.

Liam cleared his throat. "You're here to represent Frank, Alice and Neville Longbottom, Madame Longbottom?"

"Yes." Augusta said sharply.

"I am here to represent Sirius Black." Brian pre-empted Liam's form question of his presence – Remus knew the two solicitors were already aware of each other's roles in the proceedings but Brian gained three sharp looks from Andromeda, Augusta and Minerva.

"Remus Lupin?" Liam cast his gaze over Remus.

"Representing myself." Remus replied easily.

"Andromeda Tonks also representing myself." Andromeda spoke up before Liam could ask her.

"And obviously Professor Minerva McGonagall is here representing herself and who I recognise."
Liam smiled at her.

"I should hope so, Mister Arkam. I was your teacher for seven years." Minerva retorted.

"Quite," Liam replied hurriedly, "I also thank Amelia Bones who has agreed to act as the executor given the extraordinary circumstances."

"Which are?" asked Augusta.

"A copy of the will was provided by the new Lord Black to the Ministry as part of the special investigation into the matter of Sirius Black." Amelia explained. "I can't say anything more because of confidentiality."

Again there were surprised looks.

"Very well." Augusta huffed. "Shall we get on with it?"

Liam cleared his throat again. "Quite," he pulled the parchment to him, "I'll skip the legalese and summarise the bequests if that is OK with you all?"

Everybody nodded.

"Remus Lupin is left the sum of one hundred thousand galleons and the house at Dithery Cliff. Do you accept this?"

"Yes." Remus said, a lump forming in his throat. He imagined James and Lily had wanted to ensure that he always had a home and money to live, knowing as they did how hard it was for him to gain employment as a werewolf.

"Minerva McGonagall is placed in charge of the Lily Potter Scholarship Trust which should be used to provide one free place to a muggleborn student every year including tuition for their seven years of study, school supplies and a modest spending allowance to be set at her discretion. Funds are to be taken from the Potter vault, set aside in a separate vault for the Trust and receipts provided to the Potter Steward via Gringotts. Should she relinquish her position, she should recommend a replacement. Do you accept this duty?"

"I do." Minerva said and Remus could see the glint of tears in her eyes.

"Now to the rest," Liam said briskly, "starting with Mister Black. Sirius Black is left the sum of one hundred thousand galleons and the share of the flat 2A London Street owned by James Potter. Does Mister Black accept this?"

"On his behalf, yes." Brian replied.

"Neville Longbottom is left ten thousand galleons from his Uncle James and Aunt Lily. The funds are to be used at the discretion of his parents, Frank and Alice Longbottom, or his named legal guardian until he is of age. Madame Longbottom, do you agree to the bequest?"

"Yes." Augusta's starchy exterior was shaken.

Remus remembered that the Longbottoms, although an Ancient and Noble family, were rumoured to have suffered financially over the years since Frank and Alice had been attacked.

"There is a bequest to Lily Potter's sister which is being handled through muggle solicitors, and one bequest that has been denied by the executor as the named individual Peter Pettigrew has been found
complicit in the deaths of the Potters. The remainder of the estate is bequeathed to their only son."
Liam noted, glancing at Amelia. "All that is left is the appointment of a legal guardian for Harry
James Potter, the Potters' son, assuming responsibility for his care and upbringing, and assuming
regency of the House of Potter until he comes of age. Frank and Alice Longbottom are named as first
in line with provision made for the guardianship to pass to Sirius Black should they refuse or be
unable to assume responsibility, and additional provision made for it to pass to Minerva McGonagall
should Mister Black decline or be unable to assume responsibility, or Andromeda Tonks should
Professor McGonagall decline or be unable to assume responsibility."

The three women looked suitably shocked and Remus schooled himself to appear the same.

"For the record, I confirm that Frank and Alice are in no position to assume guardianship." Augusta
said tersely.

"Brian?" Liam inquired.

Brian cleared his throat. "My client Sirius Black will assume guardianship."

Liam nodded and looked over at Amelia. "I assume as custody is currently held by muggles the
Ministry will review the matter?"

Amelia sighed. "The Ministry has already reviewed the situation and has agreed guardianship of
Harry Potter should follow the legal wishes of his late parents and therefore is awarded to Sirius
Black." She glared at everyone in the room. "Please do not share this until such time as the
information is made public."

Everyone nodded.

"And that concludes our business." Liam said brightly. "Please see Kipbold for your vault keys."

Augusta retrieved her key and swept out before anyone could say anything to her. Remus exchanged
a polite nod of acknowledgement with Brian and Amelia before he got his key and waited for
Minerva.

Andromeda paused beside him as she left. "It's been a long time, Remus."

"Too long," Remus agreed, "how are you and Ted?"

"Good." Andromeda said. "Pleased to hear the news about Sirius and feeling entirely guilty for
thinking that he would ever…"

"Me too." Remus said hurriedly.

Andromeda looked at him intently. "Have you heard from him?"

"He's getting medical treatment in line with the conditions set by the Ministry for him to take
custody." Remus offered.

She nodded. "Tell him he's welcome to come over whenever he gets back. Well, I'd best be off.
Take care of yourself, Remus."

She left just as Minerva appeared and Remus fell into step beside her as they exited Gringotts and
made their way to the Leaky. He noticed his companion was silent – too silent.

Remus cleared his throat and discreetly raised a privacy bubble. "Are you alright, Minerva?"
"No, I don't think I am." Minerva said quietly. She looked every single one of her years. "I was with Albus the night he – we – left Harry in the muggle world and to think… I knew they were the worst kind, but I accepted Albus's decision and I haven't questioned it since despite… it's obvious the muggles haven't taken the best care of Harry. I failed James, Remus. We weren't close after Dorea died, and he and Lily left Hogwarts, but that's no excuse."

He placed a hand on her arm. "There was no way for you to know if they hadn't informed you, Minerva, and it's clear from your reaction that they didn't. But if you feel you need to make some kind of amends here, I would suggest that you don't tell Albus that Sirius has guardianship until it goes public like Amelia requested."

Minerva regarded him sternly for a long moment before her shoulders straightened. "You have my word, Remus." She turned and left before he could say anything more.

o-O-o

**Time Bubble: July 9th 1994**

Harry was having the best summer of his life.

They'd been at the Valley for two weeks, and although Harry had time travelled with the time turner he still had a difficult time getting his head around the idea that however long they stayed at the clinic, only a week would pass in the outside world. He'd decided to forget that oddity and simply enjoy his stay as much as he could.

The first day had been scary. The whole thing about the residue in his scar had been beyond frightening but it had all been dealt with very quickly. He couldn't remember the procedures to cleanse his scar as he had thankfully been knocked out for the whole thing. He had been restricted to bed for a few days after mainly because they'd needed his magical core to settle. What had been enormously comforting was that Sirius hadn't moved from his side the whole time except for a few bathroom breaks.

It had soothed some lingering worry inside Harry that Sirius didn't really mean it when he'd said he'd be there for him; that despite everything Sirius had done to make it possible for Harry to live with him, Sirius wouldn't really want him once he got to know Harry. But it was hard to argue about how much Sirius cared about him when his godfather spent all of his time looking after him and keeping his spirits up while he recuperated.

They'd mainly shared stories about Hogwarts during Harry's bed stay. It was the most common ground they had. Sirius admitted that Remus had already told him some of Harry's experiences but he wanted to hear about them from Harry. Harry had been a little reticent but once he'd started to talk he'd found himself happily reminiscing about his first year adventures.

He began with Hagrid taking him to Diagon Alley and Sirius had quizzed him over what Hagrid had and hadn't told him about the wizarding world. He got the impression that Sirius liked Hagrid but wasn't impressed that Hagrid had explained so little. Which surprised him as Sirius, on the whole, was very non-judgemental – he'd understood Harry's immediate use of the invisibility cloak when he'd received it and he'd mostly looked relieved about Harry surviving the troll.

It had also been a relief to Harry to tell someone about the events with Quirrell. Sirius had listened intently to Harry's tale. He'd also placed a hand on Harry's arm when he got to the confrontation with Quirrell and didn't let go as Harry haltingly recalled everything. Sirius had reassured him again that it wasn't Harry's fault Quirrell had died, noting that Harry had acted in self-defence. He also explained about possessions and how they worked, including the fact that they were almost always fatal to the
host body; that Ginny had survived her possession seemed something of a miracle. The discussion had made Harry feel better. He hadn't actually realised that he'd still been so upset about what had happened with Quirrell. He'd kind of bundled it all up and shoved it to the back of his mind.

Harry had been beyond ecstatic when Sirius had reciprocated, telling Harry all about Sirius's first year at Hogwarts which luckily also included many stories of his father, and even some about his mother. He'd smiled when Sirius had told him he and James had agreed to be friends after sitting in the same compartment on the train, but had been dismayed when Sirius admitted that they'd made a bad impression on Lily during the same trip because they'd had an immediate enmity with Snape – who had been her friend! He'd also been dismayed by Sirius's admission that, although they'd disliked Snape because they could tell he'd used dark magic (something his mother had probably not known), he and James had also been rather snobbish and full of themselves.

But he'd laughed at Sirius's recounting of how he'd begged the hat for Gryffindor – knowing James would be placed there – and at all the pranks they'd played through the school year. He'd enjoyed Sirius's tale of how they'd eventually included Remus, who they'd quickly realised was simply brilliant, and had slowly worked out he was a werewolf but hadn't wanted to say anything in case it upset him. Sirius avoided talking about Wormtail and Harry couldn't blame him.

They'd repeated the story-telling the next day with their second years. Sirius hadn't flinched at all over the fact that Harry could talk to snakes and Harry had been thrilled at Sirius's continuing unwavering acceptance of him. Again, it had helped to talk about the fight with the basilisk. Sirius had teased him over being a knight in shining armour.

Sirius confessed in an overly sad fashion that his second year hadn't been all that exciting in comparison. Mostly, they'd finally broached Remus's affliction with him and tried to work out a way to help him – Sirius eventually stumbling onto the idea of becoming an animagus. He recounted how Harry's father had also tried to become friends with his mother again, but how her continuing friendship with Snape had kept them at odds. He'd confessed with more than a little chagrin that although Snape could give as good as he got, he and James had probably crossed the line from pranking to bullying a few times where their nemesis was concerned, and so it wasn't any wonder Lily thought them both prats.

Harry was glad Sirius had been so honest with him but it disturbed him that his Dad and Sirius could bully someone – even Snape. It explained a lot about Snape's attitude towards Harry. Then he remembered how Snape had accused Sirius of trying to kill him and asked Sirius about that.

"You have to understand, Harry, that by sixth year, us Marauders and Snape were mortal enemies. He'd thrown in his lot with the Death Eater crowd the year before and dropped his friendship with your mother." Sirius began. "You remember my telling you I'd run away that summer? Well, Snape caught me one day and hinted that he knew more than the official story of my parents disowning me. He hinted that he'd tell the whole school. He shifted on the bed and shame entered his eyes. "I panicked a bit about whether he did know anything about my family situation, I guess, and told him that he knew nothing. He then said he knew everything about Remus and his monthly trips to the Whomping Willow, and would know more if he followed him. So I dared him to press the knot on the Willow and do it if he was man enough."

Harry frowned. "But that sounds like he knew Remus was a werewolf."

"I think he had a strong suspicion." Sirius agreed. "In fact, I made the dare because I thought that he already knew and I didn't think for a moment he'd be stupid enough to go looking for a werewolf." He sighed and rubbed at his beard for a moment. "I didn't tell your Dad or Remus about it either for that reason. I didn't think there was any reason to be worried."

"Only Snape went looking."

"I think he drugged our pumpkin juice that night because Peter went straight to sleep and I found it hard to stay awake. Your Dad had sensibly stuck to water so he was fine and bloody annoyed with us for snoozing. When I realised we'd been poisoned, I worked out Snape must be going after Remus - I figured Snape was going to try and kill him! So I sent James to save Remus while I got an antidote to the potion. He sighed. "I ran after them as quick as I could and luckily your Dad had already got there and was hauling Snape's arse out of the tunnel. Just as I ran up to help him, Dumbledore appeared and marched us all to his office. He let James go pretty quick. Snape, he made promise not to tell people about Remus while we were students; said something about the fact that was his punishment and then something vague about how it wasn't too late."

"And you?"

"Banned from Hogsmeade weekends for the rest of the year, and the Quidditch team. And I had detention for the rest of the Winter term." Sirius explained. "Wasn't as bad as the two months of silence and the ban from joining them at the next full moon that I got from Remus."

"He stopped talking to you?" Harry had never considered that the friends must have had issues just like him, Ron and Hermione with the Firebolt.

"If Snape had found him, if Snape hadn't killed him and he'd killed Snape, or even just attacked him, Remus would have been executed." Sirius said gravely. "My dare put his life at risk. He was quite right not to talk with me. I understood it even if it was a horrible two months." He gestured at Harry. "Your Dad forgave me after a day or so. He was mostly annoyed because Lily had been warming up to us but because the rumour around the school was that it was a prank that had gone wrong and we'd almost killed Snape, she was giving your Dad the cold shoulder. That, and your Dad said I should have told them about the dare when I did it, and he was right. Peter stayed on the fence pretty much, which should have clued us in for what happened later come to think about it."

"But Remus forgave you, right?"

"He did when your Dad intervened and pointed out that Snape had probably contrived the whole thing – both provoking me and going to the tunnel. He said Snape had probably hoped he'd get Remus executed and me expelled." Sirius grimaced. "But I don't think Moony ever truly trusted me after that. It probably was one of the reasons why he considered me the spy and why he believed I was guilty." He shifted position again. "And maybe because I felt that distance he'd put between us, I was more inclined to think the worst of him too."

"You're OK now though?" Harry questioned, a little afraid that they weren't.

"We are," Sirius smiled, "I think mostly we're just pleased that we have each other as a friend again and what's past is past."

"Shame Snape doesn't feel that way." Harry commented.

"No, he knows how to hold a grudge." Sirius said. "Truthfully, so do I; I don't like him. I know I won't be apologising to him anytime soon – I'd rather pull my own teeth out first."

Harry chuckled at that.

Sirius poked his leg through the blankets. "The dare was a mistake though and I regret it but I'm not going to pretend to you that I'm perfect and I don't expect you to be either. I can be a little reckless at times. I can maybe be too cruel and ruthless if I'm crossed. And I have a habit of acting before I
Harry flushed but he was comforted by the words nevertheless. It helped that Sirius didn’t expect him to be perfect – he could just be himself. "I think I have the same flaw," he said, "acting before thinking? And I have a bit of a temper sometimes. Hermione says I brood."

"Well," Sirius said, "we can work on improving ourselves together, but we should always keep in mind that it's OK not to be perfect."

In his heart, Harry forgave Sirius the whole affair with Snape quite quickly. Harry had to admit his own dislike of Snape was well-rooted especially since Snape was so unfair to him – had been unfair to him from the moment Harry had arrived at Hogwarts. It just seemed a shame to Harry that someone who had been such good friends with his mother was so bitter towards Harry himself even if he understood why more after all of his discussions with Sirius.

The following day, they had moved onto Harry's third year and although Sirius had witnessed everything from a distance, he still wanted to hear all about it. Sirius in return had shared his third year stories which revolved mostly around the Marauders' continuing efforts to help Remus, more pranks, and Harry's Dad still trying to build a friendship with his Mum – and still failing badly.

Harry had been sad as they moved back to the cabin that they’d ran out of school years to trade. Sirius had proposed that they made it a tradition that the first day of the summer holiday would be spent with Harry telling Sirius all about his school year and Sirius would tell him about the equivalent year of his own. It warmed Harry that they had plans for the future – that they had started a tradition.

The days since had settled into a routine: mornings began with a healthy breakfast, and the exercise routines that Doctor Jordan had assigned them both; an eclectic mix of yoga, tai chi, weights and jogging. They had a light lunch usually in the cabin. They split up in the afternoons for the mind healing sessions, Sirius's were longer because of the damage done by the Dementors, and Harry's were a mix of mind healing, Occlumency and art therapy.

The Occlumency sessions were a tad boring since it was mostly meditation to sort through his memories and to build a defence around his mind. Talking about the memories was the worst part – Harry didn’t really want to talk about any of his life under the cupboard or his previous summers with the Dursleys. Healer Fay didn’t pressure him but she made it clear that dealing with his memories was an important part of his treatment. He had started to accept her reassurance that he wasn't being judged about any of it, but he still didn’t want to talk about it. The art therapy was better. Harry had liked rediscovering painting as a hobby; he'd enjoyed it at primary school and he thought it was a shame Hogwarts didn't offer that kind of course. He vaguely remembered Stonewall offered an arts subject.

Harry enjoyed the late afternoons more. Sirius had offered to teach him to swim in the attached pool and they spent an hour in the water before eating dinner by the poolside. The evenings were spent playing cards – Sirius had taught Harry poker and promptly regretted it – or board games – Sirius insisted on being the dog in Wizard Monopoly. Sirius always told a story about Harry's babyhood or something about his Dad or his Mum.

It was simply the best summer of Harry's life.

Except for the fact that Harry couldn't do any magic or fly until they checked his magical core again but that was what they were going to do that morning.

Blackhawk greeted them warmly as Sirius and Harry were shown into a large treatment room by
Jordan. Harry grinned back at the old wizard. Blackhawk had joined them for dinner a couple of times and Harry had been enthralled by his stories of healing. He was actually thinking it might be something that he would want to do in the future. Maybe. He'd kind of considered becoming a teacher when he'd thought about life after the Dursleys before he'd known about Hogwarts, but that had mainly been because they were practically the only other adults he'd seen outside of the Dursleys.

"Now, we are going to repeat the tests we did before your procedures." Blackhawk informed him briskly. He motioned to a bulls-eye target set at the end of the room. "You will cast the Stupefy spell at the target." He indicated a book on the table. "Wingardium Leviosa to levitate this book a metre above the desk. And finally, you will produce a patronus."

Harry nodded. He only had a vague recollection of the tests the first time around. He seemed to remember the target produced a number which equated to the power used. Sirius patted his arm – a silent good luck.

Harry faced the target eagerly and raised his wand. "Stupefy!"

The red light shot across the room and slammed into the target, sending it rocking back into the wall. Harry stared at it in shock; there was a huge hole in the centre of the crumpled target. The number that appeared in the air above it was meaningless to Harry but Blackhawk was looking at it with a wide-eyed surprise that disconcerted Harry. "I'm sorry," Harry began urgently, "about the target."

Blackhawk waved his apology away. "You have done nothing wrong, Harry. Do not worry." He exchanged a look with Sirius though that clearly indicated to Harry that something was wrong.


Harry swallowed hard and faced the desk. He aimed his wand and with a swish and a flick, said the spell out loud. The book shot up into the air and Harry had a hard time yanking it back before it hit the ceiling.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" Harry asked as Blackhawk's expression grew more concerned.

"Not so much wrong as unusual." Blackhawk assured him calmly. "Lower the book and cast your patronus, Harry."

Harry set the book down with an audible thump. He forced himself to focus so he could cast the patronus; he aimed his wand at the empty space beside him. "Expecto Patronum!"

The stag leaped out of his wand and clattered onto the tiled floor. The luminescent animal tossed its antlers and pawed the ground, leaving scuff marks behind.

Sirius approached carefully; he reached out a hand and patted the stag's nose. "Hello Prongs." He said awed. The patronus was not only corporeal, it was solid. He smoothed a hand down a flank and Harry could see the fine hair of the stag's coat brush through Sirius's fingers.

The stag blew a huffy breath through its nose. It looked to Harry for instructions.

Harry cleared his throat. "It's OK, you can go."

It transformed into a glowy mist before disappearing altogether.

"Beautiful." Blackhawk said, almost reverentially.
"Thank you." Harry said automatically. "What's wrong with me?" He asked bluntly, fear churning in his gut.

"Nothing's wrong with you, Harry." Sirius said firmly. "But your power levels are off the wall. I have never seen a solid patronus – not even from Dumbledore. That binding was obviously keeping a lot of your magic locked up. We're going to need to work on you gaining some control over it."

"I agree," said Blackhawk serenely, "your magic is stable but you are unused to having so much of it at your disposal. You will need to retrain otherwise you might have instances of quite dangerous accidental magic."

Harry's gaze went unwilling to the damaged target on the other side of the room. If that had been a person…

Sirius nudged Harry's arm. "It's going to be OK, Harry. We'll work on your magic in the evenings."

Blackhawk nodded. "As your stay here will need to be extended, if you wish I will arrange access for you to the town; you can floo there from the clinic here. We do not wish for you to get cabin fever as you recover."

"That would be appreciated." Sirius replied.

"I would also like to invite you both to my home for dinner." Blackhawk's eyes twinkled. "I also have a granddaughter and a grandson your age I can introduce to you, Harry? I thought perhaps you might like to spend time with people your own age."

Harry's mood brightened. "That would be great." He smiled sheepishly. "I kind of miss my friends."

"Of course you do." Sirius said. "Thank you, Healer Blackhawk."

Blackhawk smiled warmly. "Call me Noshi, Sirius." He motioned at them. "I will leave you for tonight and will see you both tomorrow."

Harry waited until the old wizard had departed before he slumped against the desk and sighed heavily. "I'm sorry." He gestured at his godfather. "It's my fault you're stuck here."

"Firstly, there's no need to apologize; it's not your fault someone bound your magic." Sirius replied. "And secondly, I get to spend more time with you helping you relearn magic. That's not a bad thing in my book."

He felt a little reassured but still…"I'm sure you have important things you have to do back home though."

"Nothing is more important than you." Sirius said immediately.

Harry blushed; happy and bewildered at the sincere statement.

"Come here." Sirius held open his arms.

Harry moved into the hug with only minor reluctance – a roll of his eyes, and mostly that was for show – he was a teenage boy; he wasn't supposed to want hugs. But his mind healer thought they were good for him and he secretly enjoyed the comfort of being hugged. Sirius was great at hugs. His godfather seemed to instinctively know how to hug him; secure but not suffocating, comforting but without babyish words of nonsense like Petunia gave Dudley, and Sirius had a sixth sense about when to step back before Harry started to feel embarrassed.
Like right then.

Sirius patted his back quickly and eased away, although he clasped Harry's shoulders and looked him in the eye. "I don't want you to worry about this. You're a powerful wizard; we just need to work through your lessons again. OK?"

"OK," Harry mumbled, nodding. "It's just..." he bit his lip as he tried to figure out a way to tell Sirius that he wasn't that good a student. "I don't want to disappoint you."

"Why would you think you're going to disappoint me?" Sirius asked, surprise written all over his face.

Harry could feel his cheeks heating with shame. "I'm...I'm not like my Mum and Dad. I'm not as smart as they were."

Sirius sat on the desk and patted the space beside him, indicating Harry should join him. "Why do you think you're not as smart as your parents?"

Harry ducked his head. "Well, I'm not. I mean, you said they were top of their classes like...like Hermione, and I'm...I'm not, well, except in Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Hmm." Sirius looked at him closely. "Look, your Dad was one of those annoying people who could get good marks without trying very hard. He just had this intuition about magic. It used to drive Remus bonkers because we would never see him working but then in class he'd produce a perfectly conjured bouquet of flowers or make a fork dance the can-can."

Harry smiled at the image.

"Your Mum had an affinity for Charms and Potions but she worked hard to get the marks she did. She spent a lot of time in the library and a lot of time practicing. Remus was like that although he had no affinity for Potions at all. He knew the theory backwards but every time he got in front of a cauldron, it'd melt." Sirius said. "I probably fell somewhere in between – Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts came easy to me but I had to work at the rest."

Harry listened carefully, hearing the underlying message in Sirius's words: good marks and class positions took work and if he didn't put the work in – well, he'd end up where he was: average in all but the one subject that came naturally to him.

"But class positions aren't everything." Sirius continued. "Do you try your best?"

He didn't want to lie but he didn't want to admit the truth either. He squirmed under Sirius's scrutiny. "Sometimes." He admitted.

"Which means sometimes you don't." Sirius pointed out with brutally honest logic that reminded Harry of Hermione. "Why do you only sometimes try your best?"

"I don't know," Harry replied automatically, shifting again as he really considered Sirius's question.

He thought back over his schooling. He'd loved his primary school when he'd first attended; it had been an escape from his meagre existence at Privet Drive. But then Dudley had started chasing away anyone who wanted to be friends with him and his relatives had never praised his marks and had simply never accepted him being better than Dudley. In the end he'd decided not to draw attention to himself by remaining average in class, but secretly went over the lessons in his cupboard at night. He'd looked forward to Stonewall as a means of starting afresh, and he vaguely recalled that his plan had been to do well so he could escape Privet Drive when he was sixteen and get a job. But then
And Harry had intended to do well the summer before he'd started. He'd stayed up late reading his books and he'd tried, hadn't he, those first few weeks of school? But...it had been harder than he'd expected between the quills and the wizarding ways of doing things and Snape. Ron had never been interested in studying, openly disparaging of Hermione's cleverness back then, and Harry hadn't wanted to rock the boat with his new friend by going to the library or showing what knowledge and aptitude he did have. Thankfully, Hermione had forced them into studying once they'd properly made friends with her after the troll and Harry remembered that he had gotten good marks that first year: exceeds expectations and a couple of outstandings which had more than made up for the acceptable he'd scraped in Potions and History of Magic.

Second year had been a nightmare between hearing voices in the wall and being shunned for being the Heir of Slytherin; he hadn't wanted to stand out. There had been no exams that year but he thought he would have passed. And he had passed third year – mostly acceptables with a couple of exceeds expectations and the outstanding in DADA. But thinking it over, he slowly realised that he'd let Ron set the tone again since Hermione had been busy or they hadn't been speaking to her. Not that he could blame Ron – Harry figured Sirius would expect him to take responsibility for his own studying – and hadn't he already decided that he was going to be a little more independent from Ron in the coming year, drop Divination and take something else?

He looked up from his meanderings and met Sirius's patient waiting gaze.

"I guess I haven't wanted to stand out too much or...or upset Ron." He confessed miserably. "He thinks studying is boring and..."

"And you go along with it because he's your friend." Sirius completed. He nodded. "I can understand that. Peer pressure is a hard thing to resist. I only joined the Quidditch team because of your Dad."

"Really?"

"Yep," Sirius said, "I didn't want to play and while I could fly half-way decently, I didn't enjoy it. But your Dad wanted company and I was his best mate so...I ended up as a Beater until I got banned and then I took advantage and refused to go back on the team the next year." He flapped his hand. "Anyway, back to you. What do you think you should do?"

"Decide things for myself," Harry replied promptly, "I'd kind of already realised that after last year."

Sirius looked at him inquisitively.

"I hate Divination!" Harry exclaimed. "Trelawney's always predicting my death and...and I hate it. I only took it because...well, you know. I was thinking of asking Professor McGonagall if I could transfer to Runes or Arithmancy."

"I'll talk with her. There shouldn't be a problem if we get you up to speed before Hogwarts starts."

Sirius replied. "Which do you think would suit you best?"

Harry thought for a long moment, weighing both subjects in his head. "I think Runes. I don't really enjoy theory stuff as much as I do practice and I get the idea from what Hermione has said in the past that there are lots of practical applications for Runes but Arithmancy is more about theory."

"You're right. Runes it is then and you're in luck because I did Runes and we can start your tutoring while we're here and take advantage of the time bubble." Sirius poked Harry's arm lightly. "I promise
you that I won't be disappointed in any of our lessons so long as you try your best."

"OK, I promise." Harry said quickly, resolving right there and then that he would keep his promise and put the work in.

"I also expect that when you return you try your best at Hogwarts too." Sirius continued.

Harry nodded, trying to ignore the twisting sensation in his gut at Sirius's comment. He'd never had someone take an interest in his marks before – if the Dursleys hadn't cared about his marks at primary school, they'd cared even less about his marks at Hogwarts – and he was embarrassed anew at his past performance.

"I'm proud of you, Harry." Sirius said, surprising Harry into looking at him again. "You've thought everything through and made some good decisions about your future. It's like we said when we talked about our flaws, remember? We're not perfect but we'll work on the things we know we need to improve. And I will never be disappointed in you so long as you always try your best."

"I will." Harry promised again. He wouldn't let Sirius down.
June 30th 1994

The first weeks of summer had been odd, Albus considered as he adjusted the sleeves of his lime green robes. The glittery pink stripes that edged the garment in a random pattern made Albus smile as he put on his glasses and determined he was ready to head for breakfast in the Great Hall.

Oddity wasn't a bad thing, Albus mused whimsically; he'd had odd days where things had gone wonderfully well – like finding the chamber pot room and losing it again – because losing it was just as wonderful as finding it. And most odd things did have an explanation if one was inclined to look past the oddity.

So, although some might have thought it odd that Alastor Moody had suddenly taken an interest in checking on the wards around young Harry, Albus believed it had been precipitated by his own request to Alastor to take up the DADA teaching position. That had led to a nostalgic discussion about the old days, and Sirius Black still being at large (Albus had forgotten that Alastor had arrested Sirius but he had forgotten so much more than he remembered that it didn't really worry him), and from there it had been a short hop, skip and a jump to the Potters and Harry and the wards…

It wasn't at all odd that Alastor had paid no attention to Albus's reassurance that all was well and Sirius was not a threat; Alastor was Alastor which meant paranoid and not inclined to take anybody else's word, not even Albus's. It was a marvellously successful worldview for an Auror and had its uses. Indeed, Albus had fully expected Alastor to do what he had done in tracking down Harry and checking on the wards. Albus had congratulated himself with a lemon drop after Arabella's report that she had seen Alastor and that he had reported the wards were fine. Of course Alastor's visit had probably coincided with Harry's interview about Sirius come to think of it. Arabella's report had mentioned a woman that in hindsight met Amelia Bones's description.

Her second report though had been most odd; the gossip that the Dursleys had taken Harry with them to wherever they had gone because of whatever family emergency had transpired. But Albus wanted to take it as a sign that the Dursleys were finally treating Harry as part of their family so he did. Perhaps the explanation could be found in the events of the previous summer when they had caused Harry to run away from home. Perhaps they had realised that their treatment of the boy was unacceptable and turned over a new leaf. So, yes; it was odd but odd could be good – the chamber pot room was such an example.

But there was odd and there was odd. And it had been odd that out of nowhere Cornelius had decided to allow Amelia Bones to investigate Sirius's past alleged crimes and events at Hogwarts at the end of the school year. It wasn't odd that Amelia had done a sterling job and exonerated Sirius – she had been a wonderfully bright student if Albus remembered correctly.

Of course there was an explanation for Cornelius's about turn: it appeared that a new and surprising patron had appeared on the scene. Albus had spies – contacts – everywhere and his contacts had managed to scrounge up the interesting fact that there was a new Lord Black. Oh, it was all being kept very hush-hush but Albus had confirmed that someone had taken ownership of the Black Manor in London as whoever it was had consigned all the portraits to sleep and so Phineas Nigellus Black was stuck in the one at Hogwarts.

Again, a new Lord Black wasn't odd so much as odd. Not that there were one as there were plenty cousins all of whom had more or less equal claim to the family magic but it was a surprise as Sirius was the blood heir. And while Albus just couldn't see Sirius taking up the mantle with the depth of
derision he held for his family name and heritage, the whole thing was very odd in the timing.

There again, thought Albus as he navigated the corridors and stairs with ease, Sirius had been in the news constantly following his escape. Media attention may have prompted one cousin to assume the Lordship and make a plea on his cousin's behalf. Or maybe Sirius had fled to this cousin and made a deal: Sirius giving up all claim to the Lordship in exchange for getting him exonerated and perhaps a job for a friend? It would explain Remus Lupin's immediate success in finding alternative employment. No matter…Albus was sure all would be revealed in time.

So, Albus wasn't alarmed by a new Lord Black appearing on the scene. The Black family had been powerful and traditionally Dark but the old alliances were broken and Albus couldn't see someone like Lucius Malfoy simply accepting an usurper in his dealings with the Ministry. And if this was a Lord Black that had taken the position at Sirius's behest then Albus wasn't overly worried as he doubted Sirius would have approached someone truly Dark. No, there was no need to assume a political threat until more was known about this Lord Black's agenda.

The more immediate wrinkle was Sirius himself.

In hindsight Albus wondered if it wouldn't have been better to have pushed Cornelius for a trial the night Sirius had been locked up in Hogwarts. Albus could have offered his personal protection and insisted on due process under the auspice of his Chief Warlock authority. From there he could have controlled the issue of Harry's custody – using the debt Sirius would owe him to convince him that the boy remained with the Dursleys. But Albus had decided at the time that he couldn't take the risk; Sirius as a fugitive made it easier for Albus to keep Harry safe, and so he had determined to simply allow Harry to help Sirius escape – after all, Sirius was innocent and didn't deserve to be incarcerated or Kissed. Albus regretted more than he could say not visiting the boy in Azkaban and not ensuring there was a trial – the chaos of the end of the war and his own grief at the various losses were poor excuses for his inattention in that regard despite being the truth of why he hadn't.

However, Sirius was now exonerated; he was free to try for custody of Harry and, from the press over the past week, the wizarding world was eager to give it to him. Albus had lost a great deal of leverage because he'd had nothing to do with securing Sirius his freedom. It wasn't a disaster – the good news was that Sirius remained abroad, whereabouts unknown, and Harry was safely away with the Dursleys. If there was a move to award Sirius custody, Albus was certain that he could advise a long period of convalescence for Sirius after his ordeal in Azkaban before any access to Harry was allowed.

And beyond that… he had confidence in his own ability to persuade Sirius to his point of view that Harry was safest at the Dursleys. After all, Sirius had acquiesced to that view on the fateful night of the Potters' deaths when Albus had arranged for Hagrid to collect Harry from the wreckage of the Potters' home. Although possibly, Albus mused, back then Sirius had thought the plan to hide Harry with the Dursleys was a temporary one – and it had been until Albus had discovered the blood protection Harry carried. Maybe he would have to give up the secret that Harry's blood carried within it his mother's sacrifice; that it was renewed under the blood wards she had left around her sister's home and imbued back into those very same wards by Harry residing within them. The advantage it gave far outweighed any other consideration.

Like the boy being raised by people who loved him.

It was deeply unfortunate that the Dursleys hadn't accepted Harry; hadn't loved him. Albus had hoped Minerva had been wrong about the kind of people they were but Arabella's first report to him only a few months after leaving baby Harry with them had left him with little doubt she'd been perfectly correct in her concerns. Albus had felt a twinge of conscience about removing the Potters'
will from their solicitors at that point but by then the poor Longbottoms were no longer viable contenders to look after young Harry, Sirius was in prison, and Minerva…well, he was certain she would agree him which made the Tonks’ claim moot.

And the Dursleys had looked after Harry; housed him, clothed him in a fashion, fed him poorly perhaps but enough, and through their example of how not to behave, Harry had grown into quite a splendid young boy.

No, Harry’s home life wasn’t ideal but it was sufficient and more importantly, the blood protection Harry carried was maintained which was the important thing; it had already saved his life once more. Sirius would understand the necessity of leaving Harry with the Dursleys when Albus explained it. He was certain of it.

Albus entered the Great Hall in good spirits then. The holiday seating was out: one long table in the centre of the hall. He sat down in his usual chair which had been placed in the middle of the right hand side.

Minerva had chosen to sit opposite him rather than beside him, (she still hadn’t forgiven him for barging in on her meeting with Remus at the beginning of the week, and for not yet having his promised discussion with Severus), but Filius was on his left as normal and Severus had taken the seat to his right. Pomona Sprout was across from the Potions Professor, rounding out the Heads of the Hogwarts Houses, while Poppy Pomfrey sat opposite Filius. Hagrid was at one end of the table, Argus Filch at the other. The rest of the staff had already been released from their duties and had departed for their holidays – or in the case of Sybill Trelawney retired to quarters.

Albus let their conversation – a mix of glee at the absence of students, irritation at the end of year bureaucracy and paperwork, and anticipation of their holiday plans – drift over him as he tucked into a bowl of porridge with warm honey. Instead he focused on the vexing problem of Tom Riddle. He was confident that defeating him was still achievable.

He had spent years suspecting that Tom hadn’t died the night he had attacked the Potters, based on his discovery of a vile soul fragment of the evil wizard within Harry when he had examined him in the Hogwarts’ infirmary. It had horrified Albus and the staff with him – Hagrid who had brought Harry to Hogwarts, and Poppy, who had been administering healing. Albus had no idea how to remove it and had settled for binding Harry’s magic to ensure the fragment was kept weak. Then he’d erased Hagrid’s and Poppy’s memories of Harry being there and what they had learned: he couldn’t risk news of the soul fragment – or indeed the blood protection which he’d also discovered – leaking out to the general public. He’d sent Hagrid off with the child to Privet Drive on the motorcycle, beating him there easily, and allowing Hagrid to think he’d come directly from Godric’s Hollow.

It had been easy enough to think up a plan to confirm his suspicions once and for all when he had finally tracked down rumours of a wraith in Albania. The Philosopher’s stone provided a tasty bait in the trap and Harry beginning his schooling provided a second temptation to draw in Tom. He hadn’t quite planned for Quirrell to be possessed – the poor boy – even if he had suggested Albania as a possible venue for Quirrell to gain some practical DADA experience, and in his defence Albus had tried very hard to find a solution that would leave Quirrell alive once the wraith was exorcised. And initially everything had gone well; Tom through Quirrell had come to the school. Then Quirrell had let a troll into the school and, according to Severus, tried to kill Harry during his Quidditch match. After that, Albus had sent for the Mirror of Erised to place an additional protection on the stone, one he hoped would keep Tom trapped until Albus could face him.

But Albus had underestimated Quirrell’s, or rather Tom’s, sneakiness, and Harry’s sense of responsibility. Tricked out of Hogwarts, (he suspected a strong Confundus and compulsion spell on
the parchment which had called for his presence at the Ministry and for him to travel by broomstick of all things), Albus had arrived back just in time to realise Quirrell-Voldemort had gone after the stone and Harry had gone after him. In some ways, Albus believed the confrontation between the two was fated because of the prophecy Sybill Trelawney had given to him – the prophecy that had led Tom into attacking the Potters in the first place; that nothing he could have done would have prevented it. But that hadn't lessened his guilt when he had found Harry slipping into unconsciousness, his mother's protection having saved him once again (although Albus had also felt a moment's vindication in his decision to leave Harry with the Dursleys). Tom's wraith had fled rather than face Albus.

It was as he watched over young Harry in the hospital wing that Albus realised he'd grown fond of the boy, and he was consumed by sorrow because he couldn't think of any way for Tom to be eliminated without Harry dying because of the soul fragment. Albus had resolved to wait. Tom remained a wraith and powerless: there was no rush. He had decided that Harry should have as much of a childhood, as much of a life, as possible before the ultimate confrontation.

He hadn't planned on Harry facing another shade of Tom in his second year. The Chamber of Secrets fiasco had been exactly that – a fiasco. Not that Albus would admit it to anyone. He had been unable to pinpoint the Chamber's location; unable to think of an effective strategy to defeat the basilisk without allowing it to roam the school; unable to tell who was possessed and therefore he couldn't take the risk of closing the school and allowing the possessed individual to disappear…and Lucius Malfoy's political manoeuvrings hadn't helped matters.

In the end, the entire awful affair had been horrendously valuable in terms of intelligence because it had revealed the diary. Tom had created a horcrux to anchor him to the land of the living, probably more than one, and likely the partial fragment that had ended up in Harry had been a mistake or an accident caused by the instability in Tom's soul. It gave Albus a new avenue for investigation and narrowed the field on how Tom might regain a form. There were rituals of restoration…one in particular called for the use of the blood of an enemy. If Harry's was used then Harry would have an anchor to life, although it would open up the soul connection between them fully. But Albus couldn't count on it. He had to assume that there would be no advantage and that Harry's death was inevitable.

Time was of the essence, Albus mused. The prophecy Harry had overheard at the end of term seemed to indicate that Tom would regain his form sooner rather than later. That was problematic. Albus had only just started investigating the issue of the horcruxes and they would need to be destroyed before a final showdown between Harry and Tom could take place. Certainly his plans for the summer had taken on a new urgency.

He sighed and started on the plate of sausage, eggs, beans and toast. He finally tuned back into the discussion…

"Personally, I don't think we need a bullying policy." Pomona said firmly. "Just because the muggles have issues doesn't mean we do."

"Bullying does take place within these hallowed corridors," rejoined Severus silkily, "no matter how unpleasant you may find the topic."

"Perhaps then it would be prudent of us to set a good example and refrain from bullying students ourselves before we ask the same behaviour of the students." Minerva snapped at Severus who raised an eyebrow at her.

"Bullies are a part of school life and a part of life." Filius interjected. "I was bullied but I learned how to deal with it and make my own way."
"Not everyone has your fortitude, Filius." Poppy countered. "There are some young children who come into the infirmary week after week having been hexed and nothing is done! It's not acceptable."

"Well, if they don't report who did it to a staff member, what can be done?" Pomona asked.

"And they won't." Severus pointed out, "telling tales is against the unwritten rules of the school-yard."

"Well, I happen to think a bullying policy that encourages children to come forward with a promise of anonymity and confidentiality coupled with a supportive teaching staff who don't simply pat them on the head and say 'well, I was bullied and I turned out alright; buck up, old chap' would be beneficial." Poppy said strongly.

"What do you think, Albus?" Filius asked. "Are you for or against?"

"I don't see any need to implement something additional to our normal policy." Albus said firmly.

Poppy snorted loudly. "What policy?"

A rush of wings had everyone at the table looking up as the mail delivery arrived. Albus accepted the Daily Prophet from a tawny owl in exchange for some sausage. The headline had him choking on his juice.

**SIRIUS BLACK AWARDED CUSTODY OF THE BOY WHO LIVED! Rita Skeeter**

The Ministry of Magic have announced their decision to revoke custody of the Boy Who Lived from his muggle relations and to place him with the newly exonerated Sirius Black. Calls for this very action have multiplied since Black was cleared of all charges related to the deaths of his good friends and the muggles who died in his confrontation with wanted Death Eater at large, Peter Pettigrew.

Minister Fudge noted in the press announcement of the decision that it had been made after a copy of the Potters' missing will was handed over to authorities. "It is clear that the wishes of James and Lily Potter were to place their only child in the safekeeping of long term family friends, two of whom had been named as the child's godparents."

It is understood by this Prophet reporter that Frank and Alice Longbottom were the first choice of guardians for young Harry, a well-respected couple from an Ancient and Noble House in a stable marriage with a child of their own. Sources suggest that they had begun a search for the will in the days before they were attacked with the intent to challenge the placement of Harry with the muggles by Albus Dumbledore. They are currently residents of the long term spell damage ward at St Mungo's and unable to take custody. Augusta Longbottom commented, "The Longbottoms and the Potters have long been allies and it is regretful that my son and his wife were unable to assume guardianship as the Potters wished." Alice Longbottom nee Kerrigan also enjoyed a close friendship with Lily Potter nee Evans at Hogwarts, each choosing the other as godmother for their sons who were born only a day apart.

Of course, Sirius Black was named as godfather to young Harry and was therefore the immediate second choice, despite being young and single. His solicitor, Brian Cutter of Cutter, Glock and Baron gave us this statement: "My client Sirius Black is delighted at the decision of the Ministry and looks forward to fully introducing his godson to the wizarding world beyond Hogwarts. He is currently abroad and undergoing medical treatment in line with conditions set by the Ministry. He'd like to thank Minister Fudge for expediting the decision on behalf of himself and Harry so they may..."
spend part of the summer together before Harry resumes his schooling."

Black's upbringing as an Heir to an Ancient and Noble House also prepares him for his new duty as Regent of the House of Potter. The current proxy for the House of Potter is Elmer Samson, appointed by the Chief Warlock in the absence of a Regent as per Wizengamot rules. Mister Samson, a former Order of Merlin recipient, was unavailable for comment.

We at the Prophet wish Harry much happiness with his new guardian.

This was a disaster, Albus thought sadly.

"Fabulous," drawled Severus beside him, "if the brat wasn't already spoiled…"

"Enough!" Minerva interrupted sharply, banging her hand down on the table with so much force the plates rattled and the cutlery jumped. "I have had enough of your derogatory comments and snide remarks about Harry Potter. You are entitled to your opinion on Black – although I despise your daily commentary about him, Merlin knows the two of you have quite a history between you and you are both adults – but belittling and bad-mouthing a boy, a student no less, who has done nothing," her eyes flashed when Severus would have interrupted, "nothing," she stressed, "to incur such abuse beyond being James Potter's son, is entirely unacceptable behaviour for a teacher within these walls. You will speak respectfully of him as you would insist he speak of you!"

"Now, Minerva..." Albus said hurriedly.

"Don't Minerva me!" Minerva glared at him across the table. "Too long have I looked away from less than acceptable behaviour but no more!" She gave an angry huff. "Poppy is quite right; we do have a problem with bullying and why? Because we condone such behaviour by inaction; because we do not open our eyes and see what is under our very big noses." She threw down her napkin and departed before anyone could say anything.

The rest of the table was silent, unnerved by the confrontation between their colleagues.

"Well," Albus cleared his throat, "perhaps Minerva is correct. We should all pay more attention and speak out against any signs of bullying especially in light of our planned visitors to Hogwarts this coming year." He turned to Severus who looked faintly stunned. "Severus, would you join me in my office, please?"

Albus didn't wait for Severus's agreement but immediately rose from the table and glided away, fully expecting Severus to follow him which he did. He waited until he was settled behind his desk before he waved Severus into a visitor's chair.

"Headmaster, you cannot..." Severus began.

Albus raised his hand and stopped him before he could get any further. "Severus, I more than anyone know your history with Sirius Black." He said. "I know you provoked him into daring you, knowing full well what awaited you at the end of the tunnel, and I know you hated James Potter for saving you because you had hoped to kill Remus Lupin and get Black expelled. Did they bully you? Yes, but in later years you started just as many of the skirmishes between you as they did. This is the truth of your history and I told you at the time that I knew all that had transpired."

Severus blinked at him.

"I do not expect you to befriend Sirius Black nor do I expect you to suddenly proclaim a positive view of the man, but I do expect you to realise that your reactions to the news over the past week have alienated Minerva, who is distressed at the thought that an innocent man, a former Gryffindor
student of hers no less, spent the better part of twelve years in Azkaban, and who finds you glorying in that same fact so openly and wishing that he had been Kissed, distasteful in the extreme. I do expect you to address that misstep on your part and mend your working relationship."

"Perhaps I have been less than discreet in my comments," allowed Severus, adjusting his robes.

"You have made a similar mistake in regards to Harry." Albus noted coolly. "Minerva's point was well made and I have allowed your attitude towards him to continue for far too long. I had hoped that you would come to see for yourself that Harry is not his father and has many of Lily's qualities; that his life has not been easy or spoiled, and certainly he will face much hardship in the future given what we know must come to pass. While I trust your commitment to helping him defeat Voldemort, your enmity towards Harry will not serve us in achieving that goal. Don't think I don't know that Minerva had to step in as Deputy and adjudicate Harry's mark in Potions at the end of last year. It is not acceptable professional behaviour and you will stop, Severus."

Severus flinched from the criticism and sat back. "You and I both know it is not that easy. If Sybill's latest prediction was correct then even now Pettigrew helps the Dark Lord rise again. If I am to regain my position as a spy…"

"You will say that I have ordered you to be civil to the boy." Albus interrupted him. "It is even the truth, Severus, so it should suffice. Civility will not harm our plans."

He repressed his smile at Severus's scowl and picked up the newspaper.

"This, on the other hand, may derail things significantly." Albus sighed and leaned back. "Has Lucius mentioned a new Lord Black?"

"We haven't spoken since just after Black's escape and the topic of conversation revolved around that debacle." Severus said, hiding his surprise too slowly for Albus not to see it. "I can make contact, see what he knows."

"Please do." Albus said gratefully.

Severus regarded him thoughtfully. "You believe a new Lord Black is responsible for Black's good fortune with the Ministry?"

"It is a theory." Albus said mildly. "But if there is and he is…" he spread his hands wide, "we need to know more before determining friend or foe."

Severus got to his feet. "With your permission, Headmaster?"

Albus dismissed him with the advice that Minerva preferred chocolate covered apologies. He settled back and considered his options.

The only good thing was Harry remained away from Privet Drive with the Dursleys and therefore hidden. Albus could go to the Ministry and protest the guardianship but that would expose the level of his interest in Harry and provoke questions he did not want to answer. No; it was best to deal with Sirius directly and come to some agreement before Sirius returned to take actual custody of Harry.

Which meant approaching Remus Lupin or Brian Cutter, the solicitor mentioned in the Prophet, for information on Sirius's whereabouts.

Both were difficult but Albus perhaps had a little more leverage with Remus – the former Professor did owe him for allowing him to come to Hogwarts as a student and for employing him for a year. He picked up some parchment and began a letter.
Time Bubble: August 9th 1994

Harry heard the crunch of footsteps coming up the mountain path and hurriedly wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. He wasn't surprised that someone had followed him – he had run off abruptly in the middle of his mind healing session – but he really, really, wanted to be alone. As much as he'd hated his life with the Dursleys, he'd sometimes enjoyed the solitude they'd effectively gifted him with his many chores and general dislike of his presence, and he rarely had that kind of solitude at the clinic between the treatments, lessons, and living with Sirius.

It seemed stupid to resent the lack of solitude when he'd gained so much more – someone who did seem to care about him, love him even. Sirius had been nothing but endlessly patient with Harry during the past month. Harry's magic was under control again and he knew he'd learned more than the first time through his lessons at Hogwarts, they'd even begun some fourth year material. Then there was the duelling Sirius had added to the curriculum which was just wicked and Harry had quickly fallen in love with Runes too. Sirius was as a good a teacher as Remus.

It hadn't all been work though; Blackhawk – or Noshi as he insisted on being called – had introduced him to his grandchildren as promised. Kimi was fourteen and enjoyed Quidditch – she reminded him of the Gryffindor Chaser girls. Huritt was fifteen, quiet and studious but he had a wicked sense of humour. They were both loads of fun and they spent every Saturday afternoon flying or playing games or exploring the hiking trails with Harry. Neither of them seemed overawed by his whole Boy Who Lived thing and he hoped he had made two new friends. Still, he missed Hermione and Ron. He missed being able to write to them and to hear their replies. Healer Fay had suggested he write a journal of his time at the clinic to give to them when he returned. He'd felt a bit stupid the first couple of times but it did help. He figured Hermione would read it but he doubted Ron would be interested.

He began to realise that although he'd heard the crunch of steps, no-one had actually approached him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the familiar animagus form of his godfather sitting by the pathway with a rucksack at his paws, obviously guarding him but otherwise leaving him alone with his thoughts. He felt a surge of affection and cleared his throat.

"It's OK, Padfoot," Harry said softly, "you can come sit with me."

Padfoot responded eagerly, picking up the rucksack in his mouth and jogging up to Harry quickly and dropping the rucksack at his feet. He pushed his head against Harry's chest and Harry patted the Grim. "I'm sorry, Padfoot, but I think I need to talk with Sirius."

Padfoot hustled back a bit and transformed. Harry reached out for a hug and Sirius immediately gathered him up. It didn't occur to Harry that it was the first time he had eschewed the dog for the man, or that it was the first hug that he had initiated – he just savoured the security of knowing Sirius cared about him.

Sirius ruffled his hair. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No?" Harry murmured. He sighed and shuffled back from his godfather. "I didn't blow anything up, did I?"

"Nope," Sirius assured him, snagging the rucksack and opening it to get to a water bottle he handed to Harry, "you controlled yourself wonderfully and nothing blew up. Well, maybe a small ornament, but Healer Fay said it was hideous and deserved to die."

Harry grimaced but given how powerful his magic truly was, an ornament blowing up was minor.
He sipped his water and stared out at the view of the Valley. He could see for miles. "Did Healer Fay tell you…"

"No," Sirius opened another water bottle and took a large gulp. He gestured with it. "All your mind healing sessions are confidential, Harry."

He sighed and rubbed his nose as he considered how to tell Sirius what he had realised. "I was telling her about overhearing the Professors talk about you in Hogsmeade." He shifted on the uncomfortable ground and plucked at a blade of glass. "I don't know why I didn't put it together before but Hagrid met you at Godric's Hollow and took me because he had orders from Dumbledore. He was the one who left me with my aunt, wasn't he? Dumbledore, I mean. But Hagrid too! He delivered me like a parcel! WHY?"

A sharp gust of wind around them had Sirius placing a hand on his arm.

"Take a breath, Harry."

Harry could feel his magic straining to get loose as his emotions tumbled out of control, and he hurriedly did as Sirius asked. He closed his eyes and did his breathing exercises, wrestling his emotions back and slowly nudging his magic back into dormancy.

"I'll tell you what I know." Sirius promised. "Hagrid was already there when I got to your parents' house. I was a mess as soon as…as soon as I saw your Dad." Tears shone in his eyes. "I took you from Hagrid for a while – you were crying and bloody and I tried to heal you. But Hagrid told me that he had orders to get you to Dumbledore so that they could take you to your aunt's." He collected himself. "I protested quite vehemently but Hagrid wouldn't be moved; he had his orders. Then I made a decision which is the biggest regret of my life, Harry, and I let Hagrid take you."

Harry bit his lower lip but held Sirius's gaze.

"I knew you see that your Mum had placed wards around your aunt's place to protect her from the Death Eaters – your aunt was clueless about them – hadn't talked to your Mum in ages. But on the face of it, stowing you with her for a little while until all the immediate fervour died down seemed like a good idea." Sirius motioned again with his bottle. "And admittedly I was pleased I would be free to go after Peter. I was very stupid and should have insisted on going with Hagrid and looking after you myself."

"I'm not mad at you, Sirius," Harry reassured him, "I mean I was a little bit at the end of term but you've more than…what I mean is…"

"I'm making up for it now?" Sirius suggested as Harry struggled to put his feelings and thoughts into words.

"Yes." Harry confirmed with a sigh of relief.

"Good." Sirius said. "Anyway, you were meant to go to the Longbottoms according to the will. Alice Longbottom is your godmother and was your Mum's best friend. Frank was a couple of years older and like an older brother to your Dad. They were married, happy, and had Neville. James and Lily figured they would be the best guardians for you and I couldn't disagree with them. Back then, I was a young single male with only occasional baby-sitting experience. Don't get me wrong – if I hadn't ended up in Azkaban I would have happily raised you but they were the better choice."

"What happened to them?" Harry asked, curious. "Neville never talks about them and I know he was raised with his Gran."
"They were attacked a couple of weeks after you got rid of Voldemort. My cousin Bella, her husband, his brother and Barty Crouch Junior tortured them into insanity. They're in St Mungo's."

Poor Neville, thought Harry. He wondered what was worse; losing his parents or what had happened to Neville's – either way they'd both lost the opportunity to be raised by their Mum and Dad.

"From what I can gather from Remus, the Longbottoms were going to challenge for custody before they got attacked. Dumbledore told them your aunt had taken guardianship and they knew that wasn't what was in the will." Sirius said. "Only no-one could find a copy as mine was in my vault and you need a Potter to open the Potter vault. With no will, legally you would have been placed with the Dursleys anyway as your aunt is your closest living relative."

Harry sighed again. "So Professor Dumbledore just did what would have happened anyway?"

"Pretty much." Sirius said.

He let that fact sink into him. "Do you…did he know about…about how it was for me with them?"

Sirius grimaced. "I think he suspected you didn't have the best life there, Harry, but do I think he knew the detail of it? I don't know; only he can tell you for certain."

"It's just…" Harry tore some grass from the ground and let it fall through his fingers. "I thought he cared about me. But if he cared about me, wouldn't he have checked up on me? Made sure I wasn't living in the cupboard? I just…I don't understand." His previous anger and hurt rolled through him again and while he focused on keeping hold of his magic again, he missed Sirius's angry glower at the mention of the cupboard.

"You're right that someone should have checked up on you. It's the job of the Wizarding Orphan Office. Only for your safety, I assume, Dumbledore didn't record your placement with your aunt with the Ministry." Sirius explained. "Now, Dumbledore should have checked up on you himself but he'd promised your aunt minimal dealings with the wizarding world. Remus thinks Dumbledore also kept other people away from you, friends of James and Lily like Remus and Hagrid, so no-one could lead Death Eaters to your door." He shrugged. "In this case, I think there was inaction because he cared about you – do you see?"

Harry nodded.

"However, don't take my understanding for what he did as agreement with what he did – or didn't do rather." Sirius continued. "He could have made different choices. He could have just turned up once a year on your birthday, for instance, to check on you – or he could have sent Remus who can easily pass for a muggle and who would have given you a link to your Mum and Dad. Or he could have installed a monitoring charm that told him how your relatives treated you – your Mum used to use one with babysitters – fair frightened the life out of me the first time she recounted everything I'd done when I sat for you. As it stood, he left your relatives unchecked and obviously they believed they could get away with treating you…not exactly as they should have."

Harry considered everything Sirius had said. "It's like the chessboard, isn't it? That Remus did?" He poked at his laces. "This is one of the decisions you didn't like?"

"Yes," Sirius agreed, "exactly like the chessboard." He shifted position, moving into a cross-legged lotus position from their yoga exercises. "The thing about actions – or non-actions but let's stick with actions for the time being, is that an action on it its own only tells you part of the story."
Harry looked at him dubiously. It sounded like it was heading towards another politics lesson. Sirius sprang one on him every week.

The first one had been the layout of wizarding government. That had actually been interesting. The DMLE sounded very cool made up the Auror Force, the Hit Wizard Force (for hunting down dangerous criminals), and the Prosecution Service (which sounded very similar to muggle courts dealing with who could be prosecuted and taking the cases to court).

The Department of Mysteries, on the other hand, sounded like something Hermione would prefer since Sirius had told him the bulk of it was a magical research department. There was also a small Magical Forensics Department that handled magical reversals, obliviations and investigations into weird or violent crimes which sounded slightly more interesting, and the Magical Intelligence Department (MI7) sounded very interesting as it was basically about spying. What was very cool was that everyone in the DOM was called an Unspeakable and the work was highly confidential.

Sirius had explained that both the DMLE and the DOM were part of the Ministry of Magic, but the rest of the Ministry had what he called Legislative powers. The individual departments determined the government policy, created laws and worked to get them passed – same as the muggles, and liaised with the DMLE on enforcement. The Minister was voted in on the basis of his or her known political agenda. It all sounded very boring to Harry but at least he finally understood what Arthur Weasley did and why the Ministry had attracted someone like Percy.

The last part of the government was the Wizengamot, the magical equivalent of Parliament or at least the House of Lords and about as interesting. Unfortunately, Sirius had pointed out to him that he had no choice but to get somewhat interested because the Potters had a seat in the Wizengamot, and whether he sat in it himself (unlikely) or gave his proxy to someone (which his Regent would have until he was of age anyway), he should have an opinion.

The second political lesson Sirius had ambushed him with was actually even more about the Wizengamot – namely the set-up. The history of the Wizengamot was deeply boring and not even Sirius's animated puppets could make it less so. Harry had written as much as he remembered in his journal for Hermione though.

The Wizengamot had three purposes: forming government (by which they meant voting the Minister in or out and approving budgets), passing laws (which was obvious), and effectively being the judge and jury for crimes. The DMLE's Prosecution Service dealt with minor crimes and misdemeanours so only major crimes usually went before the Wizengamot (primarily use of the Unforgivables but also murder and violent assault in general).

There were fifty formal seats of which thirty had been held by the original Ancient and Noble Houses who had been part of the Wizard's Council although only twenty-two Ancient and Noble Houses remained sitting as eight had been sold on or given away after line extinction. Another thirteen seats were held by Order of Merlin First Class recipients, and five seats were held by the Minister, the Head of the DMLE, the Head of the DOM and two other Ministry appointees.

A formal seat was owned by a family and usually occupied by the Head of House or a named proxy. If a seat was empty because the Head of House was underage and there was no legal proxy named, the Chief Warlock, who presided over the Wizengamot and ensured it kept to protocol, had the authority to name one. That had happened in Harry’s case and he was kind of disturbed that some unknown person was voting on laws in the name of his family without Harry knowing anything about it.

If a family line ended, the seat was 'returned to the floor.' All members of the Wizengamot could nominate a new family to take over the seat; the members voted on the nominations and the winner
awarded the seat. Buying and selling seats had been made illegal as had using them to cover debts (the Weasleys had in the past lost their seat for that reason). As it was rare for the pureblooded original owners of the seats to nominate outside of their social circle, the only muggleborns who had seats had achieved entry as Order of Merlin recipients.

The third lesson had enlightened him to political agendas. Sirius had effectively created an animated drawing of a fictional Wizengamot of ten people debating a fictional law which wanted to make Dark chocolate the only chocolate available…

"See," Sirius said waving at the parchment where a rather disturbing caricature of Lucius Malfoy appeared, "Malfoy wants the law because he thinks Dark is the purest form of chocolate." An animated cartoon of Dumbledore appeared. "He opposes the law because he prefers White chocolate – light and full of milky goodness. And there's me; I oppose the law because I prefer Milk which is the best of both worlds and frankly the most popular kind." He pointed at Harry who was dismayed as a shy animated version of him waved from the parchment. "Those are our agendas: what's yours?"

"Milk," Harry replied immediately, "I don't like Dark chocolate because it's too bitter and white chocolate makes me feel sick. So I guess I oppose the law too."

The animation had then turned to political alliances. Since the animated Malfoy wanted the law to pass: he, Dumbledore and Sirius didn't; all of them needed to find others to help their point of view win. Sirius had added an animated Goyle and Nott: all were known Dark chocolate lovers and likely to side with Malfoy before he added an animated Bones and Longbottom; known White chocolate supporters, and Milk chocolate supporters, Greengrass and Abbott.

"Who wins now?" Sirius asked.

"Us," Harry said confidently, "there are more people who like other kinds of chocolate than Dark."

"Correct. If all the White and Milk chocolate supporters got together, they would defeat the Dark chocolate law by a vote of three for and seven against." Sirius agreed. "But the Dark chocolate people know this so they've amended the proposed law so Dark and Milk chocolate are OK but White chocolate will be outlawed."

"Well, that's not fair." Harry said.

"Why not?"

"Because it still discriminates against the people who like White chocolate."

"So, you're still opposed?"

Harry nodded.

"Excellent, so am I." Sirius agreed happily. "Now we have to convince Greengrass and Abbott."

Sirius had encouraged the animated Harry to talk with the animated Greengrass and Abbott with the result that Abbott bought his argument about equality; Greengrass didn't. The law was defeated but only just (six to four). It had almost been fun.

Almost.

It had also been hard work and Sirius had ended the lesson by indicating there was a lot more to alliances than simply agreeing on one particular issue. He'd pointed out that if animated Harry had
offered animated Greengrass support for something Greengrass wanted, he might have convinced Greengrass too.

So, political lessons were sometimes fun, sometimes not, but always informative and even if Harry didn't want to know (he was so having a proxy for the rest of his life), Sirius was quite firm that he had to learn. Harry figured Hermione was going to love his journal. He hurriedly dragged his mind back to what he believed was going to be the latest lesson.

*Actions and the action itself only telling part of the story.*

"Let's look at one of your actions." Sirius declared cheerfully.

Harry grimaced. "Do we have to?"

"We have to," Sirius confirmed with a grin, "after all, you know all of the story about your own actions."

He guessed that made sense. "So what action are we looking at?"

Sirius looked at him thoughtfully. "How about your action in protecting the stone in your first year? What motivated you to protect it?"

He blinked at his godfather. "Because Voldemort would have gotten it otherwise."

Sirius hummed. "So you wanted to ensure he failed in his objective."

Harry shook his head. "I mean, yes, but more like…it wasn't so much me making sure he failed as much as it was about making sure I didn't fail to stop him."

"And why was that important to you?"

"Because…" Harry paused, unsure of his answer, and thought about it. "Well," he began again, "some of it was the Boy Who Lived stuff. I mean, I figured everyone expected *me* to stop him because I did before, you know? And I guess I kind of thought I had to because I was the one who'd stopped him before too. So that was part of it but I also wanted to stop him because of Mum and Dad, because he killed them and it wasn't right that he got to come back and they didn't. And because it was the right thing to do." He added. "Wasn't it? I knew he was going after the stone, I couldn't just let him get it."

"Yes, it was the right thing to do." Sirius said softly. "Although I would have preferred it if you hadn't risked your life." He poked Harry in the ankle. "But do you see how complicated your motivations were for protecting the stone? Multiple reasons and not all of them obvious or apparent."

Harry nodded.

"And the lesson is…" Sirius prompted.

"People will have reasons for their actions and that they could be many reasons and not all of them will be out there for you to see." Harry supplied. "So, the Headmaster leaving me with my aunt and not checking up on me…you said he did it to protect me but there could be other reasons?"

"Exactly." Sirius beamed at him. "And you always need to question why someone does something or wants to do something. What's the benefit to them? What's the benefit to you? Look at what Remus and I did with Minister Fudge. He initiated the investigation on the promise of a new more powerful political ally. He figured if he gave Lord Black the investigation then Lord Black would
look favourably upon him, which means he stays as Minister for longer, and he gets power and money."

Harry sighed. "Doesn't anyone do anything just because it's the right thing?"

"Hardly anyone." Sirius hesitated and ploughed on. "I could say that I got custody of you just because it was the right thing to do – and it was, I mean is – but that's not the only reason. I made it happen because selfishly I want to be part of your life because I love you. And I wanted custody so I could have more say in protecting you. And because I promised your Mum and Dad and I wanted to keep my promise. See?"

He did see and he had to admit that all of Sirius's reasons were good ones and benefitted him in the end. He nodded at his godfather.

"Now, here's the second half of the lesson: what reason do you think Dumbledore thought you had for protecting the stone?" asked Sirius.

The question stumped Harry for a moment because he'd never considered what Dumbledore had thought. "I guess he thought I'd done it because I wanted to stop Voldemort because of my parents."

Maybe.

Sirius hummed again. "That's probably about on target. What about Snape? What do you think he thought?"

That was easy. "That I did it because I wanted the attention or the adventure of it." He rolled his eyes expressively.

"And the rest of the school?" Sirius prompted.

"Probably it was a mix," Harry said, "hopefully my friends knew my reasons pretty well but others probably believed the same as Dumbledore or Snape, I guess."

"People are always going to judge you on your actions." Sirius explained bluntly. "And they may not take your word for it that you did X because of Y because they may not like you or trust you. On the other hand, someone may not take your word for it that you did X because of Y even if they do like you and trust you. That's human nature, unfortunately."

"It's so complicated!" Harry exclaimed.

Sirius ruffled his hair. "Here endeth the lesson. But I want you to think back through some of your relationships with others and consider motivations, OK?"

"Homework," Harry complained, "great."

But he wasn't complaining really and as Sirius helped him to his feet so they could walk back down the mountain to the cabin, he felt better about everything with Dumbledore. He didn't agree with Dumbledore's decision about leaving him with the Dursleys and not checking on him, but he could respect Dumbledore's reasons had probably been to protect him. But he wouldn't just blindly trust that Dumbledore held all the answers or that he always did things for the right reasons. Not anymore.
Healing Padfoot & Pronglet:6

Hiking up the path to Hogwarts. He was annoyed that he was going to have to talk to Albus. And he was doubly annoyed that he owed Sirius five galleons.

"When it gets out about my guardianship of Harry, Dumbledore will come after you for where I am." Sirius said sagely.

"I don't think he will." Remus countered. "He won't have any reason to think we're in that close contact or that we've reconnected enough for you to inform you."

"Bollocks, Moony." Sirius pointed at him. "You're my closest friend! I bet you five galleons that he'll write you a wonderful letter asking you to meet with him as a favour to your old Headmaster, and when you go along to his office, he'll use the fact that he allowed you to attend Hogwarts and gave you a job for year to try and weasel the information out of you." He paused. "It's lucky he can't read your mind."

"So I'll tell him I don't know." Remus replied.

"No," Sirius said grinning, "we should prank him."

Remus sighed. This wasn't going to end well.

And bugger it all, Sirius had been right!

Remus muttered angrily to himself as he entered the castle and began the long walk to Dumbledore's office. He stood in front of the gargoyle and looked at it menacingly.

"I'm here at the Headmaster's request."

The gargoyle moved aside. Remus continued up the stairs and Dumbledore called for him to enter. Remus had seen the inside of the Headmaster's office twice during his time as a student – once to go over the terms of his stay because of his lycanthropy (he'd been eleven and scared to death) and once when Dumbledore had quizzed him about how much he knew about Sirius taunting Snape into the tunnel on the night of the full moon (nothing and it took him months to forgive Sirius for almost letting Remus eat someone, even Snape).

Remus took the offered chair, but declined the candy and tea with the excuse of another meeting to follow. He went straight on the offensive. "What can I do for you, Albus? Brilliant news about Sirius and Harry, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed." Albus smiled at him, eyes twinkling although the smile was faintly forced. "Actually, it was on that very subject that I wanted to make a plea for assistance."

"Oh?" Remus crossed his legs and tried to look helpful.

"I wanted to talk with Sirius before he returns from abroad about Harry." Albus explained. "There are things of which Sirius may be unaware that he needs to know." He continued seriously. "I fear Voldemort will soon rise again with Mister Pettigrew's help and his attention will undoubtedly turn to Harry – the boy who banished him for so many years."

"I agree." Remus said carefully. This was definitely more than either he or Sirius had thought Albus would share with them. "Harry would be a target if Voldemort came back to power."
"You always were a good student, Remus," Albus said, dropping the 'remember who allowed you to be one' hint that Remus had been waiting for, "and an even better teacher if I may say so. You understand that Harry will need every advantage in the coming dark days." And there was the 'remember who gave you a job' hint. "So you will agree Sirius and I need to talk?"

"I understand why you wish to talk with him, Albus, but I'm not sure why it can't wait until Sirius gets back and takes custody of Harry." Remus said. "According to the newspaper, he is currently undergoing treatment."

"Yes, I'm so glad he didn't decide to fight the Ministry on that," Albus said, "but I do feel it would be best for Harry that we talk before Sirius comes back to Britain, and I believe you know where Sirius is."

"If I did know, Albus, it would be a confidence given to me by a friend." Remus pointed out. "And I'm still not convinced it can't wait." He could hear Sirius's voice reminding him not to make it easy on the old wizard.

"I understand and while I wouldn't normally press you to betray the confidence of a friend, I think you know me well enough to know that I would never make such a request if it was not a matter of the utmost importance, dear boy." Albus said. "I wish I could explain more but I feel it only fair to inform Sirius first as it must be his decision if anyone else should be told."

Remus considered Albus for a long moment before sighing – not so dramatically that it would be obvious but enough to signal a surrender. He withdrew a parchment from the inside pocket of his robes, Sirius had prepared it before he went away, and handed it to Albus.

Albus happily took the parchment and read it.

"Remus!

Hope you've heard the excellent news – I have Harry! Well, not yet but soon. Off to get myself sorted out! I've found a wonderful little clinic in Thailand. Will be in touch when I get back.

Sirius"

"Thank you, Remus." Albus said warmly and passed the parchment back.

"If Sirius asks…" Remus began.

Albus nodded at him. "I'll be sure to be mysterious about my sources."

Remus got to his feet as he tucked the parchment back into his robes and decided some additional teasing wouldn't go amiss. "I assume you've seen Harry. How did he take the news? I'm sure he must be delighted."

"Ah," Albus's twinkle faltered for a moment, "Harry and the Dursleys remain away. I'm sure they'll return soon and I will inform him then."

Right. And by then Albus no doubt hoped to talk Sirius out of taking custody. Remus felt any lingering regret at Sirius's prank disappear.

Remus swallowed the retort that sprang to his lips and managed a smile instead. "Well, I must be off."

Albus gave a benign answering smile of his own. "Thank you again, Remus."
"Yes, remember I was never here, Albus."

Remus departed before Albus could say another word and hurried down the stairs and back into the main part of the castle. He headed for Gryffindor tower where his next appointment was waiting. When he had received Albus's thinly veiled summons he had decided to combine it with meeting up with Minerva. She had sent some suggestions for the scholarship to Brian and Brian had forwarded them to Remus as the steward of the House of Potter. He was also concerned after her reaction at the will reading and he hoped his news would alleviate some of the pain and guilt she'd felt. He tapped lightly on her office door and opened it at her summons.

"Remus," Minerva smiled at him briefly, "I take it your business with Albus is complete?" She moved over to a hat stand and pulled on a warm cloak of deep blue. She placed her hat on her head and adjusted it.

"All done." Remus confirmed, looking enviously at an expensive box of chocolates that sat on her desk. He took a piece of parchment from his pocket and handed it to her.

"My steward Remus Lupin invites you to 12 Grimmauld Place."

Minerva looked up from the paper and considered him intently. "Fidelius?"

"One of two." Remus confirmed. "The floo address is Black Manor. Shall we?"

She nodded sharply and headed to the floo. She tapped it with her wand and the fire erupted. Remus went first, taking a pinch of floo powder and stating the address firmly. Minerva stepped through a moment after he arrived.

She glanced around the room and breathed in sharply at the crest on the wall. "The House of Black?" She snapped her gaze to Remus inquisitively.

"Sirius assumed the Head of House to secure his freedom." Remus explained. "I'll explain more when we reach out next destination." He handed her a second piece of parchment.

"Remus Lupin invites you to Griffin House, Potter Lane"

A smile flitted over Minerva's stern features.

"We thought the name was apt as the house is owned by three Gryffindors and we named the lane ourselves in memory of James and Lily." Remus explained. "The floo address is Prongs. It will only be accessible through this floo."

Minerva nodded again. They repeated their trip through the floo and Remus shut it down as soon as Minerva was through.

He watched as she took a long around the sunny hallway with its wide wooden door leading to the outside and large window showing the open space in front of the house leading to a path that led out to a forest. The hallway itself was painted a warm cream, with natural dark wood flooring, a set of hooks on the wall by the door, an umbrella stand and a sturdy wooden table that would act as a dumping ground for keys and assorted minutiae. A wide wooden staircase led up to the upper floors.

There was a faint pop and the house elf arrived. "May Dobby be taking the cloak and hat of Harry Potter's Professor McGoggles?" He beamed up at her.

She raised an eyebrow but gave up her robe and hat. "Thank you."
"And you Harry Potter's Mooey?" Remus sighed and let the house elf divest him of his outer robe too, the house elf hanging it on a hook. "Tea in the sun room, please, Dobby."

The excited house elf nodded and popped away.

"An unusual elf." Minerva commented.

"Harry freed him from the Malfoys apparently. He turned up out of the blue just as Sirius and I agreed we needed to find an elf for here to help look after Harry. He's a free elf – we're paying him a galleon a month. It tickles Sirius no end." Remus shook his head. "Dobby's incredibly loyal to Harry and protective of him which is the main thing." He smiled happily at her. "Welcome to Harry's new home. Shall I give you a tour? I'd appreciate a female point of view."

"I'd be delighted." Minerva said, smiling.

They went upstairs first. The attic room with its sloping roof and adjoining en-suite bathroom was Remus's – the sign on the door said Moony. A large room on the floor below with a shower room was Sirius's and he too had a sign with his Marauder name.

Minerva's fingers trailed over the sign on the door opposite Sirius's that proclaimed 'Pronglet' and walked inside. She nodded in approval at the warm chocolate colour that predominated on the furnishings, linen and curtains with cream and gold accents. The room wasn't overly large but had the basics of a wardrobe, chest of drawers, bedside table, reading chair and bed. A bookcase filled with Harry's school books, a desk and chair for study were set under the large window to the right that looked out onto the back garden and the countryside beyond. Hedwig snoozed happily on her owl perch beside the desk. There was a small shower-room to the left complete with toilet and sink.

"We've set it up as similar to the room he has at Black Manor but he can charm the colours here to something he prefers once he arrives." Remus explained. "Sirius wants him to have some say in making the room his."

"An excellent idea," Minerva agreed. She waved her wand turning the chocolate to Gryffindor red. "I believe Harry will find the familiarity comforting for his first night."

Remus grinned and ushered her out and down the stairs, briefly showed her the two guest bedrooms before they ended up back in the hallway. There was a large comfortable living room to the front of the house that Minerva exclaimed over. With Remus's permission she conjured a tartan throw for the sofa and some cushions for the chairs. She picked up the photos of the Marauders, Lily and Harry on the mantelpiece, smiling wistfully at all of them before following Remus through into a study filled with bookcases and two desks on opposite walls. The study overlooked the back garden and had doors out to a small patio area.

Remus picked up a file and a book from his desk, and they walked back to the hallway, through another formal reception room where Minerva did the same finishing touches, and into the dining room. It led to the large kitchen where Remus took Minerva down the steps into the basement which had been set up for magical practice. He finally stopped the tour at the large sun room at the back of the house where a table was already laid out with afternoon tea waiting for them.

Remus pulled out Minerva's chair and got her settled before taking his own seat. "So what do you think?"

"It's lovely." Minerva said sincerely. "I believe Harry will be very happy here with you both, Remus." She accepted his silent offer of tea – picking up the teapot – and waited until he had poured her a cup before continuing. "You'll forgive me for noting that I don't believe that this amount of
work was possible in just the few days since Sirius was awarded custody."

"No, indeed." Remus filled her in on Sirius assuming his position as the Head of the House of Black; their plan to get Sirius's name cleared; the Ministry's discovery of Harry Potter's muggle life; the immediate awarding of custody to Sirius, and the agreement for the news to leak slowly to the public.

"Quite honestly, we thought we would have another week of wrangling with Fudge about the custody," Remus passed her the plate of warm scones, "but apparently Amelia Bones was horrified by the muggles and pushed for Harry's immediate removal from them."

Minerva sliced her scone open. "I should have listened to my first instinct about those muggles. I don't know why I let Albus talk me into leaving Harry with them. I'd only just found out about Lily and James but that is no excuse for walking away as I did."

"We all walked away, Minerva." Remus pointed out. "Sirius walked away when he handed Harry to Hagrid – something I know haunts him. Hagrid walked away believing as you did that Albus knew best. I held on as long as I could but even I walked away in the end because I had to live my own life. You're not alone in making that mistake. We all trusted Albus to take care of Harry."

Minerva nodded, accepting the comfort as she bit into her scone.

Remus buttered his own scone before he continued. "If the will had emerged sooner, things would have been different, I'm sure."

"Perhaps," Minerva wiped her fingers on a napkin, "although I find myself wondering if I wouldn't have allowed Albus to convince me that Harry was safer with the muggles." She shook her head. "I certainly allowed him to convince me that talking with Harry about his family was inappropriate, but then I do try not to show favouritism at the school."

"So no favouritism except in matters of Quidditch?" Remus teased. "You did make Harry the youngest seeker for a hundred years."

"That was not favouritism," Minerva retorted primly, "it was desperation not to continue losing to Slytherin!"

Remus chuckled.

"I have come to realise with Harry that I have erred badly." Minerva confessed. "I could have arranged to meet him during the Christmas or Easter break and offered him some knowledge of his family. Hagrid said that the muggles had told him next to nothing and while I contributed photos for the album he made…I should have done more."

"I didn't tell Harry about knowing James when I met him either." Remus sympathised. "It's difficult as a professor to communicate that kind of personal information to a student. I didn't realise until I was a teacher just how difficult."

Minerva picked up her cup. "Well, I have decided to request a meeting with Harry once Sirius returns and takes custody of him."

"I'm sure he'll agree but actually Sirius already has custody of Harry."

"But Albus…"

"Thinks Harry is away with his relatives." Remus nodded briskly. "Just as Sirius intended. He took Harry with him to a clinic for treatment. Harry was badly affected by the Dementors during the
school year and beyond that…Sirius was unhappy that Harry was, well, small for his age, shall we say? He wanted Harry to get fully checked out."

"A wise and responsible decision." Minerva agreed, blinking back her surprise.

"I'm hoping it's given them some time to bond." Remus said.

"I should have realised when I saw Harry's owl in his room." Minerva fixed him with a stare. "Albus will not be happy when he finds out you kept this from him."

"He'll be even unhappier when he realises that Sirius isn't in Thailand." Remus admitted cheerfully.

"Do I want to know, Mister Lupin?" Minerva questioned with mock sternness.

Remus felt like a student under her gaze again and squirmed. "Sirius guessed Albus would want to speak with him once the guardianship came out and that he would prevail upon me to provide an answer."

Minerva pursed her lips. "You've sent Albus to Thailand?"

"Sirius and Harry will return tomorrow. I expect an adoption ceremony will soon follow," Remus said, "and any opportunity to interfere with the guardianship will be gone."

"That your trust in Albus has eroded so much that you've taken these measures…" Minerva sighed unhappily.

She was still torn, Remus mused; torn between her respect for and loyalty to Albus and her own awakening realisation that Albus's decisions in regards to Harry were not always for the best – and the part she had played in allowing those decisions to stand despite her own reservations.

"You also have to remember that Sirius holds Albus somewhat responsible for his wrongful imprisonment." Remus said softly. "Sirius hasn't spoken to me much about it but I think he was very hurt that he didn't merit even a visit from the leader of the Order to confirm his guilt, not to mention Albus's abrogation of his responsibility as Chief Warlock to ensure that Sirius had a trial."

Minerva sighed heavily. "I cannot blame you or Sirius." She said quietly. "Just as I cannot deny that Albus would interfere if he could." She frowned. "I will not tell Albus you have sent him on a wild nargle chase, Remus, but only because I believe Harry will be much happier here than with those awful muggles."

"Thank you, Minerva." Remus said. "There was something else Sirius wanted me to talk to you about if the will was read ahead of him returning. You know you were on the list of potential guardians? Sirius was hoping you would accept being named as Harry's guardian in the event something happens to him."

"But you…" Minerva's cup clattered back into its saucer.

"Cannot for obvious reasons unless the law regarding werewolves changes." Remus said somewhat pained by the admission. "I believe Sirius has included a clause that specifies you have to allow me access to Harry and keep me on as steward to the House of Potter." He picked up his own cup and took a fortifying sip. "Sirius wanted to honour James and Lily's wishes in following the order of guardianship they laid out. But if you refuse he has others in mind."

Minerva shook herself slightly. "I would be honoured." She smiled at him. "And I have no objection to the clause regarding yourself, Remus. Indeed, such a tragedy occur, I would be grateful for your
"I'll confirm the details with Brian then." Remus smiled at her gratefully. "Speaking of Brian, I guess we should cover the changes to the scholarship that you wanted to make?"

"Of course, you're the steward." Minerva realised out loud. She shook herself and smiled at Remus fondly. "You deserve the position, Remus, although what society is going to think of Sirius holding both the House of Black and the regency of the House of Potter…"

"It will certainly be interesting." Remus flipped open the folder and took out a piece of parchment. "Firstly, the change you wish to make to name an unpaid deputy for the scholarship to assist in the selection of the student and oversee anything should you be unavailable…neither Brian nor I have any problems with that. Do you have someone in mind?"

"I was thinking of Filius. He adored Lily when she was a student and he's always had a soft spot for muggleborn children." Minerva said. "He actually made the other suggestion."

"Filius should be fine. The only person I would have seriously objected to is Severus." Remus explained. "Although he was friends with Lily…his treatment of Harry prohibits it."

"I agree with you," Minerva said, "Albus has spoken with Severus but we shall see. The proof is in the casting after all."

"The other suggestion – Filius's was it? – it's an admirable sentiment wanting to either offer the scholarship in retrospect to a deserving muggleborn student from each year since 'eighty-two when the scholarship should have gone into effect, or two students going forward for the next twelve years." Remus said. "Unfortunately, legally, Brian says we can't do it under the terms of the current scholarship. That said, as steward of the House of Potter, I can agree to the equivalent amount of funds for something we'll call the Lily Potter Muggleborn Award. You can award it annually going forward for the next twelve years or in retrospect for twelve deserving recipients, one from each year since 'eighty-two."

"I think the latter would be most appropriate and ensure there is no conflict going forward." Minerva said. "I suggest in fairness we award it to the highest NEWT scoring muggleborn student from the 'eighty-two to 'eighty-three academic year until this past academic year."

"I can agree to that." Remus said. "If you can provide me with the list of recipients, I'll have Brian draw up the legal papers to cover the award and its rules." He considered that Penelope would probably be a recipient; the young assistant was busily tackling the library at Black Manor and loving every minute of it.

"Thank you." Minerva said. "I'd also like Harry to get involved with the scholarship. I would like his input into the selection criteria and he should at least review the possible recipients on parchment and give his opinion before the candidate is chosen. After he's graduated perhaps he could even come along to the interviews if he wished."

"An excellent idea," Remus agreed, "Sirius wants to give some small duties to Harry to start him learning how to be a Head of House. This would work well."

"I confess that Sirius is displaying a maturity about his guardianship that takes me aback, Remus." Minerva set down her cup and looked around the pleasant sun room. "This is going to be a wonderful home for Harry."

"We're going to try our best." Remus said. He closed the folder on the scholarship and tapped the
book he had grabbed. "Minerva, there is something else I need your help on. This book contains a
spell that Lily performed on Harry just before she died – in fact the sacrifice of her death to save him
triggered the spell. We think it was partially responsible for helping Harry survive the Killing Curse.
There's a second ritual to…maintain the protection that I've marked. I'd like a second opinion."

It was a simple enough in theory, on the assumption of a blood adoption it involved female witches
in the adoptive family blessing the renewal of the protection with a simple ritual – it didn't seem to
call for them to die thankfully – but he'd feel better if someone else cast their eye over it in case they
found something he'd missed.

Minerva's eyebrows were almost at her hairline. "I'd be happy to take a look, Remus." She examined
his face intently. "You intend to do it if it's possible?"

"Sirius will do everything and anything needed to protect Harry, Minerva." Remus said simply.
"Anything." He paused as he held her gaze. "And so will I. I won't walk away again."

Her expression shifted to determination and she nodded slowly. "Neither will I, Remus, neither will
I."

o-O-o

Time Bubble: August 31st 1994

Harry shrieked as Huritt dragged him back under the water and Kimi squirted a water gun at her
cousin. The sight of his godson playing with such carefree abandon made Sirius smile so much that
his face ached.

"It is a happy sight." Noshi said beside him.

They were ostensibly keeping an eye on the kids playing in the pool from the safety of the cabin's
deck. It was a leaving party for Harry and Sirius – mostly for Harry – as they were heading home the
next day.

Sirius tilted his pumpkin juice in the direction of the pool. "It is. I should thank you for introducing
them. Harry's made two great friends."

"After the events of Monday I am surprised you are thanking me." Noshi said with a rueful smile.

Monday.

Monday when Harry had gone to Huritt's for dinner and somehow all three kids had ended up
soused on muggle beer. A drunk Harry didn't have control of his magic and it was a wonder that the
damage to Huritt's house had been localised to the teen's bedroom. Luckily, Huritt and Kimi had also
emerged unscathed. Huritt's parents had been warned by the house wards and managed to get Harry
sobered up, back to the clinic and into isolation overnight before anything else had happened.

Sirius had run the gamut of emotions that night – concerned at the news Harry was in isolation,
angry that Harry had been irresponsible in getting drunk, relieved beyond anything he was fine, a
little amused in truth that Harry was being a typical teenager, and more than a little anxious at the
realisation he was going to have to man up, be a parent and punish him.

"How did Huritt get hold of the beer anyway?" Sirius asked. Quiet, sensible Huritt would have been
the last person he'd have picked to break the rules. But then Remus had been the same way – in
hindsight, he should have known.
"His older brother gave it to him on learning that Huritt's relationship with his girlfriend had ended."
Noshi sighed. "He advised Huritt to drown his sorrows. Their mother is not best pleased with either of them. I had to intercede to allow Huritt to come to this farewell meal."

"Thank you." Sirius murmured. "I can appreciate her point of view. Harry and I had a long talk about his punishment...but I couldn't take today away from him for a first offence."

"First offence?" Noshi said, eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Charlus Potter's punishment system. I figure James would have used it on Harry and Harry would respect it knowing it was his grandfather's system." Sirius explained. "For minor stuff, there were three stages of punishment. First offence: you did something you know or suspected was wrong but probably didn't anticipate the consequences. Second offence: you repeated something you know was wrong and were aware of the consequences. Third offence: you're a repeat offender and clearly don't care about the consequences. Then, there was the major stuff which was considered a capital offence if you did it – things that were not allowed under any circumstances, rules that couldn't be broken such as hurting someone unless in self-defence, deliberately destroying property in anger...that kind of thing."

"And punishment increases on the severity of the offence?" Noshi nodded. "It's a good system."

"I also followed Healer Fay's advice and asked Harry what he thought his punishments should be for each offence." Sirius took a sip of his juice. "She was right that he responded well to that. He knows exactly what he'll get now and has agreed to it. For Monday, he lost his flying privileges and was grounded for a week, and his friends ban, because he didn't do it alone, has only been revoked today for extraordinary circumstances."

"A fair punishment." Noshi commented. "I am glad Healer Fay advised you well."

"She also told me it was a good sign that he's comfortable enough to test our relationship with bad behaviour." Sirius commented wryly. "It's not exactly the way I wanted proof that he'd settled."

Noshi gave a short laugh. "But she is right; that he feels secure enough to test your boundaries is encouraging."

"I hate having to punish him," Sirius admitted, "I feel like a complete fraud after everything I did as a teenager. I can't wait until he's an adult and I don't have to do it anymore."

"I was also pleased when my children became fully adult but then I realised I had also lost the ability to punish them when they were being stupid." Noshi commented. "You cannot win as a parent."

"I guess not." Sirius said laughing. He sobered a little, gaze drifting back to Harry who had gotten hold of the water pistol and had started shooting a shrieking Kimi. "I am also very thankful we found out that he had this problem with alcohol here and not at home."

"You will need to be certain that he understands the dangers." Noshi agreed. "Until he is older and the control of his magic is as second nature to him...and even then I am not sure I would not recommend he partake of any alcohol with the power he has."

"He's a good kid on the whole so I don't think there'll be an issue." Sirius said. "But I will talk to him again."

"And what of you, Sirius?" Noshi asked. "Are you ready to go home?"

"In some ways, no." Sirius admitted with a long sigh. "Here feels safe and secure – we're hidden
from the world. Whereas there's a lot of work to do to get Harry protected properly when I go back; a lot of political fencing that I'll need to do. I'm not looking forward to that part."

"And the other part?"

"Our new home should be ready which I can't wait to see," Sirius said, "and I want to get Harry settled and for us to enjoy living as a family before he heads back to Hogwarts."

"You would prefer it if he didn't go." Noshi surmised, observing Sirius's grimace.

"He's been in danger every year he's attended. Last year was partially my fault so I share some of the blame for that but…" Sirius sighed. "I'd prefer to home school him and know that he's safe but as Moony would point out to me, what I'd really prefer is to wrap Harry totally in cotton wool and hide him away from the whole world for the rest of his life which is unrealistic. So…he has friends at Hogwarts; he loves it there. I won't stop him from attending."

Noshi patted his shoulder. "It is a wise man that does not try to stop the stampeding buffalo."

Sirius smiled at the saying and nodded.

"You have a clean bill of health, Sirius. Your mind is mended once more; your body strong." Noshi said firmly. "If you and Harry continue as you are, I believe you will both find much happiness and love in your lives."

"I hope so." Sirius said fervently. Especially as there was something he needed to discuss with Harry…

The party broke up after dinner and Sirius watched Harry say goodbye to his friends with nostalgic sympathy and some amusement when Kimi kissed Harry on the cheek and Harry blushed in response.

"You'll write." Sirius commented after the door was closed and Harry collapsed into a chair in front of the fire.

"I know but it's not the same."

Harry had a small whine in his voice. It was a sign of how much he loved the kid that he thought it adorable rather than annoying, Sirius mused fondly.

"We can visit next year," Sirius said, poking the fire, "or they could visit us."

"Yeah?" Harry perked up at the idea. "That would be cool."

Sirius raised his eyebrows; Harry's accent and words had taken on an American twang but he figured it would fade once they got back to Britain. "We'll see how your letter writing goes. If you're still in contact with them by Easter, I'll write to Noshi and see what can be arranged."

A visit by Kimi and Huritt to Britain would be possible but Sirius wanted to make sure it was safe for them before inviting them. If Peter had found Voldemort…

"So." Sirius put the poker down and stood up. He cleared his throat as nerves curdled in his belly. "There's something important that I need to ask you before we leave."

Harry's gaze met his and he could see a hint of uncertainty flicker in the teen's eyes.

"I love you, Harry, and I would very much like to adopt you." Sirius said quickly. "If you would like
Harry stared at him for a long moment. Suddenly, he launched himself across the space between them and tackled Sirius into a hug.

Sirius rocked back a little before righting them both, holding Harry tightly. He could feel Harry shaking and rubbed his back soothingly. "I take it that's a yes?"

Harry nodded but didn't speak and Sirius let him get his emotions under control. Harry finally pulled away and wiped a hand under his glasses swiftly. "Yes," his voice broke on the word and Sirius stifled the urge to shush him and hug the hell out of him again seeing Harry's determination to speak, "I would like that, to be adopted."

Sirius hugged him, he couldn't stop himself, his own set of tears catching against the back of his throat and stinging the back of his eyes. Eventually they both stepped back and wiped their faces sheepishly.

"Well, we're a pair, aren't we?" Sirius said and he could see the flush of delight in Harry's eyes at the statement. He nudged him over to the sofa and sat down. "So, I'm assuming you don't know about the adoption ritual?"

Harry frowned and shook his head. "What is it?"

"It falls under family magic. It's quite simple really. I prick my finger, put some blood in a ritual bowl and swear an oath that I take you to be my son. You do the same only you swear an oath that you take me to be your father." Sirius continued. "Legally, it has no meaning and we still have to file papers with the WOO for the legal side of things, but from a magical perspective you'd be my son."

"So I become a Black instead of a Potter?" Harry asked confusion in his green eyes. "Does that mean I stop being the Potter heir or…"

"No, no." Sirius said firmly. "You will always be your Dad's heir in all respects – your Mum's too. They made you so you're theirs – always. This just magically adds me to the list of parents. As for your name…" he gestured at Harry, "you could be Harry James Potter, Lord Potter-Black or Lord Harry James Potter-Black or Harry James Black, Lord Potter-Black. It's entirely up to you. Having said that…Potter, well, it's…it's your Dad's name and I respect that. I don't need you to take mine. Truthfully, I think you're always going to be known as Harry Potter to our world whether you do a name change or not."

"I don't know," Harry said, "I mean I think you're right that even if I change my name people will still call me Harry Potter but I like the idea of not being that Harry Potter."

"Well, there's plenty of time to think about it." Sirius patted Harry's arm. "Any other questions?"

Harry scratched his forehead, along the line of his faint scar, and bit his lip. "What happens if you have other kids?"

Sirius thought that was highly unlikely although it was something his own mind healer had tried to get him to consider. His upbringing just hadn't allowed for him to consider relationships and marriage as anything other than political manoeuvrings, but then later, James and Lily had spoiled him into wanting the same thing they'd had – a real love and partnership. But he knew he struggled with emotional intimacy and that didn't bode well for the latter kind of relationship, and he didn't see a political need to marry to have to put up with the former.

"If I do get married and have children, I would still consider you my firstborn." Sirius replied to
Harry. "I do consider you my firstborn."

"But…isn’t it unfair if I inherit your things if you have kids of your own? Shouldn’t they get everything?" Harry pressed.

Sirius smiled. "It isn’t unfair because you are one of my children. If I have other children, then yes, there’ll be bequests to them too from a monetary and property perspective, but I would still want you to inherit as my Heir." He made a dismissive gesture. "Look, if after my death, you wanted to name a child of mine Heir to the House of Black so they would inherit on your death, you could do. Or you could name your eldest son as Heir to both the Houses, or name one child Heir to the House of Potter and another Heir to the House of Black. Really, all this is very hypothetical given all these other children, yours and mine, are imaginary at this point."

"I guess," Harry agreed vaguely.

"The other reason why I would prefer you as the next Head of the House of Black is political." Sirius admitted. "If the House is going to build a different reputation then it has to be led by wizards who are loyal to the Light. So if a Potter, you, led the House that would help to turn our reputation around. And I doubt you're going to have issues with the heir ritual; you're a powerful wizard and the family magic loves power."

Harry nodded in understanding. "You wanted to do the inheritance ritual for my Potter magic once we got back anyway didn't you?" They'd talked about it in the last politics lesson.

Sirius grinned at him. "Yes, and we'll definitely do your Potter inheritance ritual first. The Black magic is Dark in origin and I want you protected by the Light magic of the Potters. We'll have to organise some witnesses for the adoption ritual which will take a few days."

Harry nodded and half-way through yawned widely.

"Bed." Sirius declared. "We have an early start again tomorrow." He enjoyed the brief hug Harry gave him and watched him head off to his room with a giddy joy; Harry had said yes to the adoption. He did a happy little dance around the fireplace before banking the fire and heading to his own bed.

The morning dawned bright and early, Harry complained good-naturedly at taking the de-aging potion again and as soon as five year old Harry made an appearance, he was just as adorably cute as ever – and wanted his stuffed bear back.

Sirius watched with amusement as he turned Healer Fay and Doctor Jordan to mush. He shook his head as Harry hugged Noshi goodbye holding onto the bear all the while. If only he had a camera, thought Sirius, the blackmail opportunities were immense.

Harry clambered into the waiting car where a grinning Mick waited to drive them to the airport. Sirius turned to the healers to say his own goodbyes.

"Don't forget to keep up with your exercise." Doctor Jordan nagged as she accepted his hug.

Healer Fay, a young brunette, surreptitiously wiped her eyes. "I'm going to miss Harry. Make sure he does his Occlumency exercises and if you need advice…"

"Thank you." Sirius said truly grateful.

"I believe my colleagues have covered everything." Noshi held out his hand and Sirius shook it warmly.
Noshi froze and his eyes took on a distant look before refocusing on Sirius with a gravity in them that turned Sirius's stomach.

"What?" demanded Sirius as the old wizard released his hand.

"You will bring Harry to me again." Noshi said with a deep sigh. "He will face a great evil and you will bring him here to heal."

Sirius shivered, a cold dread stealing over him. "When?"

Noshi shrugged apologetically. "Perhaps a year, maybe more." He grimaced. "I cannot be certain."

Sirius nodded sharply, remembering how they had talked of Sight and prophecy. "Thank you for everything."

"Goodbye, my friend." Noshi said.

He made his way to the car and coaxed Harry into his seatbelt. But as the car pulled away from the clinic and made its way down the driveway, Sirius couldn't help but want to turn back to the safety of the place.

He glanced over at Harry who grinned at him.

Bugger the vision Noshi had Seen. Sirius smiled back at his godson and brushed a hand over Harry's head.

Sirius would keep Harry safe; he'd keep him safe no matter what.
Augusta Longbottom was a formidable woman. Scary was the word Remus had used when he'd wished Sirius well as Sirius had headed out of Griffin House that morning. Harry had just laughed at him and told him to convey his greetings to Neville. He smiled as he remembered the homely scene of lunch. He and Harry had been thrilled to be reunited with Remus and even more thrilled to hear how Remus had sent Dumbledore off to Thailand.

Sirius was certain that Augusta was keeping him waiting in her parlour just to see him squirm. He smoothed his formal black robe with its neat column of tiny black buttons that ran from the high stiff collar to his waist and had taken forever to do up. The crests of the House of Black and House of Potter decorated the front right breast. His robes opened up at his waist, angling away to give him freedom to move and he had opted for muggle black leather trousers underneath – expensive but serviceable and very protective as he knew from riding his motorbike. Expensive dragon-hide boots completed the outfit. He fidgeted with the wide cuffs of his robes which provided easy access to his wand.

Harry had done the inheritance ritual for the House of Potter that morning at Gringotts. The family magic had immediately formed into the approving gold griffin totem and the Head of House ring had leaped onto Harry's finger. It had granted Harry access into the Potter vault and had removed some of the effects of the Death Fidelius so they could access Potter family assets. Harry had been thrilled at getting to look at some of his heritage and had pounced on his father's old school trunk. Sirius had a suspicion that Harry was after James's animagus journals.

A noise from just outside the doorway had Sirius rising, just in time for Augusta to enter. Her grey hair was tightly bound in a high bun; her aged face stern and foreboding. She wore formal robes in a deep purple decorated with the House of Longbottom crest. They were high necked but narrow cuffed and looked more uncomfortable than his own.

He bowed and took her outstretched hand, dropping a kiss onto her knuckles before rising and meeting her eyes firmly. He definitely needed his Gryffindor courage, Sirius considered with a silent laugh.

"Madame Longbottom, thank you for agreeing to meet with me." Sirius said sincerely.

Augusta motioned for him to sit and took the seat opposite, her eyes running over the two crests on his robe and the ring on his finger with sharp realisation. "May I offer you some refreshment, Lord Black?"

"Only if you wish to partake yourself." Sirius replied, following the formal dance of pleasantries.

Augusta rang a small silver bell and a house elf popped in. "Some tea and biscuits for myself and my guest." The elf disappeared and a moment later a tea tray appeared on the small table between them. For a few minutes all that was exchanged was how Sirius liked his tea.

"Forgive me for speaking plainly but I'm surprised at the ring." Augusta said as they settled back, each holding a matching china teacup. "There are rumours circulating of a new Lord Black but the general opinion is that it isn't you."
"A situation which suits me for the time being," Sirius admitted, "I'd like to have my ducks in a row before the formal announcement at Thursday's Wizengamot." He took a sip of his tea and set it aside. "I would appreciate your discretion until that time."

She inclined her head. "I find myself needing to clarify; are you here for the House of Potter or the House of Black?"

"I would like us to speak first regarding business between the House of Potter and House of Longbottom. But afterwards, I would appreciate the Regent of the House of Longbottom granting an audience to the Head of the House of Black."

"Granted." Augusta said tersely. "So, to business?"

"Lord Potter sends his regards to you and the Heir to the House of Longbottom. He has only recently become aware of his heritage and the alliance that used to exist between the Houses." Sirius said formally. "We seek a renewal of that alliance."

Augusta's pale eyes sparked with interest. "Well, that answers a number of questions. I suppose Dumbledore didn't tell the boy of his responsibilities?"

Sirius nodded. "In fairness, it wasn't his legal responsibility to do so although some could argue it would fall under his Chief Warlock duties." He said diplomatically. He held his tongue that one of the other Ancient and Noble families could have stepped in – such as the Longbottoms who'd had such a strong alliance with the Potters in the past.

"What agenda will the House of Potter assume under its new Lord?"

"Respect of wizarding culture and tradition," Sirius began, "but equality for all wizards and witches including those with a dual heritage or condition such as lycanthropy. He would seek better relationships with magical races, a common sense approach to the control of magical creatures, and an improved relationship with the muggle government."

"That sounds remarkably like Charlus Potter's old agenda." Augusta said slowly. "Just even more ambitious."

Sirius allowed himself a small smile. "Harry reminds me of Charlus. He's a remarkable young man."

"This is truly his agenda?" Augusta probed.

"He's had something of a crash course in politics but this is his agenda." Sirius confirmed. He'd been proud of Harry after their last lesson which had been to determine Harry's point of view on certain critical political points. Harry was very much an egalitarian with a strong sense of justice.

"Well, our agendas mesh although the devil is always in the detail." Augusta frowned. "I assume the equality statement is a rejection of pureblood supremacy but why equality for all wizards and witches? Why differentiate?"

"Harry feels witches should have equal rights with wizards. As it stands, most of the Wizengamot seats, the Ancient and Noble Houses in particular, all follow a patriarchal inheritance rule: the eldest male of the line inherits; females only inherit when there isn't a male candidate. Harry believes that it should be the eldest child thus witches would have equal rights to inherit." Sirius shifted. "Family magic will accept a female so there shouldn't be an issue."

Augusta gave a small smile. "I remember conversations with Dorea and Minerva in my youth where we said very much the same thing. This notion of dual heritage and conditions – what's that about?"
"Our steward Remus Lupin is infected with lycanthropy. Harry has seen the discrimination against
him and disagrees with it. From his perspective, Remus is still foremost a wizard and should receive
help to aid him in controlling the lycanthropy through Wolfsbane rather than being shunned."

"An interesting perspective and one Frank would have agreed with. I believe he knew Lupin.”
Augusta commented.

"Yes, through James." Sirius said. "We also talked a little about the discrimination against those
wizards and witches with Veela inheritance or giant or goblin in their family make-up. Harry sees
this as just another expression of the same pureblood supremacy bias against half-bloods and
muggleborns."

"I can’t disagree with that either." Augusta murmured. She tapped her fingers lightly against the arm
of her chair. "What of the rest of his agenda?"

"Harry believes that we should attempt better relationships with other magical races such as giants,
centaurs, house elves and goblins especially those races which interact with wizards on a regular
basis. But he recognises the need for good but caring control of dragons, hippogriffs and other
magical creatures. He believes the current administration often gets magical races and creatures
mixed up. He also believes that a better relationship with the muggle government would be beneficial
in upholding the Statute of Secrecy."

"For a crash course in politics, he's done well. His agenda dovetails with ours." Augusta said after a
long moment of consideration. "So, in principle the House of Longbottom will be happy to renew
our alliance. What are the terms?"

"Formally, the same terms as the Houses have pledged before; mutual aid and support for common
goals. I would appreciate your assistance in repairing the other Potter alliances that have been
allowed to go dormant since 'eighty-one." Sirius replied immediately, happy that he'd gotten to the 'in
principle' discussion so early. "Informally, Harry would like your permission to foster a closer
relationship with Neville – perhaps by having Neville join him for some of his lessons this summer?
Harry didn't realise until I was awarded guardianship that Alice was his godmother nor that James
and Lily were Neville's godparents."

"You know Albus Dumbledore has a lot to answer for with that young man." Augusta sighed.

"I couldn't agree with you more." Sirius said fervently.

Augusta regarded him thoughtfully. "Will the House of Potter not seek an alliance with the Chief
Warlock?"

"The House of Potter will stand for itself," Sirius stated unequivocally. "The last alliance was uneven
at best, and subjugated the House of Potter to Dumbledore's agenda at worst. I think some of that
was our youth; James was very loyal and used to Dumbledore being in a position of authority over
him as Headmaster and leader of the Order – we all were."

"Yes," Augusta agreed with a heavy sigh, "Frank was similarly affected."

"However, I'm aware that the Chief Warlock is mostly supportive of the House of Potter's agenda. I
won't in principle disregard a possible alliance approach if one is made, but as Regent I won't
approve an alliance without further oaths from the Chief Warlock that ensure the House of Potter's
independence."

Augusta considered him for a long enough moment that Sirius had to struggle not to fidget. "I can
see why Arcturus left you as his Heir. As much as I might have despised his agenda, his skill in navigating the political arena was immense; you seem to have inherited it."

The words took Sirius's breath away; he was unsure if he'd been complimented or insulted.

"The House of Longbottom finds your terms acceptable." She drew her wand and tapped the coffee table. A ritual bowl appeared with a small knife. She slashed her finger and let a couple of drops of blood fall. "I, Augusta Beatrice Longbottom, swear as Regent that the House of Longbottom renews its pledge of alliance to give mutual aid and support to the House of Potter. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Sirius took the knife she offered and allowed his blood to mingle with hers. "I, Sirius Orion Black, swear as Regent that the House of Potter renews its pledge of alliance to give mutual aid and support to the House of Longbottom. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

The bowl flashed; a gold griffin and bear appeared briefly before disappearing again.

Augusta gave a small sigh. "Well, that's done. I'll expect a schedule of lessons so I can select which Neville will attend."

"Agreed. As part of our formal agreement, there are things that I need to brief you on immediately." Sirius said, picking up his tea. He explained about Voldemort still being alive in some form, about the horcruxes in very vague terms, and finally, the events at Hogwarts with Peter's escape and the prophecy Harry had heard.

"What's the plan to deal with this?" Augusta said. There was anger in her eyes and a rush of red across her cheeks. She was furious.

"I'll be informing the authorities tomorrow – we're not really sure how much Dumbledore has shared with the DMLE and the DOM. Then we'll work with them to eliminate the things that keep Voldemort alive." Sirius paused. "We believe there may be another prophecy at work – one involving Harry and Voldemort."

Augusta winced. "There is." She sighed and looked every year of her age for a second. "Frank told me about it before they went into hiding. It could have been Neville, you see."

"We surmised as much." Sirius noted.

"The prophecy was given by Sybill Trelawney to Albus Dumbledore during her job interview, the year the boys were born." Augusta shared. "It spoke of a baby with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord, born as the seventh month died to parents who had thrice defied the Dark Lord. Frank said there was more to it but that was all I was told." She looked at him sharply. "I would venture that Albus believes it refers to your godson rather than my grandson as he once informed me that the danger to my family was over as though that were comfort for what happened to Frank and Alice."

Sirius held his tongue. He needed to cover the LeStranges when he spoke with Augusta as the Head of the House of Black.

Augusta frowned. "Well, at least, we know and have a plan." She settled back in her chair although her back was ramrod straight. "Thank you for this information."

"Thank you for sharing what you know of the prophecy." Sirius said. "It'll make it easier for Harry and I to track down in the DOM." He clasped his hands together. "My final piece of business on behalf of the House of Potter is to extend an invitation to yourself and the Heir to the House of Longbottom to attend Lord Potter's adoption into the House of Black the day after tomorrow."
Augusta's eyebrows rose in surprise. She pressed her lips together. "This seems like an opportune moment for us to move to the audience I granted you earlier, Lord Black."

Sirius nodded. "Yes." He took a deep breath. "My House has wronged yours. Bellatrix LeStrange is my cousin; Rodolphus is my cousin's husband. The House of Black has primacy in their marriage contract; their line falls under mine. I cannot take back what they did but I wish to offer restitution."

A muscle twitched along her jawline and her gaze turned steely. "And what would the House of Black offer as restitution to the House of Longbottom for the loss of its Lord and Lady, for the damage to its Heir?"

"On Wednesday, I will hold a family meeting. In absentia, I will name them all oathbreakers to the House of Black in their act of taking the Dark Mark and call upon the family magic to render Judgement. They will lose their magic." He stopped for a moment to let Augusta absorb his words.

"Judgement." Augusta repeated. "It's been a long while since I've seen family magic invoked in such a way."

"I will also dissolve the marriage contract between the House of Black and the House of LeStrange and seize the LeStrange vault in compensation. The heirlooms and artefacts will be retained but all else will be given over to the House of Longbottom to cover the healing expenses pertaining to Frank and Alice. Bella will then be cast out of the House of Black."

She gave a sharp nod of acknowledgement.

"I also propose to assume financial responsibility for the Heir of Longbottom's education. I will provide a scholarship vault to that end to cover the forthcoming years including a Mastery if Neville wishes to pursue one. The House of Longbottom will be reimbursed for the last three years." Sirius continued.

Augusta's lips thinned as she pressed them tightly together. "I accept the House of Black's restitution."

"As of this morning, the House of Black is formerly allied with the House of Potter." Sirius said quietly. He and Harry had exchanged oaths after Harry's inheritance ritual. "One day I hope that we will be able to ally with the House of Longbottom."

"One day," Augusta agreed, "but not today. We will, however, be honoured to attend the adoption in support of Lord Potter."

She got to her feet and Sirius knew the audience was over. He got to his feet and bowed.

"Our elf will show you back to the floo." Augusta said, holding out her hand as the elf popped in. "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for having me." Sirius returned, kissing her knuckles in farewell. He breathed a sigh of relief as Augusta swept from the room.

He followed the elf out and checked the time. He was right on schedule: it was almost time for dinner with the Grangers.

o-O-o

Hedwig barked as Harry banked sharply on his broom and surveyed the house and grounds again. His new home was great – warm and welcoming. It wasn't as formal Black Manor which was a
relief and he loved the sign with 'Pronglet' on the door of his bedroom; the photos on the mantelpiece of his Mum and Dad, the Marauders (without Peter) and a few snapshots of him, Sirius and Remus. Dobby had been a huge surprise, but so long as the elf wasn't actively trying to save Harry's life, he was a good elf, and he couldn't do enough for Harry.

It was odd though not having chores to do. But Sirius had indicated that once the week was over Harry would be getting culture and etiquette lessons to go along with the magical and political lessons he already did, and Sirius had made it clear that he expected Harry to start to perform duties associated with the House of Potter. So Harry would be going with Remus to follow-up on some of the Potter properties, and be actively involved with the scholarship set up in his mother's name. The good news was that Sirius hoped to offer the lessons where appropriate to some of Harry's friends so he wouldn't face it all alone. Harry had queried the ability to use magic as he was underage but Sirius had told him they'd apply for an exception on medical grounds, and besides, the Ministry would never trace magic performed under the Fidelius.

Hedwig flew around him and he wasn't surprised when he saw Reg join her. The resplendent black owl for the House of Black was rather taken with Hedwig who ignored him. Dobby had constructed an owlery next to Remus's attic room for the three owls in the house but Hedwig preferred her perch in Harry's room. Harry mused that it was useful having different owls for different purposes – Hooter was very non-descript – and he understood the need for secrecy.

He thought it was hilarious that Dumbledore was apparently in Thailand trying to track down Sirius. He would feel sorry for Dumbledore but he suspected that if his Headmaster knew where Harry was, he would try and send him back to the Dursleys. Sirius and Remus were determined that it wasn't going to happen.

Harry frowned as he pushed the broom into flight again. He was looking forward to seeing Hermione and Ron. He already missed Kimi and Huritt – he couldn't wait to tell Hermione and Ron about them – but he had to wait for normal time to catch up with the time he'd spent in the bubble before he could write to them.

A shout from below caught his attention and he looked down. He waved to Remus who had come out of the back door and was gesturing that his time was up. He ignored the faint tug of disappointment and dived to the ground; Hedwig and Reg following him.

Remus looked a little pale when Harry dismounted. "Do you have to dive so fast?"

"I dive faster during Quidditch." Harry pointed out.

"Don't remind me," Remus retorted, ruffling his hair as he nudged him inside, "I'm likely to have a heart attack watching one of your games."

Harry grinned at him. Remus and Sirius had told him of their plan to attend his matches and he couldn't help feel a warm glow that they would.

"Shower and change into muggle clothes. Don't forget you have dinner with the Grangers." Remus instructed.

"Thanks for organising it, Remus." Harry said sincerely. Remus had set up a lot of things in the week that he and Sirius had been gone in real time.

Remus smiled at him and pushed him in the direction of the narrow back stairs in the kitchen that led to the upper floors. Harry had to admit as he ran up them and entered his room that the time difference was still a little disconcerting. He and Sirius had been in the Valley for two months while
a week had passed for Remus. It was bizarre to think that the summer holiday was still only just nearly two weeks old with most of July and August still stretched out ahead of them.

Harry dumped his dirty clothing into the linen basket in the bathroom and climbed into the shower running it nice and hot. He loved his new room and he had his own bathroom! No sharing with the Dursleys! He luxuriated in the hot water, knowing he could spend the time under the spray and wouldn’t be chased out.

Well, not immediately. He was fairly certain Remus or Sirius, or worse Dobby, would yank him out if he was going to be late for dinner. The thought spurred him into action and he set about washing off the sweat and dirt from his flight.

Harry knew the next few days were going to be busy. Sirius had explained that they had a lot of political alliances to fix and protection to put in place before Dumbledore returned to chair the session of the Wizengamot where Sirius would take his place as Lord Black and Regent of the House of Potter. Harry considered that as he stopped the water and grabbed a warm fluffy towel to dry off. Part of their preparations had been Harry performing the Potter inheritance ritual that morning and allying formally with the House of Black. The ritual had been fascinating.

They'd gone to Gringotts early to avoid the crowds and been shown to a private room. The goblins had brought in the ritual bowl but Sirius insisted they use his knife. The cut across his palm had been momentarily painful but no big deal. The feel of his family magic though – that had been such a rush – and the gold griffin that had appeared had been majestic as it bowed to him. Sirius had explained that family magic was usually used to bind oaths and in extreme circumstances for Judgement. The oaths taken by Ancient and Noble Houses were governed by the family magic. Oaths in general, Sirius had informed him, were not worth very much; they were mainly another way of forming a verbal contract, and like most verbal contracts they were unenforceable in law. However, if someone took a ritual oath with an Ancient and Noble House they became subject to its family magic and if they broke oath, the magic could be called upon by the Head of the House to judge them. Unsurprisingly, most members of Ancient and Noble Houses took it as a matter of honour to uphold the oaths they made. Harry liked the idea of the oaths. He had felt proud making his own oath as Head of House and making the alliance with Sirius.

It had changed his view of the politics lessons a bit. He realised that he really did need to know about the kind of stuff Sirius had been teaching him. Moreover he wanted to be included in deciding who to ally with; what his House stood for. He'd been thrilled when Sirius had told him his agenda sounded very much like his grandfather's and he was looking forward to assuming some of his duties.

The scholarship sounded brilliant – something his Mum had wanted to give back to Hogwarts and he was excited at being involved in selecting who would get it. He was a little nervous about working with Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick on it but Remus had pointed out that both Professors had known Harry's parents well and might take the opportunity to tell him some stories. He'd wondered briefly out loud why they hadn't told him while he was at Hogwarts but Remus had explained that it was difficult because the Professors weren't supposed to have favourites or have personal relationships with their students. Remus had even had to promise Dumbledore not to tell Harry how friendly he had been with Harry's father.

Harry stopped in front of his wardrobe and sighed. He loved that Sirius and Remus had gone to so much trouble to buy him new wizarding and muggle clothes but the sheer volume and variety always threw him. He picked out an emerald t-shirt that he’d worn a lot in the States and a new pair of black denim jeans. He finished his outfit with a black and grey sweater jacket and black trainers. He
slipped his new pair of gold wire-framed glasses on his face and futilely tried to do something with his hair before he gave it up as a lost cause.

He picked up his journal and a book he'd bought Hermione at the airport as a present, and exited his room just in time to meet Sirius coming out of his. His godfather wore a white t-shirt over a pair of blue denim jeans and a smart black leather blazer. His dark hair was tied back in a ponytail with a no-nonsense black band. He carried a black leather satchel and he opened it up so Harry could pop the journal and present inside.

"Looking good." Sirius said, taking in Harry in one glance. "I've noticed you like that t-shirt." His grey eyes took on a hint of mischief. "It wouldn't have anything to do with Kimi telling you that it brought out the green in your eyes?"

Harry made a non-committal noise and refused to blush. "You said smart but casual, right?" And what was that – smart but casual? As though someone could base an outfit on such a vague description.

"Indeed I did." Sirius nudged him towards the stairs.

"How did it go today?" Harry asked eagerly.

"The House of Potter is once again allied with the House of Longbottom. They're attending the adoption." He made a small grimace, his face contorting for a moment into an unhappy frown. "She's accepted the restitution the House of Black has offered but won't consider an alliance right now."

"You expected that though." Harry pointed out.

"I did." Sirius said. "Elmer Samson sends his regards and appreciation of your thanks for his service as your former proxy."

Harry pulled a face at that. He'd understood the need for the nicety but he and Sirius had looked over Samson's record and been distinctly unimpressed. Samson had voted for a number of laws that Sirius had confirmed Harry's father and grandfather would never have supported including the werewolf laws that so discriminated against Remus. Harry took the last two stairs at a leap to avoid talking more about Samson.

Remus came out of the living room into the hallway just as Harry landed in the hallway. "No jumping." He chided him, and then sighed as he realised Sirius had copied Harry.

Harry hid his smile. "Are you sure you don't want to come, Remus? I'm sure Hermione wouldn't mind."

"Thank you, Harry, but I have other plans." Remus said with a smile. "Give Hermione my best though."

Harry grinned at him. Sirius pushed him towards the floo. They made their way to Black Manor before taking the floo to Hermione's house which had been connected just for the night. Harry stumbled out into a normal muggle house not unlike the one he'd been raised in but with an indefinable welcoming feel that Privet Drive lacked.

"Harry!" Harry just had enough time to stand properly before Hermione launched herself at him, hugging him hard. "It's so good to see you! I was so surprised when Professor Lupin wrote to my parents and asked if it would be OK for you and Sirius to come over. Have you been reading the Prophet? They've been talking about Sirius all of last week and this week and everyone's wondering when they're going to see you and Sirius and…"
"Breathe, Hermione!" Harry ordered, laughing.

She stumbled back and smiled at him. Her hair was its usual bushy self, a mass of brown that seemed bigger than her although he noticed absently that Hermione was growing more and more into it as time went on. She was just as cute as Kimi, Harry realised with surprise, as he took in her denim skirt and summery top – so much more flattering than the school robes.

"You look nice." Hermione said shyly and he belatedly realised that she had performed a review of him while he had been doing a review of her.

"You too." Harry said. He turned around just as Sirius stepped out.

Sirius smirked at Harry and waved his wand over him. Soot vanished from Harry and Hermione.
"We need to add floo lessons to your schedule."

"I can't wait till we learn how to apparate." Harry said. He looked at his godfather hopefully. "I don't suppose…"

"No, I am a responsible adult and you will be learning to apparate in your sixth year and not a moment before." Sirius said primly.

Hermione gave a quiet laugh beside Harry. "It's good to see you again, Mister Black."

"Sirius, please." Sirius replied, taking Hermione's outstretched hand and dropping a kiss on her knuckles. "Or Padfoot, if you'd prefer."

A throat being cleared by the door had them all turning to look at an older and amused looking version of Hermione.

"Mum," Hermione waved her hand at Harry and Sirius, "this is Harry and Sirius Black. This is my Mum."

"Hermione's Mum otherwise known as Miriam Granger." She crossed the room and stuck her hand out in a no-nonsense way that reminded Harry of Hermione herself.

"Mrs Granger." Harry followed Sirius's example with Hermione and kissed the back of her knuckles, surprising the older woman.

Sirius did the same. "Please call me Sirius."

"And I'm Miriam." Miriam's gaze raked over them both. "Well, it's good to have you both here. Come through. It's a nice day so Wallace thought any excuse for a barbeque." She led them through a narrow corridor and into a large family kitchen which opened up onto a wide patio and substantial garden.

There was another round of introductions. Sirius accepted a beer from a cool box to the side of where Wallace had set up the smoking grill, and Harry stuck with unsweetened lemonade on the picnic table which was also laden with summer salads. The drink was tart but refreshing and he'd learned his lesson about alcohol.

Miriam coaxed her husband away from the grill and they all adjourned to the table.

"I have to admit that I was a little surprised when we got the request for a meeting, Sirius." Miriam smiled at him warmly. "According to that magical newspaper Hermione gets, everyone thinks you're abroad?"
"Deliberate misdirection on the part of myself and my advisors." Sirius confirmed. He nudged Harry's shoulder with his own. "We wanted to make sure my getting custody of this one went off without a hitch. Unfortunately there are too many people out there who would have loved to have interfered since Harry is famous in the wizarding world, and after the events surrounding me..." he gave a shrug.

"Understandable." Wallace said. "And, congratulations."

"Thank you." Harry said, beaming at Sirius again.

"I believe you had something to talk to us about?" Miriam prompted. "Professor Lupin was quite vague but he mentioned something about a life debt? Hermione has already done some research and she tells us that they're quite important in the wizarding world."

Harry was unsurprised. He turned to Hermione. "So what did you find out?"

"Well, just what Mum said really." Hermione admitted with some chagrin. "There wasn't a great deal of information in the books I have and I haven't had time to get to Diagon Alley to find something more relevant."

"Maybe I should explain more?" Sirius offered easily.

Everyone nodded and Harry was amused to realise that all three Grangers had identical looks of fascination, curiosity and anticipation. Hermione was almost vibrating in her seat opposite him.

"Historically, life debts had much more importance than they do now." Sirius began. "It used to be that if one wizard saved the life of another that the rescued wizard would have to remain beside their rescuer until they had returned the favour. That went out of fashion around the time the Ancient and Noble Houses were formed."

Harry shifted, a tad bored because he'd heard it before.

"It then became a matter of honour for the Houses." Sirius explained. "If a member of one House saved the member of another, it created a political debt between them that could only be satisfied with an alliance or an exchange of money or property of some sort – usually negotiated dependent on the relative value of the person saved. If you saved the youngest daughter, for instance, that would be viewed differently than saving the Heir to the House or the Head of House. The former might be offered in marriage, for instance, but the latter might determine a House alliance."

"It all sounds very Victorian or do I mean Edwardian?" Miriam commented. "Austen-ish anyway."

Sirius smiled at her. "If you mean old-fashioned, you'd be right. It is even for the wizarding world."

"What about if you weren't from a House?" Hermione jumped in enthusiastically. "What happens then?"

"Ah, well. If a member of a House saved the life of an ordinary wizard or witch then the ordinary wizard or witch would become beholden to them to a degree and would pay off the debt by working on the estates of the House or performing other services for the House." Sirius said. "Equally, if it was the other way around, the House became responsible for the ordinary wizard or witch and would ensure employment and safety – they gained the protection and sanctuary of a House."

"Is it a magical bond?" Hermione immediately moved to her next question.

"No," Sirius laughed, "magical bonds of any kind are very rare and the most common are between
wizards, or witches, and their familiars. There are twin bonds but beyond that – no. An oath might be taken as part of the life debt payment." He motioned with his beer bottle. "Equally if an oath was already in existence, incurring a life debt may make the person involved more inclined to keep that oath. But as I've said to Harry, only oaths to Ancient and Noble Houses can be enforced through magic – and that's usually a Judgement after the oath has already been broken. Oaths in general are nothing more than verbal contracts."

All three Grangers went to ask a question and all stopped abruptly and looked at each other to decide which was going to get the chance to ask their question.

Sirius and Harry exchanged smiles at the silent Granger communication going on in front of them.

Both parents looked at their daughter expectantly and Hermione sat back with a quiet huff as she acknowledged she'd already had the opportunity to ask two questions. Wallace waved a hand at his wife.

Miriam smiled. "You said this was the fashion but no longer?"

"Life debts aren't usually acknowledged these days and if they are, usually at the insistence of the older generation, then it's a token gesture – a favour or money." Sirius said. "However, the Houses follow the tradition between themselves as it's a matter of honour."

"Now my question," Wallace said, raising his own beer, "what does a life debt have to do with Hermione?"

"Your daughter, along with Harry, saved my life." Sirius answered simply.

Miriam and Wallace glanced at their daughter who was turning cherry red under the attention.

"I assume because she gave evidence to aid your acquittal?" Miriam asked perplexed.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at Hermione in a silent question of 'have you told them?' and received a brief shake of a head in response. Harry threw her an apologetic look – they hadn't meant to get her in trouble.

"On the night I was captured at Hogwarts," Sirius said firmly, "the Headmaster gave Hermione and Harry permission to help me escape. They used a magical device to help get them to the right place, found transportation for me and got me out of the office where I was locked up. If it hadn't been for them I would have forfeited my soul to a Dementor."

"And why is this the first we're hearing about it if you had the Headmaster's permission?" asked Wallace, staring pointedly at his daughter.

"The device," Harry jumped in, "the magical device we used – Hermione wasn't supposed to tell anyone else about it. Sirius and I only got told because of the Headmaster's permission to use it."

Hermione shot him a grateful look and nodded at her parents. "And I didn't want to worry you." She admitted honestly. "I mean, this year has been relatively quiet and normal really compared to first and second year and..."

"Hermione," Miriam interrupted sternly.

Hermione grimaced, her eyes downcast. "Sorry, Mum."

"We're not angry with you," Miriam cast a look at Harry and Sirius, and Harry got the distinct
impression that she regretted the conversation was taking place in front of them, "but I am disappointed that you felt you couldn't tell us not even in general terms."

"I feel I should apologise," Sirius began.

"Please don't," Wallace said immediately, "I dare say Hermione's reticence is in part our fault as we may have indicated to her that we weren't happy with the amount of danger this school of hers seems to place her in every year. Did you know somebody let a troll into the school in her first year which almost killed her? And then she was in a magical coma the year after?" He huffed out a breath at Hermione's dejected face. "We discussed not sending her back for her third year which is why I think someone was reluctant to tell us what happened."

Harry was alarmed at that. Hermione had almost been withdrawn? And what now that they knew she'd been in danger again? "It's all my fault." He blurted out.

"Nonsense," Miriam said briskly, "from what Hermione said, you saved her from the troll and were playing your broomstick sport when Hermione ended up in the coma. You're a young boy, Harry; it's not your fault these events took place. You've been a good friend to Hermione and you are one of the reasons why we decided to let her continue at Hogwarts."

"Uh, well, she's been a good friend to me too." Harry said, a little taken aback at the heartfelt praise. He felt Sirius's hand on his shoulder and settled again.

"I tell you whose fault it is," Wallace added, "that Headmaster of yours. What is he thinking allowing a troll and things that cause comas to get inside a school with children? And, you'll forgive me, Sirius?"

Sirius nodded enthusiastically.

"But what was he playing at sending two kids to rescue you? Why couldn't he have done it?"

"An excellent question." Sirius agreed fervently.

"The Headmaster is a great wizard and a..." Hermione defended Dumbledore passionately and Harry knew that before his time at the clinic with Sirius, he might have been eagerly waiting for his turn to do the same.

"And a senile old man by the sound of it." Wallace interjected, cutting off his daughter's words.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Miriam said, "but I agree with your father. If I ever meet this Headmaster of yours believe me I will have more than a few questions for him."

"I feel exactly the same way." Sirius said.

There was a moment between the adults that had Hermione and Harry doing a mutual eye-roll while their guardians' gazes were occupied elsewhere.

Miriam cleared her throat and turned to her daughter. "That said, we're very proud of you, Hermione, for helping to save Sirius's life and see justice get done."

"Very proud." Wallace repeated gruffly.

Hermione's eyes shone brightly and her mother gave a one-armed hug, squeezing her tightly until the threat of tears went away. Harry fidgeted awkwardly with his glass of lemonade unsure what to do.
"So," said Wallace brightly, "you owe Hermione a life debt?"

"Yes," Sirius said, enthusiastically returning to the original subject, "and I would like to honour it."

Miriam and Wallace exchanged another wry look.

"Honour it how exactly?" Miriam asked briskly. Her arm remained around her daughter. Her eyes twinkled suddenly. "If you'd like to offer Harry as a potential bridegroom I'd have no problems with that."

"Mum!" Hermione yelped, going a bright red.

Harry figured his own cheeks were a similar colour from the heat he could feel. He didn't even look at Sirius because he knew Sirius would just tease him if he did. In some ways, he knew it was a compliment but in others – it was mortifying. Hermione was his friend and it wasn't that he didn't realise she was a girl, it was just…she was his friend and why would she be interested in him, he concluded with a fair amount of confusion.

"I would offer him," Sirius began mischievously.

Harry glared at him.

"But Harry will have to choose his own wife." Sirius winked at him. "His Dad did a fair job with his Mum so I think he'll choose wisely. Of course, his Dad also chose the smartest witch of his generation."

There was a ripple of chuckles around the table from Miriam and Wallace at the unsubtle implication that Sirius would be quite happy if Harry did choose Hermione, and Harry smiled apologetically, mouthing a 'sorry' at her. She returned his smile with a shy one of her own.

"Are marriage contracts usual in the wizarding world?" Miriam asked.

"Betrothal contracts are not used anymore, and there was a ruling that effectively declared any old outstanding ones to be null and void just after the war with Grindelwald. Match-making still happens to a degree where families may agree an introduction and an intended arrangement. However, contracts to protect assets and agree terms especially for Ancient and Noble Houses are usual." Sirius said. "Remus tells me that there's something similar in the muggle world?"

"Pre-nuptial agreements." Miriam supplied. "They're only usually done by the very rich though."

"Well, if we can't get Hermione married off," Wallace said, with a smirk in Hermione's direction, "what are you proposing exactly?"

"I'd like to offer her the sponsorship of the House of Black." Sirius said. "There are three reasons. Firstly, because you don't have magic, you're quite restricted in what you can do as parents to protect her in the wizarding world, either physically or legally. In fact under our legal system, you have very few rights. Sponsorship by an Ancient and Noble House means that Hermione would get the same protection as any daughter of my house. While Hermione is at school, it means that the House of Black could act in loco parentis. If Hermione ended up in the hospital wing for an extended period of time, I or my steward could visit and provide a conduit for news."

The Grangers exchanged a look of surprised pleasure.

"We can see the benefits of that," Wallace said, "especially after Hermione's second year."
Miriam nodded. "It was torture getting an owl from Professor McGonagall to say that Hermione was in the infirmary but not be able to see how she was." She patted her daughter's hand. "That's why we seriously considered removing you, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry." Hermione said sadly. "I can't even imagine. It must have been awful."

"Well, sponsorship would help going forward." Sirius said before they all got side-tracked again. "Secondly, I would assume financial responsibility for Hermione's education." He brushed aside their first murmurs of protest. "Don't worry, I'm very rich."

Hermione's parents exchanged a silent look.

"I can't say we wouldn't appreciate the financial boon of not having to pay for the tuition." Miriam said. "We can afford it but there's always something else we could use the money for – holidays or I've been wanting to remodel the kitchen, and then there's always the attic conversion we've been thinking of doing or buying a place in France…"

"The third reason?" said Wallace loudly.

Sirius coughed to hide a chuckle. "It will open up opportunities for Hermione after Hogwarts. A lot of muggleborns find it difficult to secure high paid employment in the wizarding world. It's difficult for them. Magical schooling separates them from the muggle world so they can't go back easily and yet the innate prejudices of the wizarding world mean that they face an uphill battle if they want a career in the top-flight: the Ministry or St Mungo's or apprenticing to some of the Masters of our world."

The Grangers were frowning.

"Remus says it's similar to the muggle world where the government for a time only took people from Oxford and Thingymebridge?" Sirius offered a little uncertainly.

"Or even getting into Oxford and Cambridge to begin with," Hermione suggested sagely. She brushed her fringe out of her eyes. "I knew we'd have to choose electives for third year so I started researching career options at the end of second year. I read some of the alumni records that are available in the library and realised the problem then. It's one of the reasons why I took everything I could."

"Why didn't you say something?" Harry blurted out, a little upset to realise that it was something that had evidently bothered his friend enough to send her to the library but he hadn't known.

"Well it was the end of the year, and it's not something that either you or Ron have to worry about, really." Hermione replied, blushing again.

"I take it sponsorship will help Hermione attain the career she wants?" Wallace asked.

Sirius nodded. "It'll open doors and people won't dismiss her out of hand."

"But isn't it cheating?" Hermione asked worriedly. "I mean, I would prefer to get something on my own merits."

"And you will," Sirius said firmly, "nobody will offer you anything just because you have sponsorship. It's a bit like having Hogwarts as your school. It gives you an advantage but you'll still have to do the hard work to obtain good grades and the extracurricular stuff that will help you."

"So we've heard about the benefits of scholarship, what is actually involved?" Miriam asked.
"An oath." Sirius replied promptly. He set his beer down and reached into his satchel, pulling out a sheaf of parchments Remus had prepared. "The full details are in there. Primarily we do a ritual where the sponsor puts a drop of blood into a bowl and Hermione puts a drop of hers, and they each swear an oath; one to do the sponsoring and Hermione to accept."

Miriam took the parchments before Hermione could make a grab for them. "We'll read these over carefully."

"I should also tell you that it's not appropriate for me to be Hermione's sponsor as I'm a single male," Sirius said. "I'll be asking my cousin Andromeda to take the role. She's married to a muggleborn wizard called Ted and they have a daughter who has just left Hogwarts to start at the Auror academy. If you agree I would like you to meet her ahead of the ritual. If there are any issues, we'll work something else out but Andy's a great witch and I don't think you'll have any problems with her." He paused. "There is a small problem with timing as we have an additional favour to ask of you."

"For me, really." Harry inserted quickly.

"Anything," Hermione said immediately and promptly blushed at the arching eyebrows of her mother.

"Sirius is going to adopt me the day after tomorrow," Harry told her proudly.

Hermione bounced out of her chair, around the table and hugged him. She let go of him and beamed at Sirius and at Harry. "That's wonderful! Oh, I'm so pleased for you, Harry."

"Yes, congratulations again." Miriam said, watching Hermione carefully.

Sirius picked up his beer and ruffled Harry's hair. "Thank you. We were hoping to do all the rituals on the same day and combine it with a blessing ritual of the protection Harry's mother gave him before she died."

"That's a very good idea," Hermione agreed, darting another anxious look towards her parents.

Harry assumed she hadn't exactly told them about Voldemort either. He couldn't blame her.

"How will it work?" Hermione asked enthusiastically seating herself next to Harry and almost leaning over him to look at Sirius.

Harry inched back a little.

Sirius smirked at him. "Well, the ritual is runic based. Each female member of the House of Black will prick their finger and draw a specific protection rune on Harry's forehead renewing the blessing of his mother."

"So if I take the sponsorship ritual, I'll be a daughter of the House and could take part?" Hermione surmised quickly.

"Yes," Sirius held up his hand, "but only if your parents agree. After some research, we realised the protection spell will eventually erode if Harry doesn't live periodically with his aunt. As that's not going to happen going forward, we think this ritual will acknowledge the adoption and mean Harry will only have to live with a member of the Black family."

"That's so clever." Hermione looked admiringly at Sirius.
"It was Remus's idea." Harry said. His former Professor had put a lot of work into researching the spells and understanding their complexity.

Sirius coughed. "Yes, it was." He waved towards the parchment. "Remus thought you would appreciate the details." He returned his gaze to Miriam and Wallace. "If you consent to the sponsorship before Wednesday, then it would be great to have Hermione involved as she out of all the female members of the House will be the only one to actually have an actual existing relationship with Harry and that will strengthen the spell. But if you would like more time to make a decision, we'll understand and can still do the sponsorship ritual another time."

"We'll look over the information." Miriam promised.

"I'll send Hedwig tomorrow." Harry promised. "She'll have your formal invite to the adoption ceremony."

"You can let us know by reply." Sirius added.

"Good." Wallace stated. He motioned towards the grill. "Well, if that's the business over and done with, we should throw the meat on."

Sirius perked up and followed Wallace over to the smoking apparatus.

Miriam rolled her eyes at the men before she gathered up the parchment and got to her feet. "I have some finishing touches to put on dessert."

Hermione made a move to join her but was waved back into her seat.

"Stay and keep your friend company, Hermione." Miriam winked at them both and departed.

Hermione offered Harry another shy smile. "Sorry about all…that before. They've been teasing me all Summer about whether I'll get a boyfriend next year just because I was complaining about Parvati and Lavender going on about dates in Hogsmeade."

Harry frowned. He hadn't thought about Hermione dating anyone. The thought disturbed him and he wasn't sure why. Maybe he was just worried she'd stop being his friend, Harry mused, which was silly because Hermione wouldn't drop him for a boyfriend any more than he would drop her if he got a girlfriend.

He truly hadn't thought about dating and girls himself beyond noticing sometimes that some of his classmates were getting pretty and cute – like he'd done with Hermione when he'd arrived or with Kimi at the clinic. He'd ignored Dean and Seamus when they'd mentioned girls they fancied and Ron had never brought up the topic. But then Harry had never really taken part in the boyfriend-girlfriend stuff before. In primary school when his classmates had been playing at it more than anything, nobody had approached him because of Dudley – and Dudley had been kicked in the privates the one and only time he'd tried to play kiss-chase with a girl (it was one of Harry's favourite memories).

He'd actually been pleased when he'd started Hogwarts that boyfriend and girlfriend stuff didn't seem to be a thing in the wizarding world – possibly because it was slightly old-fashioned compared to the muggle world. He guessed he was going to have to think about it more in the coming year. It was fairly common knowledge around the school that most people started dating in fourth year. A few of the third years had already begun because Hogsmeade provided a date venue – he hadn't totally escaped the gossip that filled the Gryffindor common room or the whispers in the classrooms.

Great, he thought morosely; how was he supposed to go about dating girls?
Hermione patted his hand, obviously reading his expression correctly. "Don't worry about it, Harry." She smiled at him. "I wouldn't be surprised if there was a queue of girls lined up when you are ready to ask someone."

"Really?" Harry looked at her doubtfully. "Who would want to date me?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Only most of the girls in our year, and probably a lot in the others too. You're considered quite the catch and I can imagine the publicity from the summer is going to just increase your fanciability."

"Is that even a word?" Harry teased before he grimaced again. "Anyway, from what you're saying, most of the girls want to go out with the Boy Who Lived, not me."

He could see Hermione open her mouth to protest but she closed it again abruptly.

"I guess you might be right about that." She admitted softly. "But as someone who knows you you, I think they'll be happy once they get to know you, and if you don't date them, how are they going to get to know, you know, you?"

"Maybe." Harry said uncertain she was right. "I was thinking it might be good to make some new friends next year. You and Ron are great and my best friends and that's not going to change," he hastened to assure her, "but it just occurred to me that I don't have a lot of other friends."

"You probably have more than me. What about the Quidditch team," Hermione said, "and Neville, Dean and Seamus?"

"The Quidditch team are great and Fred and George, maybe, are friends, but Oliver was, well, Oliver; the girls are older than me." Harry said. "As for the guys in my dorm...I guess I'm about as close to Dean and Seamus as you are to Parvati and Lavender. We're mates but not friends."

Hermione nodded in acknowledgement.

"Neville..." Harry smiled, "I'm hoping to get to know Neville better this summer. He's going to join me for some lessons. Our mothers were best friends at school. His Mum was my godmother and my Mum was his."

"Oh, wow." Hermione said. Her eyes narrowed. "What lessons are you doing?"

Harry brightened and gave her the headlines; wizarding etiquette and culture, politics and estate management, runes and magic.

"But what about the underage..."

"Medical exception." Harry grimaced. "Sirius got custody of me the night before they announced his being innocent. We've been away at a healing clinic this past week."

He explained the time bubble at the clinic, and his treatment and power issues. He picked up Sirius's bag and took out the journal and the wrapped present.

"Because of the amount of time we were there, one of the healers suggested I write to you and Ron in a kind of journal as though I was sending you letters. I put all my politics lessons in there too since I figured you'd want to know about it." He handed her the journal and the gift. "I picked the present up at the airport. It's a book on American magic thought you might like it but it's OK if you don't."

"Harry!" Hermione said delighted. "Thank you! You didn't need to get me anything! The journal
would have been enough." She was already holding onto it tightly. Her front teeth sank into her lower lip. "Do you think Sirius will let me join you and Neville for your lessons?"

Harry nodded. "If your parents are OK with it." He glanced toward Wallace and Sirius to make sure they were engaged in a discussion and lowered his voice. "I take it you didn't tell them everything about Voldemort and what happened with the stone?"

Hermione nodded. "They kind of freaked out at Christmas about the troll so…no." She sighed. "I doubt I would have told them about the basilisk but obviously they found out from the school I was petrified and I pretended it was no big deal so they wouldn't worry." She made an unhappy face. "I had no idea it was so bad for them."

He moved to put his hand over her arm. "You couldn't have known and if it helps any, Sirius freaked out about everything when he found out too."

There was a shared moment of solidarity between them.

"Well, that helps explain why he said what he did about the Headmaster." Hermione noted with a hint of disapproval. "I thought he'd be more grateful to him…"

"Hermione, your parents were right." Harry interrupted fiercely. "Dumbledore could have saved him himself. He's Chief Warlock – he could have placed Sirius in his protective custody and overruled Fudge but he didn't!"

Hermione's mouth opened and closed again. Her shock was written all over her face. "But surely…" she searched Harry's eyes for something, anything to explain it, "but why didn't he then?"

"Me." Harry said succinctly. He took a breath to keep his temper under control. "Dumbledore was the one who left me with the Dursleys, Hermione. We think he was trying to make sure I went back there and didn't have somewhere else to go."

"But that's awful!" Hermione exclaimed. "How could he leave you with those terrible people and…oh, this is just too much!"

"Sirius thinks it has to do with this spell that my Mum did and some wards she put up at my aunt's." Harry admitted. "He thinks Dumbledore was trying to protect me."

She looked furious for a second before her face froze into mute horror.

"What?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed heavily and leaned closer to him, lowering her voice. "You don't think…he was Chief Warlock when Sirius was imprisoned and he should have made sure Sirius got a trial. Do you…"

Harry was already shaking his head. "Sirius doesn't think it was deliberate. He says Dumbledore should have checked but that he's pretty sure from the conversation they had in the office when Sirius was captured that Dumbledore honestly thought he was guilty." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Dumbledore's in Thailand and by the time he gets back I'll be adopted and he won't have a say in it anymore."

"It's just so…unbelievable! He's always seemed so…good and kind and great." Hermione said miserably. "He's Albus Dumbledore! He's not supposed…"

"To make mistakes?" Harry said quietly. "Sirius says nobody is perfect."
"I guess not." Hermione said with a huff. She sighed and changed the subject. "Ron sent a letter with Errol. He's invited us to the Quidditch World Cup. My Mum and Dad are thinking about that too although I'm not really sure I want to go. Have you talked with him yet?"

Harry shook his head. "We've only been back a couple of days and we've been settling into our new house. We're supposed to be seeing them tomorrow evening to give them an invite to the adoption – Ron and his parents, I mean."

She bit her lip again. "You're not inviting Ginny?"

Her question took him aback. He hadn't really had much contact with Ginny over the past year although they'd exchanged small talk in the common room and sat together occasionally at meals. He'd tried to pay her some attention since the previous year had been so horrible for her but he felt awkward around her. He still half-expected her to fall into her butter dish if he was honest. "If I invite Ginny then I have to invite Fred and George, and…I don't really have an issue with it but Sirius wanted to keep it small."

"Would it be so bad?" Hermione asked. "It's just…Ginny and I chatted a bit at the end of the year and she wants to get to know you better. If we want to make more friends like you were saying before – and I actually think that's a good suggestion – we should try and get to know more people. Ginny might be a good place to start."

Harry sighed and confessed the real reason. "Yeah, but I think Ginny has a…"

"Crush on you?" Hermione nodded. "Of course she does."

"Then why…"

"Because, Harry, she wants to get past it and become your friend." Hermione said. "I know it's awkward but the Boy Who Lived was her childhood hero and you saved her life so of course she has a massive crush on you. It's quite a lot for her to get past."

"I helped save your life and you didn't get a crush on me." Harry pointed out, proud of his logic. Hermione blushed and looked a tad guilty; Harry stared at her speechless as he realised the implication.

"Look, that was me. Obviously I was mature enough not to get a crush on you." Hermione's cheeks reddened even more as she blatantly lied and she made a hand wave as though to dismiss the entire thing. "Ginny…I think all she really wants is a chance to get past her crush and get to know you."

"I'm not promising anything," Harry said deciding they should drop the subject quickly rather than dwell on the fact that Hermione had once had a crush on him, "but I'll talk with Sirius about inviting all the Weasleys."

Hermione smiled at him brightly. "Thank you, Harry." She frowned suddenly. "You know I owe you a life debt for the troll – and Merlin! I owe Ron too!"

"I don't think so," Harry said, "from what Sirius told me you can't owe someone a life debt if they were responsible for placing you in danger in the first place and Ron was the reason why you were in the bathroom." He waved his hand. "As for me, if you ever did owe me anything, you've saved my life since, and besides…saving Sirius paid it back tenfold, Hermione."

Her eyes took on a mischievous glint. "I tell you what; just to make sure there are no debts between us, I'll run interference for you if Ginny gets too crushy."
"That isn't funny!" Harry exclaimed hotly, although he wasn't truly mad at her teasing.

"It's a little funny," Hermione retorted, "and besides you should be happy someone likes you." Her face fell. "I don't think I'm going to have a queue of boys lining up to ask me to Hogsmeade."

Harry felt the same disturbed lurch in his belly as he had earlier but his need to reassure her trounced it. Unfortunately he had no idea how to reassure her and settled for squeezing her arm absently. She smiled at him in appreciation though so maybe it had been the right thing to do.

The sound of a throat being cleared at the head of the table had them both looking up sharply.

Sirius smirked at Harry. His gaze fell pointedly to where Harry was still holding onto Hermione's arm. Harry blushed bright red and let go.

"Your Dad wanted your help," Sirius told Hermione.

She sighed and headed over to the grill. Sirius sat down and grinned at Harry.

"Don't," Harry warned him briskly, "or I'll tell Remus about the time Healer Fay was over when we were swimming and you lost your…"

"We swore we would never speak of that," Sirius reminded him quickly.

He stared at his godfather.

"Fine, no teasing about how cosy you and Hermione were looking," Sirius promised in a grumbling tone.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and sat up straighter as Hermione returned with a plate of piled high with burgers, steaks and chops.

"I hope you're hungry," Miriam said with a laugh as she and Wallace rejoined them.

The topic of conversation turned to questions over how comfortable Sirius seemed in the muggle world and Harry sat back, content to listen to tales of how his Mum had made sure the Marauders could handle muggle things. He glanced at Hermione and felt his stomach flip-flop again. He was hungry, Harry thought determinedly; that was probably all it was.
Building Team Pronglet:2

Sirius paced nervously in the reception room. There was a lot riding on the outcome of the meetings he was about to hold. If things didn't work out as he and Remus hoped…

They would deal with it, Sirius thought briskly. There was always the Obliviate spell.

He heard the approaching cheery voice of Penelope and move hastily smoothed his formal robes as she and Remus entered.

Penelope smiled at him brightly. "Very smart, Lord Black."

"How many times do I have to tell you; it's Sirius." He complained at her good-naturedly.

"Not during working hours." Penelope reprimanded him as she brushed imaginary lint from his shoulders. "You have an image to convey."

Remus smirked at him and handed him a black canvas bag. "Here's the pensieve and the memories." He patted his arm. "You'll be fine, Padfoot. It's only Fudge."

"Right," Sirius said, "and whose idea was that that I should be the one to tell him and not Brian as we originally agreed?"

"Brian's." Penelope and Remus chorused together.

Sirius glared at the two of them.

"Look, I think Brian's right; Fudge will probably take the news of you being Lord Black better if you tell him yourself." Remus said. "According to Brian, he's all agog at the request of a one-to-one meeting with you on the subject of Lord Black ahead of the Lord Black meet-and-greet session later this afternoon with Directors Bones and Croaker here at the Manor. You'll be fine."

"If I get thrown back into Azkaban, I'm blaming you." Sirius stated dryly.

Penelope cleared her throat. "You should get going, Lord Black. You don't want to be late; the Minister is expecting you."

Sirius turned to Remus and opened his mouth…

"Yes, I'll go back to Griffin House and check on Harry later. I'm sure he and Minerva are getting along fine though." Remus ushered him towards the floo.

Sirius harrumphed, took a deep breath and tossed some power into the fire. "Minister's Office!"

He stepped out into Fudge's private domain and straightened immediately, staring at the two Aurors flanking the Minister with suspicion.

Fudge immediately got a clue about Sirius's discomfort and gestured back at the Aurors. "Oh, they're here just a precaution in case someone else stepped out."

Sirius moderated his tone to something vaguely diplomatic. "If the Aurors would like to check me for glamours or polyjuice they're certainly welcome to do so, Minister."

Fudge waved the Aurors forward. "Shacklebolt! Dawlish!"
"Apologies, Mister Black." Shacklebolt said formally. "We won't be more than a moment." He lifted his wand and did an intricate gesture to start the identification spell that Sirius knew well; it was mandatory Auror training – as was Dawlish's position. He'd stayed back to cover Shacklebolt.

Dawlish he knew from his Auror days; a miserable git who Sirius had half-suspected of being a Death Eater. Shacklebolt…Shacklebolt…

"Kingsley Shacklebolt?" Sirius asked. "I seem to remember you were at the academy after I completed my Hit Wizard training."

"That's right, Mister Black." Kingsley smiled at him politely. "You held most of the records we were trying to beat." He turned to the Minister. "He is Sirius Black, Minister."

"May we ask what's in the bag?" Dawlish asked roughly before his partner could ask for them to be dismissed.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "A present for the Minister for his sterling effort to uphold justice."

Fudge broke into another pleased smile and almost clapped his hands together in delight. He made a wavy hand gesture at the Aurors. "Please leave us, gentlemen."

The Aurors left – Dawlish with obvious reluctance.

"Sirius! May I call you Sirius? You must call me Cornelius." Fudge charged forward as soon as the office door closed behind the Aurors and held out his pudgy hand. "Welcome to the Ministry."

Sirius shook hands. "Sirius is fine, Minister." He requested permission to raise a privacy bubble and Fudge – Cornelius smiled ruefully. "Brian does the same thing." Cornelius said amused as he indicated for Sirius to go ahead. "This is the safest office in Britain!"

"I'm afraid I attended the Alastor Moody School of Constant Vigilance, Minister." Sirius said. He waved his great-grandfather's wand around and nodded happily when the privacy spell took and the office was secured.

"You've probably guessed the reason for this meeting already, Cornelius, so I won't keep you in suspense," Sirius began as he placed the canvas bag on the Minister's desk, "Brian said he suspected you'd worked it out when he mentioned how quickly I was able to respond to the query about custody when he had initially written to Lord Black."

"Well, I…" Cornelius looked fairly bemused as he took his seat.

"Obviously you realised then that I was and, indeed, am Lord Black." Sirius announced briskly, ignoring blithely the different shades of red that Cornelius was turning. He mentally took away the concealment spell on his ring and waggled it at the Minister. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate your discretion in keeping my secret to date and supporting my guardianship of Harry. I am in your debt." He pulled out the brand new pensieve from the bag and set it down in front of Cornelius. "I hope you accept this as a small token of my thanks and appreciation."

Cornelius's eyes dropped to the magical artefact and gasped.

"It's top of the line; newest model." Sirius stated as he took a seat. "As you know many countries have provided pensieves for their Ministers for years and it's criminal that the Wizengamot hasn't authorised budget for you to have one yet."
"Criminal, yes." Cornelius touched it reverently. "I can't tell you how envious the American Ambassador is going to be the next time he comes round. This is much better than the one in his office." He sat back suddenly and gazed at Sirius.

This was the pivotal moment, Sirius mused. Cornelius knew that Sirius probably knew that Cornelius hadn't guessed at all but Cornelius had two choices; to throw his toys out of the pram or to graciously allow them both to pretend that he had guessed, save face and continue to develop a relationship with Lord Black. Sirius also knew that Cornelius had to be considering the fact that not only was Sirius Lord Black but he was also the Potter Regent – his eyes had already skated over the crests on his robes twice.

Cornelius cleared his throat. "I have to confess that while I did suspect as Brian surmised, I didn't actually know for certain that you were Lord Black, uh, Lord Black."

"I thought we agreed it was Sirius." Sirius said smoothly. He was surprised at Cornelius's admission but it was a good ploy – a half-truth but not an all-out lie; something that allowed Cornelius to save face, but acknowledged the truth at the same time.

Cornelius smiled widely at him. "Sirius it is."

"My new assistant calls me Lord Black and I keep looking for my grandfather." Sirius joked, trying to remember all the lessons at political glad-handing that his father and mother had literally beaten into him.

"I remember when my parents found a tutor for me before Hogwarts and Professor Lichen called me Mister Fudge for the first time. I thought he was referring to my father and wouldn't answer him." Cornelius replied with good humour. "I received a fair few raps on the knuckles for that."

"Harry finds being Lord Potter quite strange but then nobody has ever told him about his House responsibilities until this Summer."

"Oh?" Cornelius frowned. "I mean, I'm not surprised at the muggles because what would they know about it but surely Albus…"

Sirius shook his head. "I'm afraid not." He didn't have to pretend the heavy grimace that he made. "Harry has been left entirely too uninformed about his place in our world, not just the Boy Who Lived nonsense, but the House of Potter, his family, his heritage..." he sighed, "I've been told that his teachers were made to promise not to tell him about his mother and father."

"That is terrible." Cornelius commiserated. "I've had concerns about how Albus has been handling things at Hogwarts for a number of years now, but his hold on the school is absolute."

"Speaking of concerns," Sirius said, turning the conversation to what he was really there for, "I did have an ulterior motive for getting you the pensieve." He reached back into the canvas bag and extracted three vials filled with silvery fluid. "With your permission, I'd like to show you some copies of Harry's memories from his time at Hogwarts. I'm not certain how much you know already – how much information Albus has shared – but I believe it's important for you to see them. However, I must have an oath that you will keep this information confidential."

Cornelius nodded slowly. "I'm intrigued so I'll agree." He picked up his wand. "I, Cornelius Ambrose Fudge, swear to the House of Black to keep the contents of this meeting confidential." There was a flash of light from the tip of his wand and Sirius was satisfied.

He motioned for Sirius to fill the pensieve and they dived into the basin. The memory begun with
Harry and his friends approaching the Cerberus and went from there.

"What is this exactly?" Cornelius asked a tad impatiently. "Some kind of student obstacle course for their first year DADA exam? I can understand your concern; the dog is a bit much."

"I'm afraid it's nothing as benign as an obstacle course," Sirius replied, "this is a set of traps created by the Hogwarts Professors to protect Flamel's Philosopher's stone, or at least that's what they're supposed to be protecting. Somebody has already gotten past them and Harry and his friends are trying to stop the potential thief." He pointed Cornelius back at the action.

They watched silently for the most part although Cornelius muttered a 'oh good show' as Harry caught the key. As Harry faced Quirrell and Voldemort, Cornelius paled considerably (Sirius had thrown up so the Minister was actually doing better than he had done at that stage). He was shaking by the time Sirius led him out of the memory – just after Harry's discussion with Dumbledore in the infirmary (Sirius had been livid when he'd seen it for the first time – Remus had stuck him to a chair until he'd cooled down enough to agree that trying to find Dumbledore in Thailand to hex him was a bad idea).

"Firewhiskey?" prompted Sirius gently.

Cornelius pointed at a cabinet and Sirius retrieved the alcohol and poured him a generous amount. He resumed his seat and waited for Cornelius to speak.

"I assume there's no hoping that the memory has been tampered with or that this isn't an elaborate fantasy of young Harry's?" Cornelius said eventually, his hands wrapped tightly around his whiskey glass.

"It's my intention to show the memory to Amelia Bones and Wilbert Croaker later. I'm sure they can both vouch for the authenticity." Sirius said firmly. "I'm certain it can be independently verified for that matter if necessary."

"No, no, just…" Cornelius took a gulp of his drink and slumped back in his chair, "I can't believe that You-Know-Who is still out there! He was supposed to be dead! How could Albus not tell anyone?"

"In part to protect the wizarding world, I suspect." Sirius replied. "From what I've heard, the days following the downfall of Voldemort back in 'eighty-one were chaotic with some Death Eaters walking free because of lack of evidence. Had they known for certain their leader was still around, I assume they would have continued their reign of terror and helped him find a body. I can appreciate why Albus may have kept it quiet back then."

Cornelius sighed as he absorbed the truth of Sirius's words.

"And it's also probable that Albus didn't know for certain." Sirius said. "My steward and I are convinced that Albus constructed the entire thing with the stone as a trap to prove Voldemort was alive using both the stone and Harry as bait."

"Well, he should have told me then!" Cornelius stated angrily.

Sirius gazed back at him calmly. "Perhaps he would have, Cornelius, but your closest advisor since Harry returned to the wizarding world has been Lucius Malfoy."

"What's Lucius got to do with it?" Cornelius asked evidently honestly bewildered.

"Lucius is one of those Death Eaters who walked free." Sirius replied. He held up a hand when
Cornelius went to argue. "I've investigated the matter thoroughly, Cornelius. He's married to my cousin and tomorrow will be subjected to our family magic. As you can imagine I wanted to be very sure of my facts."

Cornelius's eyes widened dramatically. "Yes, I can imagine. But I still can't believe Lucius would…I mean, I know about the Imperius, of course, but he assured me that he simply agreed with You-Know-Who's wider political agenda and the whole thing got blown out of all proportion."

"I will agree that he was under the Imperius the day he got caught in the Ministry; Moody was the one who diagnosed him so I have some confidence in that." Sirius stated. "I'll even accept that there was no additional physical evidence of wrongdoing apart from the Dark Mark he had. His wand was clean at the time. However, I can unequivocally say as someone who went undercover with Death Eaters that you can't get the Dark Mark if you're under the Imperius; you have to be a willing recipient. There's also an initiation – a murder of an innocent. Now perhaps Lucius only performed such an act at his initiation and beyond that his political influence and position at the Ministry were more of a benefit to Voldemort than having Lucius out raising terror. But the main point holds: Lucius was a Death Eater."

Cornelius downed his glass of Firewhiskey and poured himself another.

"Now, I doubt he knows for certain that Voldemort is back but I think he must have his suspicions. His political advice and agenda are in line with Voldemort's; he's sponsored and voted for laws and motions that would benefit Voldemort if he returned. The DMLE and DOM budgets have been massively reduced; certain members of our population such as werewolves and other magical races have been disenfranchised and would probably not give us aid now. Would Lucius rejoin him if Voldemort gained a body? I don't know." Sirius said. "His answer will certainly determine his fate tomorrow."

"I should have him arrested!" Cornelius said passionately. "All this time and he's been using me!"

"Lucius is a consummate politician, Cornelius. Whether he's trying to get power to assist Voldemort in usurping the government or simply trying to get power for himself as part of the existing government, of course he was going to befriend the most powerful man in the Ministry and work to become his chief confidante and advisor; to get his own agenda pushed before all others and convince you of its merits." Sirius pointed out briskly. "But, legally, he's done nothing wrong: nothing is provable about his Death Eater activities. I suggest you leave him to me to deal with and simply disassociate yourself. Nobody will be surprised that you distance yourself since it's well known among Wizengamot members that the House of Black holds primacy over the House of Malfoy."

Cornelius breathed in deeply and nodded. "You're right, of course. I will leave it in your capable hands, and distance myself from the man."

"I would also suggest if I may that you should also consider distancing yourself from those who rely and seek out his advice or agree fervently with his agenda." Sirius advised. "Your Senior Undersecretary seems to be a capable woman but perhaps it's time to reward that with an ambassadorship to a South American country?"

For a moment Sirius thought Cornelius was going to defend her but he finally sighed regretfully. "She is wonderfully capable but you're quite right." He smiled benignly. "Perhaps it is time for her to move on."

Sirius picked up the second vial. "Talking of moving on, are you ready for the next memory?"
He wasn't surprised when Cornelius downed his drink again before allowing Sirius to take him back into the pensieve. Harry's encounter with the shade of Tom Riddle and the basilisk was horrifying (Sirius had wanted to close his eyes the entire time he'd watched it) but informative.

Luckily Cornelius wasn't as pale and shaky when he came out but rather determined looking. Perhaps, Sirius considered wryly, learning Voldemort was still out there and Lucius had conned him was the worst news; everything else was manageable.

"Tell me that the diary was the only thing that could bring him back like that." Cornelius said harshly.

"I can't." Sirius said. He and Remus had agreed that the word 'horcrux' would never be shared although Croaker would probably know even if he wasn't explicitly told. "My brother Regulus was a Death Eater but he came to realise Voldemort didn't have any respect for purebloods and so turned on him and sent me a letter telling me all about these objects. Unfortunately I only received his letter once I became Lord Black. There are other objects like the diary. We'll need to work together to track the others down and destroy them."

"Of course." Cornelius agreed.

"Our theory is that these objects may have helped Voldemort escape death in 'eighty-one, if we get rid of these..." Sirius sighed. "We can trap him again and get rid of him for good. However there is an immediate concern." He led Cornelius back into the third memory – Trelawney's prediction of Pettigrew helping Voldemort to rise again.

"Well, this certainly adds some urgency to the matter." Cornelius said anxiously as soon as they left the pensieve. He shakily poured himself another glass of Firewhiskey. "We're just not prepared! I thought he was dead! How was I to know and..."

"Cornelius!" Sirius barked at the Minister. "Pull yourself together! Of course, you couldn't know! The public isn't going to blame you for acting like a peacetime Minister for the last few years when they believed the same thing. But they will judge you on what you do now!"

Cornelius made an effort and calmed down.

"Believe me when I say that this is my top priority." Sirius said firmly. "Voldemort has an unhealthy fascination with Harry. I will do everything in my power to make sure Harry is safe from that monster. As of now you have the considerable influence and wealth of the House of Black and the House of Potter backing the Ministry, Cornelius, in ensuring we rid ourselves of Voldemort for good."

He wasn't surprised when Cornelius brightened considerably.

"Obviously we need to bring Amelia Bones and Wilbert Croaker into this." Sirius said. "But I'd like us to present a joint plan to them. I've outlined one with my steward with your permission I'll take you through it now."

Cornelius nodded absently. "What about Albus? Do you see a role for him?"

Sirius grimaced and sank back in his chair. "My first inclination was to try and do it without him. He led the Light the last time and we almost lost. It was only because Voldemort was trounced by the Potters somehow that we gained a victory." He had no intention of telling Cornelius exactly how much power Harry had or about the spell Lily had used. He sighed. "He's also kept information secret and while I agree with some of his reasons, I disagree with some of his decisions. By all
reports, you two were close when you first took office. He could have shared his suspicions about Voldemort to you then – warned you about Lucius. There are also decisions about Harry that I have issues with."

"But," prompted Cornelius, "I'm assuming there is a but?"

"But as my steward has pointed out to me, Albus is a powerful and knowledgeable wizard. If we can utilise him we should." Sirius said. "As my steward has always been the more sensible and level headed of the two of us, I value his opinion."

"For what it's worth, I agree with your steward." Cornelius said. "Like you I'm not happy Albus hasn't shared information of vital importance, but he is the only wizard that could face Voldemort and expect to survive the fight – perhaps with the exception of young Harry who obviously has survived a number of encounters." He paused. "With that last thought and everything else you've said in mind, I agree Albus shouldn't be the banner under which we fight this time."

Sirius caught the gleam in Cornelius's eye. "I appreciate that people will fight under the banner of the Boy Who Lived, however, I don't want Harry exploited in the press. It will only serve to focus Voldemort's attention on him even more and that's unacceptable to me." He paused. "Behind the scenes, I have no issues with Harry's status as the Boy Who Lived being used to persuade the reluctant into the political alliances we'll need."

"Perhaps then we focus on ensuring what press there is continues to be positive?" Cornelius suggested. "The press are likely to print stories about Harry regardless especially since, well, I really shouldn't say anything but I'm sure you won't tell – the Tri-Wizard Tournament is being revived and will be held at Hogwarts this year. Harry won't be old enough to participate but the press will be allowed access to Hogwarts for the first time since he began his time there and, well…you can see the attraction for the journalists."

Sirius thought the whole tournament thing sounded like a very bad idea but he doubted it was something he could change. Cornelius was also right; the press would go after Harry regardless of whether Sirius tried to keep them away or not. It was better to try and control their public image than allow a free for all. "Some press then but everything is approved by me through Brian as we did this last week."

"Agreed." Cornelius smiled at him. "It's marvellous how well we work together. Shall we cover the rest of the plan?"

Sirius bit down on his snarky retort and pulled out a parchment from the bag. He didn't need to like Cornelius to work with him, Sirius reminded himself, and it was time to get to work.

o-O-o

It was weird seeing one of his Professors during the summer, Harry mused ruefully as he showed Professor McGonagall down to the basement.

It was shielded so the rest of the muggle house could function as normal. Harry didn't really understand it but knew electricity didn't work well around magic and that the basement and the kitchen were the only rooms in the house that were magic-proofed – the basement so they had a practice room and the kitchen because it was Dobby's domain. Apparently, Dobby switched the electricity off room by room when he cleaned the house.

Harry had questioned why Remus and Sirius had bought a muggle house and it had come down to two things: one, making Harry comfortable and they knew he was more familiar with a muggle
home and two, because living in a muggle area helped keep Harry safe as wizards often found navigating the muggle world difficult.

The fact that they had muggle technology was great. They'd had a movie night with Star Wars and Harry had shocked Remus and Sirius by inviting Dobby too. The house elf had been glued to the entire film his thin arms wrapped around a bowl of popcorn. Additionally, after a few days of living with Sirius and Remus – Marauders – he was also very appreciative that they had to keep the magic to a minimum. They both had quite an evil sense of humour and Harry was certain that at some point he'd be a target.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat, recapturing his attention. She had set her carpet bag on the side table and was apparently waiting on him.

He flushed. "Sorry, Professor."

To his surprise she smiled at him. "Outside of school, you may call me Aunt Minerva like your father did, if I may call you Harry. What do you think?"

Harry was stunned and settled for nodding his head. He gestured at her and forced the words out of his mouth. "My Dad called you Aunt Minerva?"

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said briskly as she began to unload the bag with small objects that Harry recognised from their Transfiguration lessons, "although when James got older and cheekier he called me Aunt Minnie. I was good friends with your Grandmother Potter – we were at school together."

"Remus said you might tell me some stories?" Harry asked hopefully.

She paused and turned to him with an apologetic look. "I owe you an apology, Harry. I should have approached you before now and offered to tell you about your family. I have no excuse."

"That's OK," Harry said awkwardly, "Remus explained there's a line you have to stick to as a professor where relationships with students are concerned."

She nodded sharply. "I also owe you a second apology for allowing the Headmaster to leave you with the Dursleys against my better judgement."

Harry was speechless again. He'd never expected her to apologise for that. "Professor…I mean, Aunt Minerva, it's fine, really. Sirius explained why the Headmaster left me there and I understand. I mean, I was mad about it but…" he shrugged. He just wanted to forget he had ever lived with the Dursleys.

Her gaze rested on him for a long moment. "Well, Sirius and Remus seem to be taking very good care of you."

Harry smiled at her. "They're brilliant."

Her lips twitched visibly. "Well, shall we do some Transfiguration first? Then we can go over the scholarship details. And we can end with afternoon tea and some stories about your mother and father."

"OK." Harry agreed happily.

"Now, Sirius has explained to me that you had a binding and that you've been working with constrained powers for the last three years. He said that you've worked hard at the healing clinic after
the binding was lifted to bring your magic back under control but you still require practice." She handed him a matchstick. "When you're ready, Harry."

He released his wand from its holster and set the matchstick on the table. A wave of a wand later and it was a perfect needle.

"Excellent." Professor McGonagall stated brightly. "If we were in school I would be awarding you points. Let's continue."

They worked for over an hour moving from the first year syllabus to the second and then to the third. The one-to-one tuition helped Harry relax around her more as she helped correct his wand movements to make the transfiguration easier or explained something about the theory that he hadn't understood. Slowly, he started to get used to calling her Aunt Minerva, but it was still a conscious exercise and he figured it would be sometime before he called her anything but Professor McGonagall in his head.

She stopped him after he had successfully completed the exam again.

"We should leave it there for today." Professor McGonagall said sternly. "How do you feel?"

"A little tired." Harry admitted.

"Most wizards your age would be exhausted, Harry." She assured him, beginning to pack everything away. "Clearly your power levels are as impressive as Sirius told me. I rather thought he was playing a prank on me." She shook her head. "You were quite a powerful baby come to think of it." She smiled at him. "You should consider becoming an animagus; I seem to recall you have a natural gift for it."

"I do?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said dryly, "you turned yourself into a miniature version of Sirius's form when you were three or four months old. Your father flooed me almost immediately. I'm not sure if he was more disturbed by the fact that you'd changed into a puppy rather than a young stag, or changed at all. I think it was the reason why he placed a binding on you."

Harry's mouth fell open and he snapped it closed again. "You knew? You knew that Sirius was an animagus? And my Dad?"

"And Mister Pettigrew, yes." Professor McGonagall nodded. "The summer after your father's third year I was visiting Dorea, your grandmother, when your father managed to transfigure his hand into a hoof. He couldn't undo it. I came across him luckily and reversed it. I also worked out quite quickly that he and his friends had taken an Unbreakable Vow not to tell anyone what they were doing – which was very foolish." She must have caught Harry's confusion because she paused in her packing up. "Has anyone explained Vows to you?"

"Are they the same as oaths?" Harry asked.

"Very different. Oaths are only enforceable if sworn to family magic, but Vows are a promise to magic itself. If someone asks you to take an Unbreakable Vow and you agree, if you fail to keep the Vow, you will lose your magic and quite possibly die from the shock." Professor McGonagall said.

Harry frowned. "Why would anyone take one?"

"To prove themselves worthy or because they owe a debt of some kind or because they're not in a position where they can refuse." Professor McGonagall answered. "In the case of your father and his
friends, I suspect it had more to do with helping another friend keep a secret. I suspected that they'd realised Remus was a werewolf and that an animagus could spend time with him on a full moon without threat of being turned into a werewolf themselves."

"And you didn't stop them?" Harry asked, curious. He handed her a tea-cup and she changed it back into a rock.

"I might have inadvertently forced them into breaking the Vow if I'd confronted them directly so, no." Professor McGonagall confirmed. "I did, however, tell your father that he could come to me for any advice or help on any transfiguration problem without fear of reprisal which he did over the next year or so. And when they all successfully completed the animagus transformation and joined Remus on the full moons, I would keep watch in my cat form to ensure if they ran into difficulties I was nearby to assist." She stopped and looked over at him gaping at her. "You're no doubt shocked I didn't take points and award them detention."

"Well, you did take all those points from us when we were first years and you caught us out after curfew." Harry pointed out.

"I'd already taken points from Slytherin's Mister Malfoy for the same reason." She pointed out. "It would have been favouritism not to take points from each of you just because you were in my House."

"I guess," sighed Harry, although he knew Snape in her position would have simply let his House members go with a detention.

"And while I realised after speaking with Hagrid that your rule-breaking was done in the same spirit of friendship that motivated your father's full moon affairs, at the time I thought you were playing a prank on Mister Malfoy." Professor McGonagall admitted with chagrin. "Which is also why I ignored your warning about the stone, I'm afraid. To some extent I was as guilty as others in seeing your father in you rather than you for yourself back then."

"You mean like Snape, I mean, Professor Snape?" Harry asked as she closed up the bag and motioned for them to go back up the stairs.

"And others." Professor McGonagall said firmly.

Their conversation paused while they focused on the steps and Harry went over her admission in his head with a frown. As soon as they were seated at the table in the sunroom and provided with refreshments by Dobby he blurted out his question.

"How come you didn't realise the Weasleys' pet rat was Peter if you knew he was animagus?"

Her eyebrows shot upwards. "The thought never occurred to me." She admitted ruefully.

"Not even when the rat lived for years and years?" Harry questioned, inching forward in his seat to lean on the table.

"I assumed the Weasleys were doing what most parents do when a short-lived animal is a pet." Professor McGonagall said.

Harry looked at her bemused.

"Buy a similar looking animal and pass it off as the same creature." She explained with a small smile. "I got a pet fish called Bubbles when I was five. I loved watching Bubbles swim around in her fishbowl. My mother told me later in life that there were actually twenty different Bubbles until I was the
one who found her dead one morning rather than my parents."

"Oh." Harry suddenly remembered the goldfish Dudley had won one year at the town fair. It had died rather quickly and his Aunt Petunia had replaced it with an identical looking goldfish. Obviously Dudley had gotten bored soon after and when that one had died, it hadn't been replaced.

"I'm not sure I would have recognised Mister Pettigrew even close-up," Professor McGonagall continued, "I watched from a considerable distance during the full moons as canines and felines don't mix too well in my experience."

Harry stifled a chuckle at the thought of Sirius and Remus chasing their former teacher in her cat form.

"And truthfully I thought Mister Pettigrew was dead. The idea that a rat could be him didn't enter my mind." Professor McGonagall said. "Just as it didn't enter my mind that Sirius could use his animagus form to escape from Azkaban as he told me this morning. I believed that the presence of the Dementors would have made transforming impossible."

"Is that why you didn't tell the Headmaster that Sirius could be getting into Hogwarts as Padfoot?" Harry asked, curious.

Her eyes widened. "I assumed the Headmaster knew. He did find your father and Sirius outside the Willow one full moon in their sixth year in an altercation with Severus."

Harry shook his head. "Sirius told me they were all in their human forms when the Headmaster showed up."

Professor McGonagall looked disconcerted. "Well, I'm still certain he knows." She took a sip of her pumpkin juice. "Shall we discuss the scholarship?"

Harry nodded and she reached into her bag and pulled out a folder filled with parchment.

"Now firstly how much do you know about how Hogwarts assigns places to muggleborns?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Not much." Harry said truthfully. Hermione probably knew; it was probably in *Hogwarts: A History*. "Actually, I'm not sure how Hogwarts assigns places generally."

"Well, it's a long story," Professor McGonagall enthused, "originally, the Founders made Hogwarts open to all. It was the first school of its kind. Unfortunately as you know there was a falling out over whether muggleborns would be welcome or not. Eventually, it was accepted that all magical children would be welcome and the Founders simply asked for donations from the families – as much as they could afford, if anything."

She picked up a chocolate digestive, dunked it in her tea, and ate it quickly before it disintegrated.

"Then our population grew and Hogwarts began to struggle financially despite the donations because of the sheer numbers." She cleared her throat. "Eventually, in order to keep the Ministry from assuming control and to retain independence, the Headmaster at the time made standard tuition fees mandatory with scholarships available for a small number of places. The Ministry had to settle for setting up an alternative school for those unable to afford Hogwarts. This all took place in the last century."

"So, there's a State school? Like a muggle comprehensive?" Harry asked, wondering why no-one had ever mentioned it before.
"There are seven now," Professor McGonagall said with a small smile, "Belfast, London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester, Durham, and Edinburgh." She listed quickly. "Most have an average year intake of around sixty to eighty pupils although the Irish and Welsh schools are much, much smaller. They don't board but students either floo or portkey in on a daily basis. They're quite good although they have to follow a Ministry approved syllabus. Some of our teaching staff came to us having previously worked at one. Professor Babbling taught at the Edinburgh Academy before she came to Hogwarts, and both Professor Flitwick and Professor Vector taught at King's Magic School in London." She paused and continued. "And obviously, home schooling is still chosen by many wizarding families."

"So why didn't I end up at one of the State schools?" Harry asked.

She smiled at him again. "We have wandered from the point, haven't we? But luckily your question brings it back into focus once more. Generally, we have no upper limit of how many children we can take. Your class is somewhat small but it was a terrible year in the war when you were born and we lost entire families." She shook herself briskly. "To answer your question, Hogwarts has a list – usually parents apply for their child to be placed upon it when they're born. Your parents did that for you. Your father's parents did that for him. Most members of the Wizengamot will send their children to Hogwarts as will most senior members of the Ministry."

Harry vaguely remembered that Vernon had done the same for Dudley with Smeltings. He nodded slowly in understanding.

"Now, the Founders – Helga Hufflepuff to be exact – enchanted a book that lists all magical births within the United Kingdom. It resides somewhere in Hogwarts but nobody really knows where – not even the Headmaster." Professor McGonagall sipped her tea. "What does happen is that a month before every child's eleventh birthday, a Hogwarts notification is produced and delivered to the Headmaster's desk so he can send a letter of acceptance. These days they automatically get transferred to me."

"But not everybody goes to Hogwarts." Harry said confused.

"Exactly." Professor McGonagall said looking pleased for some reason. "I have a house elf who helps me and she checks to see whether or not the student is on our acceptance list. If they're on the list, the usual letter is sent which she signs in my name. If they're not on the list but have magical parents, the notification is forwarded to the parents so they can arrange their child's education. But it's the latter category that we're most interested in for your mother's scholarship; those without magical parents."

Professor McGonagall paused to refill her cup and Harry snagged a chocolate digestive from the plate, thinking about what she'd said to him so far. In hindsight, it had been stupid to think that his Hogwarts class were all the magical children of his age in the country, Harry thought a little chagrined.

"All muggleborn notifications are set aside for my action." Professor McGonagall said. "All muggleborns are provisionally accepted at Hogwarts subject to whether they can pay the tuition. The Headmaster and the Heads of the Houses are usually the only people authorised to perform visitations although occasionally another member of staff is authorised if no-one else is available. We deliver the letter personally, reassure the parents to the existence of magic and determine their decision. If they cannot afford the fees, we offer them the opportunity to attend a Ministry school and, if they say yes to that, we send the child's name onto the nearest school so they can make the necessary arrangements by mail. They usually send a letter with a portkey and instructions on what supplies the children will need and where to purchase them."
"What if they refuse to attend?" Harry asked.

"Ah, well, there is no such thing as home schooling for muggleborns as they don't know any tutors." Professor McGonagall sighed, her expression turning to one of sadness. "If the parents do not want their child to attend magical school at all, we bind the child's magic and obliviate the family to the nature of the visit. They say goodbye to us believing that we came to discuss their child attending our school but they've decided against it – and that's it. We have to protect the Statute of Secrecy."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"Now there are some Hogwarts scholarships already available," Professor McGonagall said, "one is for orphans and another is to assist families with multiple children."

Harry wondered idly if the Weasleys had received some help from that scholarship before he flushed – reminding himself it wasn't any of his business how his best mate's family afforded Hogwarts. Although the other scholarship might account for how Tom Riddle had been able to attend Hogwarts since he'd grown up in a muggle orphanage without any money, Harry mused.

"What I propose is this: if a muggleborn family cannot afford the tuition and opts to send their child to the Ministry school, we will give them the option of applying for your mother's Hogwarts scholarship." McGonagall glanced at him. "Is this acceptable to you?"

"Yes." Harry said quickly. "You're giving them the option of not applying?"

McGonagall nodded. "Some parents will prefer not to send their children away to school regardless – that's one of the most popular reasons I get from muggles for turning down Hogwarts even when the parents can afford tuition, and others may see it as charity and refuse it." She motioned with her cup. "Those who accept will be told that a decision will be taken on 1st August which is really the latest we can take it. If they receive notification they will have been awarded the scholarship, if they do not they should proceed with the placement at the Ministry school."

"OK, so what about this year?" Harry questioned.

"I have already sent the families that opted for the Ministry school because of financial concerns a letter asking for them to confirm whether they wished to be considered to notify me by simply writing yes on the parchment letter." She looked immensely pleased with herself. "There are fourteen who have said yes. Now what we must do is decide what the criteria will be for choosing the recipient."

The discussion that followed was spirited and Harry was pleased when his new 'aunt' encouraged him to put his own ideas forward. She challenged him on some of the suggestions. He'd argued that they should test for intelligence – his mother had been smart so it made sense to him that the recipient of her scholarship should be smart. Professor McGonagall had wondered how they would test for such a thing and Harry pointed her at the primary school tests.

They'd both agreed any superficial things such as hair colour or eye colour should not be considered but Professor McGonagall had argued quite fiercely for witches to be considered ahead of wizards. Harry had no issues with that once it came down to the final candidates if there was a close decision that had to be made – but he didn't want gender to factor until then; yes, his Mum had been a witch but the scholarship was for all muggleborn children. He'd been gobsmacked when the Professor had backed down and agreed.

They'd finally come up with a points system: families who had greater financial need would get more points; primary school tests with better results gained more points; then there would be the
assessment of the Professor at the interview with the family for general attitude – politeness and what Professor McGonagall called 'a good disposition' and what Harry deemed 'not Dudley or Draco-like.' Gender would be used to make the final call if a boy and a girl ended up within one or two points of each other.

Harry dithered over whether to suggest the last thing but in the end he gathered his Gryffindor courage and blurted it out. "What about their…their home situation?"

Professor McGonagall paused in raising the cup to her lips and looked at him sharply. "What do you mean, Harry?"

"I mean…" he took another deep breath, "what if their family is like the Dursleys? I don't mean that they hate magic because I think those types will already have said no to the entire thing probably but…what if you can tell at the interview that they're not…that they maybe don't love…but I guess…" he stumbled over his words, "I mean, I wasn't theirs so they didn't have to love me and…" he stopped mortified.

He stared down at his empty pumpkin juice.

Professor McGonagall reached over hesitantly and put her hand over his. "It wasn't you, Harry. The Dursleys would have treated anyone who didn't comply with their narrow world view the way they treated you – and they were absolutely wrong to do so. They were…they are the worst sort of muggles – of people."

He glanced up at her and wasn't surprised to see her face set in stern lines but her eyes were warm and fierce.

"I can also tell you that it does happen between parents and children too. Sometimes parents don't love their children appropriately or like them very much. In the worst instances, there is neglect and abuse. But there is a large grey area where rather than outright abuse, there is disinterest or, for want of a better term, coldness. These cases are harder to spot but we come across them from time to time." She paused. "I believe you want us to put all these…these disadvantaged children ahead of those with comfortable family situations? To help remove them from the home to at least give them respite?"

"And to give them a home." Harry said awkward under her kind gaze. "Hogwarts is really the first home I can remember."

She nodded slowly as though absorbing his words. "I see no issues with your suggestion. We will award points again – a larger number to those children we feel would benefit from a separation from their home environment." She pressed her lips together. "I have reported cases of evident abuse in the past to the muggle authorities but perhaps I should also report these additional cases too."

Harry nodded, relieved she'd agreed and understood what he'd meant.

"I'll go back through the notes of the interviews for this prior year, Harry. Some of the families with children in these situations may not have responded to my letter so I will pay them a personal visit." She promised.

Harry felt a lot better after hearing that.

"Well, I think we have a very workable set of criteria." Professor McGonagall said. "Is there anything else you want to add?"

He shook his head.
"We should take a break." She declared briskly. "I could do with stretching my legs and I'm sure you could do with some exercise." She motioned towards the outside where the sun was shining. "How about we take a walk outside and I'll tell you about when I gave your mother her Hogwarts letter?"

Harry grinned at her and quickly accepted her offer. "Sounds great," he hesitated and ploughed on, "Aunt Minerva."

She smiled understandingly at him. "And Harry?"

He looked at her inquisitively.

"I swear on my magic that you will never return to the Dursleys." Her eyes flashed with a fierce protectiveness that shocked him. "Do you understand?"

He could only nod at her as he realised she was waiting for some kind of a reply.

"Good." She rose from her seat, stretched in an absent minded way that reminded him of a cat and gestured for him to join her.

He scooted out of his chair.

"Now, your grandmother Marigold was the one who answered the door," she began…and Harry listened intently, eager to hear about his mother and his grandparents; eager to learn about his family.
Almost two hours of working with Cornelius had reaffirmed Sirius's belief that he didn't like the man. But, and there was a but, he had come to have an appreciation for Cornelius's shark-like predatory instincts about politics. Cornelius knew every single member of the Wizengamot; he knew their position on the key policies and what they would and would not accept; he knew dirt on most of them, and the ones he didn't were the ones who were best at hiding it or who were far too boring to have dirt. He also had a keen sense of the power of the press and how to spin a story.

More to the point, Cornelius wasn't stupid. Not about politics and media spin. Not about the threat of Voldemort to his position, to the Ministry. He was scared and more than a bit of a coward (Sirius doubted Cornelius would ever be able to face Voldemort with any kind of dignity) and he was lazy on the details of the execution (Sirius had an unfortunate feeling that was how the awful Umbridge woman had made herself invaluable) but Cornelius wasn't stupid.

No, Cornelius's main flaw was that he operated from a strange default that doing **nothing**, maintaining a status quo, meant that he would remain the Minister of Magic. Conversely, when convinced that he would definitely lose his position if he didn't do **something**, Cornelius had a remarkable sense of self-preservation. It explained why their gambit at clearing Sirius's name and getting Harry away from the Dursleys had worked so well.

Sirius was glad that he'd thought to make Cornelius watch Harry's memories first before ever tackling the subject of Voldemort with him. He had a sneaking suspicion that the Minister would have preferred to have stuck his head in the sand like an ostrich but having witnessed absolute proof that Voldemort lived in some form and would try to regain a body, and having a political patron who would not tolerate inaction, Cornelius had had no choice but realise if something wasn't done, his days as Minister were numbered. The Minister was therefore doing his best to safeguard his own arse but Sirius didn't really mind that as it meant Cornelius actually doing his job.

In fact, Sirius had eased off the back-up plan he and Remus had mulled over of 'replace Fudge with someone competent' because it turned out Cornelius was competent in his milieu of politics and as a bonus feature was easily malleable once it was understood what he wanted (to remain Minister of Magic) and how to gain his interest (assure him that Sirius would make sure Cornelius would always be Minister of Magic if only he could do this tiny thing for Sirius in assisting him in getting rid of Voldemort and revolutionising their society).

He and Remus had underestimated Cornelius, Sirius realised, as he stepped back into Black Manor and watched as Cornelius came through the floo, his eyes wide as he took in the impressive Black crest. It was a valuable lesson to learn and one that they needed to take note of, Sirius mused. They couldn't afford to underestimate anyone if they were going to have a chance at defeating Voldemort and keeping Harry safe.

It was a lesson they should have already learned with Peter, Sirius considered tiredly.

They'd underestimated Peter when they'd confronted him at Hogwarts and he'd escaped. OK, there had been extenuating circumstances (Moony and the full moon, and Dementors!) but they'd underestimated him nevertheless. In hindsight they'd also underestimated him back when he'd betrayed them. They'd never considered Peter talented enough to be the spy; to be devious enough despite his being as much of a Marauder as any of them – Merlin, Peter had **spied** as a Marauder for them on their targets in the run up to some of the major pranks. They'd **known** Peter was smart enough when he wanted to be, he was just very, very lazy. The comments that Minerva had made at times to Peter during their school days had been very sharp and pointed, and all amounted to the
same thing: *could do better.*

But the Marauders had fallen into the habit of thinking him less smart than the rest of them just because he'd languished in the middle of the class positions whereas the rest of them had excelled; because after school Peter had headed for a lowly entry position in the Ministry in some obscure department to do with flying carpets. And because of that blindness, Peter had betrayed them comprehensively; had sold Lily and James out to Voldemort; had set up Sirius; had hidden in plain sight for years as the Weasleys' pet rat. There was no doubt Peter was a coward and a traitor, a snivelling piece of excrement Sirius wanted to wipe off the face of the Earth, but he was sneaky and smarter than they had thought. It would be wise, Sirius thought, to sit down and seriously consider what Peter was likely to have done already to find his Master.

Sirius led Cornelius through to the front parlour where they were due to meet with Amelia Bones and Wilbert Croaker.

Penelope came and knocked on the door. "Welcome back, Lord Black. Shall I arrange for some refreshments for your meeting?"

"That would be great, but if you wouldn't mind coming in for a moment, Penelope." Sirius motioned for her to enter fully. "Cornelius, this is Penelope Clearwater, my Executive Secretary. Penelope, the Minister."

Cornelius shook Penelope's hand and offered her a warm smile. "Lovely to meet you, Miss Clearwater. I don't believe I'm familiar with your name…"

"Penelope's a muggleborn," Sirius said simply. "Top of her Hogwarts class; very smart. She eventually wants to work for the Ministry but we convinced her to help me out in the meantime."

"Well, once you're ready to make a move, you'll have to come and see me." Cornelius said smoothly. Penelope beamed at the Minister. "Thank you, sir." She looked to Sirius who nodded his dismissal and she headed out of the room.

Kreacher popped in a moment later with the refreshments and disappeared again. By the time Sirius had finished pouring Cornelius some tea and himself a cup of very strong black coffee, Penelope was back, escorting the remaining visitors from the reception room to the parlour.

Wilbert Croaker grinned widely as he shook his hand and waved the invitation, with the location written so they could access the house, at Sirius with the other. "Lord Black! A Fidelius charm! I haven't seen one in operation since the Longbottoms! Is it part of the wards or did you set it up separately? And did you set it up or was it part of…"

"Bertie!" Amelia said sharply. She inched around her DOM counterpart and held her hand out to Sirius who shook it rather than kissing it. She seemed glad of the propriety he showed since they were meeting in her official capacity. "Lord Black, I assume?"

Sirius smiled at her. "I see Cornelius wasn't the only one who suspected the truth."

Amelia's eyes widened but she got the message quickly enough to play along with the delusion Cornelius had suspected. "Indeed," she huffed and nodded a hello at the Minister, "Cornelius."

"Amelia."

"Bertie." Cornelius greeted him with a handshake. "It's good to see you can climb out of the depths of the DOM. You never attend *my* meetings."
"Well, a new Lord Black sounded interesting unlike the latest persecution of some hapless magical creature your Senior Undersecretary wants to pursue." Bertie said simply. He sat down in one of the comfortable chairs and accepted a cup of tea. His grey robes suited his rounded stature and wild white hair. He wasn't as old as Dumbledore but Sirius knew the man had been at Hogwarts with his own grandfather. His piercing blue eyes gave away his intelligence and Sirius reminded himself not to underestimate the Head of the Unspeakables.

Amelia took the seat next to Bertie and accepted a glass of pumpkin juice. "I have to admit to some curiosity as to why you've brought us together. I assume you're not just meeting us to introduce yourself in your formal position, Lord Black?"

"It's Sirius, please," Sirius said as Penelope departed the room and closed the door, "and no, I've asked to meet you both to discuss something of importance." He gestured with his wand and revealed a pensieve on the coffee table. It was the same model and make as the one he had given Cornelius. He fingered the memory vials in his pocket. "I have some memories to share with you. I've already shared them with the Minister."

"These memories are intelligence vital to our national security." Cornelius said pompously. "You are both under confidentiality oaths in regards to your positions and you must treat this information as top secret."

Bertie and Amelia exchanged a look but Sirius was pleased when they both nodded. He poured the first vial into the pensieve and they all dived in.

Sirius couldn't bear to watch events a third time and he kept his eyes on Amelia and Bertie watching their reaction to Harry's encounter with Voldemort at the end of his first year. Amelia looked furious when they exited; Bertie quietly contemplative.

Bertie held up his hand before any of them could speak and they all deferred to him as the elder. "Let us watch all the memories you have to share and then discuss."

Sirius nodded his agreement and they quickly made their way through the other two memories.

Amelia sank back in her chair, white with rage and shock. She set her pumpkin juice aside and asked for something stronger. Sirius had Kreacher bring them all a Firewhiskey.

"Well, let's get the facts on the table." Bertie said authoritatively. "You-Know-Who is still out there thanks to items such as that diary. He seeks a body to return to power, and there is a prophecy that states he will rise again with the help of his servant."

"I take it the servant is Pettigrew?" Amelia questioned gruffly.

"We think so." Sirius said.

"Why hasn't Dumbledore said anything and what the hell has he been doing in that school?" Amelia erupted. "Quirrell's death was reported as an accident! And Dumbledore claimed the situation with the basilisk was under control!" She glared at Cornelius. "Why you arrested Rubeus Hagrid back then is beyond my understanding."

Cornelius flushed. "He was heavily suspected of opening the Chamber of Secrets during the first incident way back, Amelia, and his arrest warrant was ordered and signed off by your Head Auror. I merely went along to witness justice being done. Obviously we now know who did it."

"We should arrange for Hagrid's record to be cleared and an apology from the Ministry wouldn't go amiss," Sirius jumped in before Amelia could continue arguing, "but frankly, I think we have more..."
important things to focus on as an immediate priority."

"We have a plan." Cornelius said swiftly. He nodded at Sirius who produced the parchment they had been working on in Cornelius's office.

"There are three prongs of attack." Sirius rolled the parchment out on the table and directed the others' attention to it. "Firstly, there's Operation Tag The Death Eater. We need to watch all those known Death Eaters that walked. Voldemort will want his followers back. He and Peter are bound to make contact with them eventually."

"That's a job for the Aurors." Amelia said immediately.

"Our thoughts exactly, Amelia." Cornelius said. "We thought a special investigation unit?"

"We will need to make sure the Aurors serving in it are not unmarked Death Eaters." Sirius said firmly.

"Obviously," Amelia snapped, "and I will expect Vows."

"My department might be able to help with this too." Bertie said. "I have an Unspeakable in the intelligence department who was a spy during the last war. We're aware of which of the Aurors and Hit Wizards are suspect along with two members of my own department and another dozen throughout the Ministry."

"You've left them in place? Why have you never told me?" Amelia asked, furious.

"Because there was no proof." Bertie said. "All I have is the word of my own spy and unsubstantiated hearsay of these individuals' political leanings. But I would suspect all these well-placed Death Eaters is the reason why Albus has never told us his suspicions and shared with us what has happened with Harry Potter in the last few years." He gestured towards the pensieve.

"Well, let's work up a list of targets." Amelia said. "I'd like your spy back on the job too if possible."

"I'll speak with him." Bertie promised. He sighed and tapped the parchment. "Your second prong of attack, Operation Treasure Hunt. You think there are more of these objects similar to the diary?"

"We know of six in total. Harry destroyed the diary but there are five others." Sirius said.

"Seven being the magical number." Bertie shook his head. "Merlin, Riddle was truly insane. I assume these objects are what I think they are? That a murder must be committed to create one?"

Sirius nodded curtly.

"The Unspeakables have studied these…objects in the past. They discovered one in Egypt and another in Africa. Once the Unspeakables at the time had learned all they could, the objects were destroyed. There are only two methods of disposal – a large furnace with high temperature fire reminiscent of Fiendfyre will be sufficient or dissolution in a highly erosive acid such as basilisk venom. The hunt and disposal should be undertaken by my department." Bertie said solemnly.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Voldemort had protections around those that haven't been retrieved." Sirius commented.

"My department can handle it. We have several good curse-breakers and spell specialists." Bertie said.
"As neither of you are actually saying what these objects are, can I assume that they are indeed unspeakable?" Amelia said with an amused smirk.

Sirius felt his lips twitch and smiled a thank you at her for lightening the moment. "They are that."

"They are Evil most foul." Bertie concurred. "We will need independent witnesses to testify that the objects are destroyed by us. I will not have claims that we kept one for study – there is no need and I will not risk the safety of the wizarding population."

"I suggest Sirius in his capacity of Lord Black acts as one witness," Cornelius said, nodding his agreement, "and perhaps we can do the rest of the honours?"

"I don't disagree but we're getting ahead of ourselves," Sirius pointed out, "we do need to find these objects first."

Bertie nodded. "I'll put a team together. Again, I will make a vow of loyalty and confidentiality to be mandatory."

"Well, the last prong belongs to Sirius and I," Cornelius said firmly, "and that is Operation Power Play."

Sirius refrained from rolling his eyes at the name Cornelius had come up with. "Cornelius and I will work on pushing through some new laws to make it harder for Voldemort to gain control."

"So effectively shutting down his finances and getting us better relationships with those he would ally with?" Amelia deduced.

Bertie raised his eyebrows. "That won't be easy with the current Wizengamot."

Sirius smirked. "The current Wizengamot is about to find itself with a new Lord Black who is also the Potter Regent."

"Lucius will be muzzled, one way or another." Cornelius said briskly. "The old Pureblood alliance will find itself adrift from current opinion. I think many of those families will not want to ally with Voldemort when they realise the truth about his origins. Some of them may find themselves eager to remain neutral at least and…"

"And we can see that clearly you and Sirius will have the political machinations under control." Amelia cut in. "Well, I think we've covered everything so…"

"Not everything." Bertie said firmly. He turned to Sirius. "There is another prong that we have not discussed: your ward, Harry Potter."

Sirius found himself pinned by Bertie's perceptive gaze. "My godson is not up for discussion."

"I can understand why you wouldn't want him to be but I'm afraid he must be." Bertie countered. "There is no doubt after seeing these memories that Voldemort has an unhealthy interest in him; that there is a connection. If I was running Amelia's tag team, I'd be watching young Harry because Voldemort will make a move on the boy. There are two rituals he could use to create a body that involve the use of an enemy and I would think Harry would be his target. Even if he doesn't use him in a ritual, I cannot see Voldemort allowing the existence of a boy who almost killed him, who has so defied him, to continue. I think you know this too."

Sirius resisted the urge to order everyone out of the house; to run to Griffin House, snatch up Harry and run far away. Instead he forced himself to reply to Bertie. "I'm not denying that I know Harry
will be a target but I don't want Harry involved. He's not even officially fourteen yet. He's had to face Voldemort too many times as it is. We're the adults here; this should be our job."

"Hear, hear," Amelia said softly. "Sirius is right, Bertie. Harry may be the Boy Who Lived but the key word is boy. This isn't his fight."

Bertie sighed. "There is a prophecy which sits on a shelf in the DOM labelled with both the Dark Lord's name and Harry Potter's."

The second confirmation of the prophecy had Sirius flinching and turning away, pacing restlessly to the fireplace and back again.

"We know." Sirius admitted. "My steward and I compared notes on why James and Lily went into hiding and we realised it was probably a prophecy. Madame Longbottom confirmed it when we renewed the Potter-Longbottom alliance yesterday."

"Albus never told you?" Bertie asked surprised. "The prophecy was told to him by Sybill Trelawney the year Harry was born. Neville Longbottom was the other candidate but ultimately it was Harry who fitted the bill."

"You know the exact prophecy?" Cornelius asked, speaking up for the first time since Bertie had raised the topic of Harry.

"No," Bertie said, glancing back at Sirius, "but we can guess the contents since it was hearing the beginning of this prophecy that compelled Riddle into attacking the Potters. I believe he hoped to eliminate a prophesised threat."

"Harry." Cornelius surmised. He looked over at Sirius. "We should know the exact contents of the prophecy."

"I had intended to track it down," Sirius admitted, "but let me make one thing clear right now: even if this prophecy says Harry is a threat to Voldemort, it will still make no difference. I will protect Harry as much as possible and I will proceed with or without your help with the plan."

Cornelius's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Oh no, I wasn't suggesting we abandon our plan. No, no. I always believed prophecies are a waste of paper – I never did get the point of Divination." He made a dismissive gesture with one hand. "Whole load of hooey if you ask me...but we should know what the prophecy says to understand what You-Know-Who knows."

"I believe Sirius here needs to know," Bertie corrected, "and his ward if that's his decision but the rest of us don't need to know." He spread his hands out wide in a conciliatory gesture. "We don't actually know how much of the prophecy Voldemort knows. My spy believed Voldemort's intelligence about the prophecy was sketchy at best and learned from a Death Eater eavesdropping on Dumbledore and Trelawney's meeting."

"I agree with Bertie." Amelia said firmly. "As much as I abhor that Dumbledore hasn't shared vital information, the reality is that we should keep certain things on a need-to-know basis even among the four of us who I guess form a War Council of sorts. The exact nature of unspeakable objects at the heart of the Treasure Hunt prong is obviously one need-to-know piece of information; the prophecy is another. There may be political manoeuvrings that are best left between yourself and Lord Black, Cornelius."

Cornelius didn't look pleased but he nodded. "Very well." He turned to Sirius. "May I offer you additional protection for Harry?"
"Thank you but no." Sirius replied politely. "I believe the best way to protect Harry outside of Hogwarts is to ensure as few people as possible know and have access to his location and plans ahead of time."

"And inside Hogwarts?" Amelia asked, pointing at the pensieve. "I don't know about you but I will definitely be following up with Dumbledore on a number of issues after seeing those memories and I would think you'll do the same."

"And you'd be right. Harry loves Hogwarts and I won't keep him from attending," Sirius confirmed, "but by the same token, I'm going to need some reassurances from Dumbledore about Harry's safety within the school."

"Is Harry here?" Cornelius asked looking up towards the ceiling.

"No," Sirius said sharply, "I'll be using this as a base of operations for the Wizengamot, so: no. Our home is elsewhere."

"It sounds as though you have the boy's safety well in hand, in which case, may I suggest that you owl me a time for us to arrange for you to hear the prophecy at the DOM? Once you learn the exact contents, you may wish to revise your plans and I'm sure the Minister will all offer any assistance you may need." Bertie suggested.

"Absolutely." Cornelius agreed obsequiously.

Sirius nodded his agreement, hoping that the prophecy contents wouldn't change anything he'd already arranged with Harry.

"We should also agree what we're going to do about Albus." Bertie said, looking around the room and catching everybody's eye. "He is the Chief Warlock. From an official point of view, if this is a War Council, he should be part of these discussions." He motioned at Amelia who had grimaced. "I don't deny he's kept secrets but we could use his knowledge and expertise going forward."

"Sirius and I came to the same conclusion." Cornelius said.

Sirius sighed and turned to the folder Penelope had placed on a side table in anticipation of the meeting. He extracted the three parchments and handed one to each of his visitors.

Amelia's eyes widened as she read the invitation. "You're adopting Harry tomorrow?"

"Yes," Sirius confirmed, "and you're all invited…"

"I'd be delighted!" Cornelius said brightly. He looked chuffed to bits and Sirius knew he was doing an internal dance of glee that he would be present at such a prestigious event.

"As will I." Bertie said with a smile. "It is a long time since I saw family magic in action. May I ask what this has to do with Albus?"

"You want to ensure that Albus can do nothing to challenge your guardianship before he is brought into the Council." Amelia stated, motioning with the parchment she held. "If the official Ministry witnesses are us, it will be difficult for him to argue it isn't valid."

"Yes," Sirius confirmed baldly, "with tomorrow's adoption ritual, I aim to ensure that he won't be able to challenge my guardianship of Harry. Look," he sighed heavily, "Dumbledore already knows the things I've shown you. I have no doubt that he has some grand plan in mind for defeating Voldemort – and I'm certain that plan involves Harry. What he needs to understand is that he no
longer has a say in what happens to Harry outside of his schooling at Hogwarts and that there are others now with a plan." He paused. "I like our plan. I think our plan is sensible and will work. I believe it is best for Albus Dumbledore to realise these things and help us but I'm not blind to the fact that unless we have all our ducks in a row, he will find some way of convincing everybody he knows best."

"You may be right," Bertie began.

"Maybe?" scoffed Cornelius stabbing a finger in Bertie's direction. "He's perfectly right and you know it! Albus always believes he knows best. I'm prepared to admit that some of the time he does, although perhaps if he shared more than 'but it's for the greater good' it would be easier to accept his reasoning. But he's made mistakes as the past couple of weeks have clearly shown. He was partially responsible for a man not getting a trial and because of that he left a child, who vanquished the most terrible Dark Wizard of our time, with abusive and neglectful muggles who hated magic! He's almost gotten the boy killed twice looking at those memories! No, I agree Albus should be a part of our Council but Sirius is quite right: Albus also needs to understand that he will not be leading the fight and we do not always have to submit to his way of doing things."

Amelia was quietly nodding and Bertie looked at her questioningly.

"You too, Amelia?"

"I have a lot of respect for Albus Dumbledore," Amelia said firmly, "but I cannot deny Cornelius's point or Sirius's: Dumbledore has made mistakes here especially with Harry. It seems likely to me given Dumbledore's actions to date," she waved a hand towards the pensieve again, "that he'll place Harry at the centre of any plan. I agree with Sirius that we should not accept any plan that relies upon a thirteen year old boy."

"Albus may have placed Harry in such a position because of the prophecy." Bertie pointed out.

"Well, he can bloody well unplace him!" Sirius retorted fiercely.

Amelia pinned Bertie with a frank stare. "Apart from the fact that for the first time I find myself in complete agreement with Cornelius in that I also believe prophecies are a load of hooey, do you honestly believe we would be better served placing the defeat of an evil like Voldemort on the shoulders of a young inexperienced and partially trained wizard, and sitting around twiddling our thumbs as Dumbledore seems to be doing, rather than the plan we've come?" She pointed at the parchment on the table.

"No," Bertie sighed, inclining his head, "and I happen to agree that it would be best for us to present Albus with a fait accompli. However, I do believe the prophecy has some merit just as I believe the third memory we witnessed with the prophecy of the servant helping his master has some merit. We may try to keep Harry safe and out of the fight but prophecies have a way of coming true despite our best intentions."

"Perhaps," Sirius allowed, "and I will say that I am ensuring Harry is tutored as much as possible so he has a fighting chance if the worst comes to the worst. I will do as much as possible to ensure that he has every advantage when he faces him. However, I will not have the assumption made that it must be Harry who defeats Voldemort."

Bertie nodded. "Fair enough."

"I do have one concern, Sirius," Amelia said, waving her invitation at him, "the adoption? You've only spent just over a week with Harry as your ward. I know you want to shut down any avenue
Dumbledore has to challenge you but I'm not convinced it's a good idea to push it through so fast."

"And I would agree with you if I had spent just over a week with Harry." He held up a hand before she could argue. "You remember that you insisted on my getting medical treatment?"

She nodded warily. "You took Harry with you for a week's treatment in a clinic abroad."

"Yes," Sirius said, "we went to the Valley clinic. It exists in a time bubble. A week passes on the outside and months can pass inside. Harry and I spent two months there together."

Bertie's expression brightened again. "With Noshi Blackhawk? How is he?"

"He's good. Very good and an excellent healer. Harry and I are both back to full health now." Sirius leaned against the mantelpiece and turned back to Amelia. "Maybe the adoption is fast but it's something we both want."

"Then I'll represent the WOO tomorrow and see that the legal papers are sorted at the same time." Amelia offered. "I assume Brian will be attending?"

"He is." Sirius acknowledged.

"Excellent!" Cornelius exclaimed, clapping his hands. "Now, Sirius will be attending Thursday's session of the Wizengamot and afterwards I believe it would be prudent to meet with Albus and inform him of the plans."

"Why don't we do that Friday morning?" Sirius suggested. "I think I should probably meet with him alone after the session itself."

"Suits me." Amelia said and Bertie nodded in agreement.

"Very well." Cornelius agreed. "Shall we meet weekly for a progress report?"

"We should meet here as we know it is a safe and secure location." Amelia said. "If that's alright with you, Sirius?"

"Fine with me." Sirius said.

They wrapped up the details and Sirius escorted them back to the floo. Cornelius left first, followed by Bertie, leaving Sirius with Amelia.

"I should thank you for all you've done." Sirius said feeling a tad awkward. "I wouldn't be here if you hadn't cleared my name."

Amelia gave an understanding smile. She reached into her robes and brought out a wand box. "I meant to give this to you when I arrived but…here." She handed him the box with a nod of ceremony. "I thought this should be returned to you."

Sirius took the box and opened it swiftly, breathing out sharply at the sight of his old wand. He clutched it to him, the warm familiarity of it rushing through his veins like quicksilver. "Thank you!"

Amelia smiled at him. "You can thank me by looking after Harry." She paused. "I take it the clinic you were at was good for him?"

"For both of us," Sirius repeated, not wanting to give away just how much Harry had required healing.
She nodded though, compassion and understanding lighting her eyes. She said a goodbye which he hastily returned before she tossed her floo powder into the fire. "Ministry of Magic!"

She was gone a moment later leaving Sirius alone in the reception room. He sighed heavily and rubbed his forehead tiredly even as he held his returned wand with glee. The plan was in motion but there was still a lot to do.

o-O-o

"I thought you wanted to wait until the adoption ritual before Harry claimed the Black Heir ring?" Remus questioned Sirius as he positioned Harry in front of his desk in Black Manor.

Harry stared down at the waiting ritual bowl and small knife with a mixture of trepidation and eagerness. He wanted to do the Heir ritual but he had to admit that Sirius's comments about the magic being very Dark in origin worried him.

"I was but I've had a rethink." Sirius said brightly. "Cornelius and I both agree it's best to keep Lucius around but neutered – although that's subject to what Lucius admits to tomorrow – but we also think he'll try and stab us in the back at the first opportunity so…I want to make sure the Heir stuff is all done before tomorrow's family meeting so Lucius has no opportunity to interfere with that."

Remus sighed and nodded. "Should I leave?"

"No, you'll be fine as you're a recognised steward." Sirius assured him. He went to stand beside Harry. "You remember what I told you?"

"I remember." Harry said. "You'll proclaim me Heir; I'll accept, and then the magic tests me."

"Right."

"Not to be a killjoy but that test could take some time and we are expected at the Weasleys." Remus pointed out as he took position on the other side of Harry.

"You're expected at the Weasleys – Harry and I are unexpected guests accompanying you!" He waggled his eyebrows and Harry hid a smile. They'd decided on the subterfuge because the Weasleys seemed very respectful of Dumbledore. They didn't think the Weasleys knew that Dumbledore was in Thailand and why, but Sirius wasn't taking any chances.

"Thank you." Remus said dryly. "So it's only me who'll hear the sharp edge of Molly Weasley's tongue."

"We have plenty of time before we go to the Weasleys." Sirius contradicted. He waved his hand dismissively. "Besides, if this goes anything like his Potter inheritance ritual, we'll be out of here in thirty seconds flat." He grinned at Harry who rolled his eyes at his godfather.

"OK, let's get on with it." Remus ordered.

"Familius magicus." Sirius picked up his wand and tapped the ritual bowl. Silver sparkles erupted from the bowl; he cut his palm, allowing the blood to drip into the hollow. "I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black name Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter as Heir to the House of Black, by blood, by magic, by law, and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Harry took the ritual knife and repressed the nerves that were running rampant in his belly. He sliced his palm with a grimace and let the blood drop into the bowl with Sirius's. "I, Harry James Potter,
Head of the House of Potter, accept the duties of Heir to the House of Black, by blood, by magic, by law and by this my oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

The Black magic rose up sharply and surrounded Harry in a silver mist. He could feel it pressing against him, testing him. It was so different to the Potter magic which had been warm and welcoming; the Black magic was cold and icy in comparison. But he remained firm in the centre of the silver tempest. He wanted this to work for Sirius because he owed his godfather more than words could say for getting him away from the Dursleys and giving him a home, for loving him.

Abruptly the magic left and settled above the ritual bowl in the shape of a silver snake. Harry felt the ring settle on his finger.

Harry didn't think; he just opened his mouth. "Hello."

The snake rose up, its hood flaring. "A speaker."

"Yes." Harry said. "Have you had a speaker before?"

"Only one other speaker has come before you, youngling." The snake rippled and twisted.

"Sirius told me you were a snake but I didn't realise I would be able to speak to you." Harry said, fascinated by the snake.

"You are a speaker and so we can understand each other. Know this, Heir of Black, Lord of Potter: you are of our blood and magic, youngling. We will do all that we can to protect you just as the griffin of Potter." The snake shifted, glancing towards Sirius who Harry realised belatedly was looking on with concern. "We reunited you once before and always will again when called; remember that, youngling."

The snake vanished without another word and Harry caught his breath as he felt his skin tingle coldly for a long moment as though the Black magic was seeping into him.

"Harry?" Sirius placed a hand carefully on Harry's shoulder.

Harry looked up at him and smiled. "I'm fine. The snake said it would protect me like the griffin."

"Ah." Sirius didn't look any less concerned and Harry wondered why.

"That's good, isn't it?" Harry questioned warily.

Sirius and Remus exchanged a look over Harry's head.

"What?" demanded Harry, annoyed.

"It's just surprising," Sirius said finally. "Family magic isn't supposed to work the way it does for you. I've never heard of the totems being so…" he whirled his hand about his head, "interactive? Talkative? Cooperative? Protective? All of the above?"

"Oh." Harry frowned. "Well, the snake did say it hadn't had the chance to talk with a speaker in a long while and I would guess the other totems don't have a way of speaking?"

"That's a good point." Remus said. "And at least we know you still have your parseltongue ability. I had wondered if the cleansing of your scar might have, uh, taken it away."

Harry nodded slowly. He'd wondered the same thing. "I guess I'm stuck with it."
"I know it isn't the most popular ability to have, Harry," Sirius comforted him, "but it could prove to be useful in the future."

"Only if I plan on becoming a snake handler." Harry joked, his tension easing again with the evidence that it didn't matter to Sirius and Remus that he was a parslemouth.

"Funny." Remus nudged him, caught sight of the clock and blanched. "We should leave."

Sirius rolled his eyes but carefully cleaned the bowl and knife before locking them away. Remus hurried them out of the study and towards the floo. Remus went first to warn the Weasleys of the additions to the visit and Sirius had Harry go next.

Harry stumbled out of the floo into the Burrow and gave quiet thanks that he hadn't ended up flat on his face. He moved out of the way to allow Sirius room to walk through and was immediately gathered into a hug by Molly Weasley.

"Harry!" She beamed at him as she stepped back and Harry took the opportunity to step away and stand beside a grinning Ron. "It's so good to see you! And don't you look well? You're still a bit skinny though but no matter; we can feed you up tonight!"

"We weren't expecting dinner," Remus said quickly, "and we wouldn't want to put you out."

"Nonsense!" Molly chided him. "It's only another couple of mouths to feed."

Sirius stepped through with elegant precision and Harry could see Molly stiffen a tad.

"Apologies," Sirius said, "I had a small delay on the other side." He offered his hand to Molly and she reached out to take his, surprise widening her eyes when he turned her hand over deftly and kissed her knuckles. "Madame Weasley."

Arthur, who had been standing off to the side, a half-read Daily Prophet tucked under his arm, moved forward. His eyes quickly caught on the crests on Sirius's robes and the ring he wore. "Lord Black."

"Mister Weasley." Sirius shook hands solemnly. "Please call me Sirius."

"Blimey," Ron muttered under his breath at Harry, "this is all a bit serious." He elbowed Harry and snickered. "Serious! Get it!"

Molly shot her youngest son a look that shouted 'behave!'

"It's Arthur and Molly." Arthur answered in reply to Sirius's earlier request. He waved around the rest of his brood which included an older looking Weasley that Harry hadn't seen before. "My eldest, Bill; Percy; the twins, Fred and George; you know Ron, of course, and finally; Ginny. We're just missing Charlie."

They all gave small waves or muttered hellos.

"Well, this is an unexpected pleasure!" Molly said brightly. "It's so good of Professor Lupin to bring you both!"

"Please; it's Remus." Remus said quickly. "I've only just broken Harry out of the habit of calling me Professor."

He had too, Harry mused, smiling back at him.
"I'm afraid the subterfuge is my fault." Sirius said smoothly apologising for their unexpected arrival. "Not many people know Harry's already in my custody and we're keeping a low profile at the moment until we can make the formal announcements at the Wizengamot."

Arthur nodded understandingly. "May we congratulate you both on the guardianship?"

Molly looked desperate to say something but she held her tongue.

"Thank you." Harry said proudly.

Sirius ruffled his hair and smiled at him affectionately. "We're both very pleased." He sobered a little and motioned at Arthur. "The reason for the visit is there's a bit of business between our various Houses that we should discuss. May we make use of your dining table?"

"Of course," Arthur's gaze sharpened on Sirius's.

Molly waved her hands in a shooing motion. "All of you children go and play outside!"

Sirius placed a hand on Harry's arm to prevent his leaving and cleared his throat. "Harry will be staying, Molly, as both Head of the House of Potter and Heir to the House of Black, he has to be present."

The want to protest was written across Molly's face as prominently as her freckles but she nodded sharply conceding in the face of Sirius invoking the House positions.

"And as this involves a service Ron has performed for both our Houses, you may wish for him to stay." Sirius continued undaunted. "But that is of course at your discretion…" his gaze moved from Molly, "Arthur."

Molly's head snapped around to her husband's with frantic speed. "Arthur, dear…"

"Ron can stay," Arthur said firmly, "and Bill…"

His eldest son paused in his bid for the exit.

"You should stay as my Heir." Arthur gestured toward the table with a succinct head move.

It was odd and awkward, Harry thought, as Arthur ushered Sirius, Remus and Harry into seats on one side of the table, grabbing Ron before he could sit next to Harry. The three Weasley males sat opposite and Molly plonked herself down next to Arthur. From the looks exchanged between Arthur and Molly, Harry surmised Molly wasn't supposed to attend but was insisting on being part of the proceedings.

Arthur gave in with a sigh. "I have to admit to being surprised," he said to Sirius, "it's been a long time since the Weasleys were openly acknowledged as an Ancient and Noble House."

Sirius shrugged easily. "There's more to House honour than the trappings, Arthur." He gestured at the thinning red-head across the table. "You may regain your seat in time if not your title but that's for discussion another day."

Arthur's eyebrows rose up his forehead. "And today's discussion?"

"Well, the first bit of business is Harry's." Sirius nudged him gently.

Harry cleared his throat nervously. "Mister Weasley, you and your family have been very kind to me since I came back to the wizarding world and Ron was my first friend of my own age so…" he took
a deep breath, "as, um, Head of the House of Potter, I would be honoured if you'd consider an alliance between the House of Weasley and the House of Potter."

Ron, who had blushed bright red at Harry’s pronouncement of their friendship, beamed at him. Evidently he knew enough about the traditions to know that an alliance was something of immense importance, and to have a House of the status of the Potters request an alliance was a significant honour especially in light of the House of Weasley's relatively low status. Bill also looked pleased if mildly surprised.

Molly looked astounded and she darted a look at her equally stunned husband.

"That's…" Arthur started again and cleared his throat, "that's a lovely thought, Harry, but…"

Harry's heart sank.

Sirius cut in. "We thought the terms should be an alliance of friendship between the Houses, Arthur."

Because the Weasleys weren't in a political or financial position to agree an alliance of mutual aid and support having lost their Wizengamot seat years before. Harry believed there wasn't really a difference in the intent of the alliance just the wording.

Arthur's face brightened. "Friendship?" He looked from Harry to Sirius and back again. "Lord Potter, I would be honoured to accept such an alliance. How could I not?"

Ron and Harry grinned at each other. Harry felt Sirius not-so-subtly nudge him again.

"Thank you, Mister Weasley."

"I think it's probably time to start calling me Arthur, Harry." He said with a smile. He frowned suddenly. "I'm afraid I don't think I have our ritual bowl on hand. It's probably somewhere in the family vault."

"We can complete the alliance ritual another time," Sirius said agreeably, "your word is certainly enough until we can perform it."

Molly smiled at Harry. "That's a lovely thing you've just done for our family, Harry. Thank you."

Harry blushed.

"Our second piece of business," Sirius said rescuing him, "involves the House of Black. I hope in time that we will also agree an alliance of friendship but clearly we need to get to know each other a lot better before then."

Arthur nodded. "Agreed."

"For now the bit of business we have involves a debt of honour between us." Sirius said. "I did get, uh, rather enthusiastic when I went after the rat at Hogwarts, and Ron here did end up getting accidentally injured…"

Harry watched warily as Molly's expression took on a note of anger. He wondered whether Ron had told her about getting his leg injured or about the night Sirius had ambushed him.

"According to my solicitor, you were easily within your rights to have me charged with assault." Sirius concluded, keeping his remarks addressed to Arthur. "If you had I would still be on the run…"

Remus coughed.
"Or back in Azkaban," allowed Sirius, "and Harry would still be at the Dursleys."

Harry was pleased to see that mollified Ron's mother a little.

"In gratitude for your act of kindness and to honour the debt between us, I would like to assume financial responsibility for Ron's education up to and including a Mastery if he wishes to pursue one. His tuition fees, his school supplies and a small allowance to be agreed with yourselves would be included." Sirius said.

"Woah." Ron muttered, his eyes wide.

Remus plucked a parchment from the pocket in his robes and handed it to Arthur. "All the details are stated here, Arthur."

"Well, we couldn't possibly…" Molly began.

"Molly." Arthur's firm use of her name had Molly subsiding. He handed the parchment to Bill. "It's a generous offer but you understand that it isn't necessary, I hope? My decision was made in the same spirit of friendship that is at the heart of the new alliance between the Houses of Potter and Weasley."

Sirius smiled. "Granted, but I'm afraid my House honour demands I repay you, Arthur. I won't take no for an answer."

Ron was almost beside him, squirming on the chair beside Bill. He looked anxiously from his father to Sirius and back. Harry could guess at his friend's feelings: Ron was hopeful that the time of always ending up with second-hand clothes and books and everything was at an end. Harry could relate.

Arthur sighed. He gestured at his eldest son. "What's your view here, Bill?"

Bill set the parchment down on the table. He had a serious expression on his amiable face. The earring he wore glinted in the late evening sunlight streaming through the window. "Everything seems to be in order from a legal point of view." He said. "It's a generous offer but in order for me to know if it satisfies the debt, I'll need to know what exactly happened and how Ron got injured?"

"It's a fair question." Sirius said, stopping Arthur from dismissing his son's query. "Let's see, I guess you know the background context of me being innocent, Peter being the traitor hiding out disguised as your family's pet rat?"

Bill nodded.

"Well, I guess there are two incidents. The first one I merely scared Ron by breaking into the dorm and trying to get to the rat there. And the second one, I ambushed him on the Hogwarts grounds while he was carrying the rat and dragged him into a tunnel to the Shrieking Shack, accidentally breaking his leg in the process."

"You broke my son's leg?" Molly yelled loudly.

Arthur turned to her with a fierce expression. "Molly."

Molly glared at her husband and sat back with an angry huff.

"I was right as rain the next day, honest, Mum." Ron said tentatively.

"Well," Bill said, with a smile in Ron's direction, "I give my blessing to the proposal. I think as Sirius
interrupted Ron's education this last year, paying for his future education is an acceptable payment." He paused. "But in fairness to the House of Black I think we should only agree on the basis of Ron maintaining Acceptable grades."

Ron grimaced.

"I agree." Arthur said. He looked at his youngest son. "We don't expect Outstandings across the board, but if you fail anything, we shouldn't expect Lord Black to continue paying for you."

Bill added the addendum and handed the contract back to Remus to review. Remus nodded at Sirius. Sirius conjured a quill and signed the parchment, passing both over to Arthur so he could do the same.

"Yes!" Ron said gleefully.

"Remember this agreement is dependent on you getting good grades, Ron." Arthur said.

Molly nodded her agreement, her eyes narrowing on Sirius again. "At the same time, I'm not sure money can make up for harming a child." She said frostily.

Harry inched closer to Sirius, hearing the anger in Molly's voice.

"I agree with you," Sirius said simply, surprising everyone at the table, "although in my defence I wasn't quite sane at the time. Twelve years in Azkaban as an innocent man took its toll."

Molly had the grace to look discomforted but the glint in her eye told Harry she hadn't completely given up the fight. "And you're sane now? After only a week of healing?"

"Molly!" Arthur protested, his face burning as brightly red as his hair.

"Harry and I spent some time at the Valley clinic in the States." Sirius informed briskly. "As you may know it's located in a time bubble. We spent about two months there in the week we were gone in normal time."

Molly opened her mouth to speak again.

"However, that's beside the point," Sirius said before she could speak, "regardless of my questionable sanity, I know what I would do to anyone who broke Harry's leg even accidentally so yes, I agree with you that monetary compensation can't make up for what I did. And knowing that, I assure you the scholarship isn't an apology for that act; it's a thank you for not pressing legal charges so I could take guardianship of my godson."

Arthur placed a hand on Molly's arm. "I'm grateful that you can appreciate my wife's point of view. As Ron doesn't seem to hold a grudge and it was him that was harmed, I suggest we put it in the past and move on." His gaze rested on his wife's intently.

Molly gave a huff and nodded.

Sirius inclined his head. "Thank you."

"Ron," Arthur said, turning in his chair to face his son, "there's some additional business that I have with the House of Potter that you don't need to stay for, son. You can go and join your brothers and sister outside."

Ron looked as though he wanted to protest but he threw Harry a vaguely apologetic look and pushed
his chair away from the table, swiftly departing the house.

Harry looked at Arthur confused, wondering what other business they could have to discuss.

"Harry," Arthur sighed and rubbed at his forehead, "I had discussed this previously with the Headmaster as at the time there was no regent or steward assigned to represent you but now you've claimed your ring and have Sirius and Remus here to advise you…"

"You wish to discuss the life debt your daughter owes Harry." Remus concluded.

Sirius raised an eyebrow questioningly at Remus as Harry shifted uncomfortably at Arthur's nod of agreement.

"It wasn't that hard to deduce, Padfoot." Remus defended quietly.

Harry knew from his discussions with Sirius about the life debt Sirius owed Hermione and himself that he couldn't say he didn't care about the life debt – he didn't but it wasn't good form to dismiss it as it was like saying he didn't care that he'd saved Ginny's life which was untrue.

"What life debt?" asked Bill, frowning at his father.

Arthur sighed and quickly explained about Ginny's possession, the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets and the diary.

"Why didn't anybody tell me?" Bill asked, horror written clearly in his blue eyes.

Molly glared at him. "You were the one who chose to work abroad as a curse-breaker, William…"

"You spent most of last summer with me, Mum, I'm sure there was a chance to tell me." Bill rejoined. "No wonder Ginny spent so much time quizzing me about possessions!"

"Clearly," Arthur broke in as Molly bristled angrily beside him, "we should discuss this more in private after our guests have left but in the meantime, we do have the life debt to settle."

Sirius cleared his throat. "What did you propose to Albus Dumbledore when you spoke with him?"

Arthur shook his head. "It wasn't so much a proposal as a discussion. I did tentatively suggest that we'd be happy for Harry consider the Burrow a second home and to have him during the Summer instead of his going back to his relatives in the muggle world."

Harry could guess where the discussion was going.

"Let me guess; he shot down the suggestion." Sirius said sarcastically enough to get another disapproving frown from Molly.

"Albus thought Harry was too young to deal with responsibilities such as life debts…” Arthur replied mildly and Molly muttered her agreement, "and that Harry was safest at his muggle relatives."

Harry flushed in embarrassment and anger. He felt Sirius's hand on his shoulder but he stared at the table and took a deep breath; he really didn't want to lose control of his magic.

"Well, that was then and this is now," said Remus soothingly. "Obviously your first suggestion, while a wonderful idea at the time, is no longer needed given recent events."

"And I'm afraid that is where we come unstuck." Arthur admitted. "Ginny…Ginny is our only daughter and frankly one that was very much wanted. She holds a great deal of value in our eyes. A
place in our family would have been equal to that value and paid the debt she incurred, but I'm not entirely certain what else I have to offer beyond the land that comes with the Burrow or my sworn service to the House of Potter."

Molly shifted in her seat, worrying her lower lip as she folded her arms. Harry knew that they could demand the service of Ginny herself – it was her who owed the debt. He had no idea what he was supposed to say.

"Or the sworn service of your Heir." Sirius said with a thoughtful expression, staring at Bill.

Bill sat up straighter although a hint of worry lurked in his eyes. "If that's what is required, I will fulfil the debt on behalf of Ginny."

Harry tapped Sirius on the arm hurriedly and gestured towards the living area. "Can we speak for a moment?"

Sirius nodded. "If you'll excuse us, we'll be just a moment."

The House of Potter representatives made their way to the front of the sofa and Remus erected a privacy bubble.

"What are you doing?" Harry demanded immediately. "Ron says Bill loves his job! I can't take that away from him."

"Of course not." Sirius assured him. "And there are details to be worked out but it would be very useful to have a Goblin trained curse-breaker for our little treasure hunt."

Remus nodded sagely. "It also gives us someone of our own in Croaker's team. Bertie won't be able to refuse because of the life debt angle."

Harry frowned. "OK, so it might be useful but it's not exactly fair of us to drag him away from his own job. What happens when the treasure hunt is over?"

"I should be able to get something arranged at Gringotts – a leave of absence to fulfil a family debt for the period of the treasure hunt, something like that." Sirius assured Harry.

"Or how about an exchange of knowledge as part of the treasure hunt?" Remus suggested. "Bill spends the time learning from the Unspeakables; the Unspeakables get some Goblin knowledge. The vows he'll have to take will be difficult but not impossible..." he trailed off as he noticed both Sirius and Harry staring at him. "It's a thought."

Sirius looked at him sceptically. "I can't see either the Goblins or Croaker going for it."

"Well, we won't know until we've sat all parties down to discuss the matter." Remus said. "I suggest we get Bill's tentative agreement subject to something being arranged with Gringotts about his ongoing employment." He hesitated for a moment. "You know thinking about it... do you believe that given a choice Bill will turn down hunting and destroying other objects like the diary that hurt his sister anyway?"

"No," Harry answered immediately, "not if he's anything like Ron."

They all turned back to glance at the dining table and saw the curious expressions on the faces of the waiting Weasleys.

"OK, new plan," declared Sirius, "we tell Bill about the treasure hunt subject to an oath of
confidentiality. We'll offer to help make an arrangement with Gringotts and if that doesn't happen, once the treasure hunt is over, we'll set Bill up in a new curse-breaking business funded by Potter and Black."

Harry nodded slowly. "OK."

They both looked at Remus.

"I agree." Remus confirmed. He took down the privacy bubble and made their way back to the table.

Sirius waited until they were all seated. "Let me start by saying that we are all agreed that if we go with a service arrangement for the life debt that we will do our utmost to ensure the impact to Bill's career is minimal." He began.

Harry was pleased when Bill's eyes brightened with relief as did Arthur's.

"Exactly how we'll do that we don't know as yet but I'm sure it'll involve a discussion with Gringotts. What can you say about your employment contract?" Sirius asked.

Bill motioned across the table. "Not much as you would guess with it being a Gringotts' contract. I can tell you that I signed on for ten years, that Mastery in Runic Warding is part of the deal and I got that two years ago, and that there are penalties for non-completion. Beyond that…there are the usual oaths that Gringotts requires of its employees."

"Hmmm." Sirius said. "So you have five years to go and the penalties are financial?"

Bill nodded.

Molly cleared her throat. "If this is the only way to honour the life debt the Goblins would understand that wouldn't they?"

And Harry realised from the hope in Molly's eyes that service to the House of Potter would mean Bill would be doing something less dangerous and would return to England.

"They'd probably not press the oath-breaking penalty as a life debt would take higher precedence," Bill informed her, "but they would certainly enact the financial penalties." He sighed. "I could afford it with what I have saved…"

Harry stirred uneasily in his chair and looked at Sirius beseechingly.

"Any penalties would be covered by the House of Potter," Sirius said, catching on immediately, "but we will try and arrange a leave of absence so the penalties aren't incurred at all. If you have to leave Gringotts, we'll also ensure your career continues as you wish."

Bill's eyes widened in pleased surprise even as his mother's face fell with the assurance that Bill would continue with his wanted profession. Harry guessed Ron's brother had worried that service meant the end of his career.

"In fact, the reason why I thought of you rather than your father to honour the life debt is that the House of Potter has a project where your talents as a curse-breaker would be useful." Sirius continued. "We will need a vow of confidentiality before I say anything more and assurances that you practice Occlumency."

"Well, I never…" Molly protested.
Arthur shot her another pleading look and she subsided. "My Occlumency is not...good." He admitted. "If I wore my Head of House ring I would be protected but I've never seen a need to wear it and it's in the vault."

"I'm Goblin trained." Bill said. "They don't start teaching you anything of import until you can do Occlumency." He smiled at Harry. "They like to know their secrets will remain secret."

"Why don't Bill and I head to another room and I'll inform him of the project?" Sirius suggested. "If you're happy for only Bill to be privy to the details of the service we require and whether it will satisfy the debt on behalf of the House of Weasley, Arthur?"

Arthur frowned but nodded. "Well, as it mostly will affect Bill...I'll leave the decision to my Heir then."

Sirius smiled widely. "Bill, if you could lead the way?"

Bill got up and motioned for Sirius to follow him up the stairs. Harry deduced they were going to use a bedroom.

"Well, I'll start dinner." Molly said brightly, getting up. "You will all stay, Remus?"

"I'm afraid not, Molly." Remus said politely. "Thank you very much for the invitation, but we're expected home for dinner and Dobby will be anxious if we don't show. Another time, perhaps."

Molly frowned heavily but nodded. She headed over to the stove and began banging pots and pans as she assembled them.

Arthur cleared his throat, ostensibly ignoring his wife. "Harry, has Ron mentioned the Quidditch World Cup?"

Harry gave a smile and a nod. "He said you hoped to get tickets."

"There's still some finagling to do but we're almost set on that score. You're more than welcome to come with us." Arthur said warmly. "We're going to camp there the night before and after so it'll be a real trip."

"Sirius said he'd talk to you about it." Harry promised. "It sounds like fun."

"So far it's just been a lot of work." Arthur said with a smile. "I've had my colleagues at the Department of Magical Games and Sports complaining at me every lunch hour."

"Is your Department involved in the preparation?" Remus asked, jumping into the conversation when Harry floundered unsure what to say.

"Yes, the pitch site is very close to muggles so we're having to double check everything." Arthur admitted. "Why Bagman decided that place was a good idea...well, I shouldn't criticise really. His assistant Bertha Jorkins was supposed to be back from her holiday and helping by now but she's still away."

"Bertha?" Remus repeated. "I haven't heard that name in years."

Harry sent him an inquiringly look.

"She was a few years ahead of us at school." Remus explained. "Nice girl but a bit of a gossip and rather flaky."
It sounded like Lavender Brown, Harry mused idly.

"That's Bertha." Arthur said. "Ludo's convinced she's just forgotten her return date but I'm not sure she's *that* dippy."

Molly snorted from her position at the stove. "Bertha is that dippy, Arthur. She'd forget her own head if it wasn't screwed on."

Harry laughed at the comment and Arthur winked and whispered that Molly could be right.

Footsteps on the stairs had them all turning back. Bill looked thunderous while Sirius looked calm. They retook their seats. Molly hurried back, evidently determined not to be left out of the discussion.

"Bill?" inquired Arthur tentatively.

Harry had a feeling he knew why Bill was so angry; the fact that there were objects like the one that had hurt Ginny lying about…it was horrible and terrifying.

"I'll gladly perform the service requested for the House of Potter. We have agreed that I will join the project they have in mind in exchange for a salary matching my Gringotts pay and accommodation in London where I'll be based." Bill said tersely. "We're also agreed that the House of Potter will do its best to ensure my career doesn't suffer. We'll try and organise a leave of absence but if Gringotts won't allow that, I'll leave. Sirius has agreed with me that we'll split the penalties fifty-fifty." He held up a hand before anyone could argue. "For the record, the importance of the project is such that I'd do it if there was no life debt involved hence the penalty agreement, but as the House of Potter is insistent…"

"And we are." Sirius added firmly.

"There we go." Bill said. He looked at his father who nodded in return.

"I trust you, William." Arthur said proudly.

"Then I agree as the Heir of the House of Weasley that the House of Potter shall have my service until the task we have discussed is complete to honour the life debt between Ginevra Molly Weasley and Lord Harry James Potter."

Sirius nudged Harry. "You need to accept."

"I accept on behalf of the House of Potter," Harry said quickly, knowing he was probably breaking a number of protocol rules.

Molly gave a small clap and beamed at her eldest son. "Oh, it'll be so good to have you back! And really, Harry, you don't need to include accommodation, Bill will stay here."

Harry wondered if Bill was really as horrified as he looked.

Sirius cleared his throat. "As the Potter Regent, I'm going to have to insist as a point of honour, Molly. Service for the House has always included accommodation and board, and frankly, we have a lot of properties standing vacant. It would be doing us a favour to have one of them occupied and looked after."

Molly opened her mouth to argue and Arthur jumped in before she could.

"Thank you, Sirius, Harry," Arthur said quickly, "a young man of Bill's age needs his own space."

"Thank you, Sirius, Harry," Arthur said quickly, "a young man of Bill's age needs his own space."
He patted his son's shoulder.

Bill gave a relieved smile and glanced over at Sirius. "I'll arrange a meeting with my bosses at Gringotts for next week." He turned to his father who wore a faintly guilty air. "Don't think for a moment I took this under duress, Dad. I'm more than happy to help with the project Sirius has told me about. If there was no debt and I'd found out about it, I would have quit my job and volunteered."

His parents were stunned by the admission.

"Well," Sirius said brightly, "one further bit of business is this." He plucked a sheet of parchment from his robes and gave it to Arthur. "Your family's invitation to join us for a blessing ritual tomorrow. I know it's short notice but we hope you can make it." He turned to Harry. "Why don't you head outside and spend some time with Ron while Remus and I discuss arrangements with Arthur and Molly? We're done with the official business."

Harry nodded, smiled at the Weasleys and made his escape. Ron was hovering just outside the back door – evidently waiting for him – and he quickly dragged him away from the house to the bottom of the garden. They sat down and Harry frowned at the dampness under his palms.

"Did I hear right?" Ron asked excitedly. "Is Bill going to work for you?"

"Well, for Sirius, really," Harry pointed out. "But, yeah."

Ron grinned at him. "That's great! Bill's really cool! Not like Percy at all!"

Harry smiled at Ron and wished he had a brother or a sister. He pushed away the note of jealousy and focused on his friend.

"I heard you talking about the Quidditch Cup," Ron said, "you are going to come aren't you? It's going to be brilliant."

"Maybe," Harry prevaricated, "I think Sirius will say yes but he has a lot of lessons planned for me this Summer so..." he gave a shrug. He wanted to attend but he had to admit there was a large part of him that didn't want to spend time away from his godfather.

"Lessons?" Ron said outraged. "What lessons?"

"Stuff to do with my being Head of House; etiquette and culture and stuff." Harry said, leaning back and staring up at the sky.

"Blimey," Ron winced, "rather you than me."

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm, uh, also taking Runes. Professor McGonagall agreed that I could drop Divination and take an entry test."

Ron stared at Harry as though he'd grown two heads. "But...but that means I'll be on my own! You're abandoning me!"

"I'm sorry but I can't take another year with Trelawney predicting my death every week!" Harry retorted. "Besides, you're not on your own, the other guys will still be there, Ron," he pointed out, "and if you want, you could do the same and come with me to Runes? Sirius won't mind you joining the lessons."

"Nah," Ron shook his head, "I'm good." He shook his head. "I can't believe you're learning all this other stuff though."
"I need to know it," Harry said, with a touch of annoyance, "I didn't realise there was all these traditions and forms of protocol and everything. I have to learn it as the Head of the House."

"Well, as long as you don't turn into Malfoy." Ron said with a strange glint in his eye that told Harry that on one level Ron was deadly serious.

Harry gave a bit of a forced laugh and reassured him that was highly unlikely. He wasn't surprised when Ron turned the conversation to Quidditch. He gave a quiet sigh of relief as he listened, pleased with Ron's relatively easy acceptance of his new position and his decision about Runes. Sure, there had been a tense moment but they had gotten past it.

Harry ignored a lingering flicker of worry that Ron would have issues with Harry gaining a little independence and focused on Ron's rant about the Cannon's new signings.
The polite knock at the door to the formal parlour had Sirius pausing mid-sentence with a muttered apology to Miriam Granger and calling out for Penelope to enter.

Her blonde hair was braided into some complicated female thing Sirius had never worked out and she was dressed in formal robes bearing the Black and Potter crests. She smiled cheerfully. "The Tonks' and the Malfoys are both awaiting your presence in your study, Lord Black."

"Right." Sirius grimaced.

It had already been a long morning in some respects; he'd performed the Judgement ritual on the LeStranges in anticipation of the family meeting as soon as he had flooed to Black Manor that morning. He had discussed it with Harry the night before and his godson had been appropriately attentive, understanding the gravity of the decisions that Sirius had made. It would serve as his politics lesson for the week. Sirius wouldn't allow him to witness the ritual though or take part as the Heir as he had known the likelihood of the LeStranges surviving Judgement was small and he didn't want Harry involved with what was in reality an execution.

Harry and Remus had instead collected the Grangers in anticipation of meeting the Tonks' once Sirius had accepted them back into the House of Black. Miriam and Wallace wore good quality if plain muggle clothing while Hermione had formal dress robes in a deep mauve colour that suited her colouring. Minerva had since arrived too and had been delighted to be reintroduced to Hermione's parents, presenting them with a long wished for apology about the various school incidents that helped smooth everything over. They had all settled in the formal parlour for morning tea.

"Show time." Remus pointed out briskly with a grin that Sirius remembered from their Marauder days.

"Good luck." Harry said with a cheeky grin all of his own. Sirius had learned the subtle differences that separated Harry's features and expressions from James's or even Lily's.

Sirius gave him a wink, set his tea down and got to his feet. He headed out of the door and down the corridor. If it hadn't been for the Malfoys he would have had Harry with him as his Heir but he'd talked it over with him and they'd decided it was too risky. Draco and Harry were likely to set each other off and Sirius didn't trust Lucius not to try and murder Harry in front of him no matter what protections the Manor had for its Heir.

He stopped in front of the study door and took a deep breath. He opened the door, strode into the room and closed the door behind him with a sharp bang that caught the attention of his waiting cousins and their families.

He was amused to note that they were politely ignoring each other in the seating area; the Tonks' sat to the far right and the Malfoys closer to the door. Sirius ignored Narcissa's paling face and Lucius's dark look to walk forward and stand in front of his desk.

"Hello, members of the House of Black." Sirius said formally. "Thank you for answering the summons to the family meeting." Andy and Ted gave tentative smiles while their daughter grinned at him happily; the Malfoys were a mix of disinterest (Draco), horror (Narcissa) and glowing anger (Lucius).

"You're Lord Black?" Lucius questioned furiously.
Sirius held up his hand and displayed the ring. "And you're a prat and now we've established that perhaps we can get to business." He heard a badly hidden snicker from Nymphadora Tonks.

Draco bristled. "Father, are you…"

Narcissa put a hand on his arm and silenced him with a look. "My apologies, Lord Black, my husband and son are simply surprised. We had believed the new Lord Black came from the line of Marius Black."

He could see the wheels turning in her eyes as she recalculated what was going to happen.

"Simeon?" Sirius offered with a toothy smile. "Well, in that case you'll be pleased to know that in the event of my unfortunate demise Simeon will take on the mantle of Regent of the House of Black until my Heir is of age. Simeon sends his apologies but he will be in the country later in the summer and will meet up with you all then. He and I have, via correspondence, discussed our new agenda, the decisions that I've made and will make today and are in agreement."

The shocked looks on their faces was priceless.

"Well, that deals with one of my announcements." Sirius said jauntily. "Let's see, second announcement: Lord Harry James Potter is my confirmed Heir by blood, by magic, by oath and by law. He wears the ring. He sends his apologies but he is hosting our other guests for today's later events."

Draco was instantly outraged; his nostrils were flaring, cheeks bright red. Sirius wondered if he was about to see someone combust without the use of flammables. He'd have to show Harry the memory later in a pensieve, Sirius mused.

"By blood?" Narcissa challenged haughtily.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "I thought you of all people with your love of genealogy would have remembered that Harry's grandmother was a Black, Narcissa, Dorea Black to be exact." He smiled again. "I'm also going to be adopting him later today. Frankly, the family magic loves him. You remember the totem is a snake? Apparently it can talk to Harry; they get on like a house on fire."

Lucius's lips thinned to almost nothing as did Narcissa's.

 Sirius began to pace. "Now, to other business. I did think about telling you what our new political agenda will be," he said gesticulating vaguely, "but I decided actions speak louder than words. So…" he stopped and regarded them solemnly. "I have been reviewing our family's actions. Let me start with the LeStranges. Our motto was and is 'Toujours Pur' – Always Pure. It wasn't always about blood no matter what my mad mother might have thought; it was always about the House of Black remaining pure to itself, to its own ideals; never sullied by subjugating themselves to others."

He saw Lucius shift on the stuffed sofa the Malfoys were sitting upon. "The House of LeStrange is not here at this family meeting because they did not follow the motto of the House of Black."

"Why would they?" Draco piped up, crossing his arms with an irritated huff. "They're the House of LeStrange."

Sirius glanced at Narcissa who was turning a lovely shade of red. "Well, well, well. You haven't informed your son of the primacy rule between the Houses?"

"Primacy? Why should that matter here?" Draco spoke before his mother could and she turned to him swiftly.
"Be quiet, Draco." Narcissa ordered. "You are not to say another word."

Sirius didn't miss how Draco glanced at his father who gave a sharp nod to follow the order before subsiding.

"Perhaps you should explain about primacy, Narcissa, as clearly your son's education is lacking." Sirius said mildly.

Narcissa glared at him. "He knows that primacy denotes the rank of a House in relation to another."

"But you apparently have failed to inform him that the Ancient and Noble House of Black has primacy over the House of LeStrange, which after all is simply an upstart pureblood Belgian family that immigrated to England during the nineteenth century." Sirius smiled again, all teeth and no humour. "Rodolphus LeStrange petitioned to marry into the House of Black. He got Bellatrix. The marriage contract is quite clear: the House of Black has primacy. LeStrange was contracted to honour that primacy." His eyes flashed angrily. "He failed when he took the Mark of Voldemort."

The room flinched at the name.

"He failed when he allowed Bella to take the Mark of Voldemort." Sirius continued blithely. "And he failed when he allowed his brother to take the Mark. On this single issue alone I would have cause to declare them all oath-breakers but additionally, Bella never produced the two children as contracted and now never will."

He wet his lips and took a deep breath. "Additionally, the House of LeStrange dishonoured our family name and brought our House into disrepute by their attack on the Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom. They created a debt of honour between our Houses. This morning, I summoned the family magic for Judgement against the House of LeStrange."

He saw shock register around the room.

"Having forewarned the Warden at Azkaban, he confirmed post the ritual that all three no longer have their magic." Sirius stated grimly. "Rodolphus and his brother died within an hour."

"Bella?" Andromeda spoke up for the first time. "Do we know…"

"Without magic but stable. Well, I say stable, nuttier than a fruitcake but alive." Sirius informed her gently. Of course, he doubted Bella would remain alive for long. Azkaban was hard enough when a body had magic to sustain it against the harsh conditions there; without magic…

The Malfoys were exchanging concerned looks.

Sirius ignored them. "Before the LeStranges died, I declared the marriage contract broken and seized their vault for the repayment of the dowry. As restitution, all monetary assets from the vault have been turned over to the House of Longbottom. The House of Black has also assumed financial responsibility for the education of the Longbottom Heir."

Draco made to speak and his mother glared at him.

"As a final act, I have cast Bella out of the House of Black. She is to be given no sanctuary or aid. Any provided to her will be assumed to be breaking oath with the House of Black." Sirius said. "It shouldn't really be a problem as Bella is locked up but just so we're clear."

Andromeda and Narcissa nodded. Lucius was looking wonderfully uncomfortable.
"Andy," Sirius turned to his oldest cousin, "you never did have a head for politics but what do you make of my actions so far in relation to our new agenda?"

Andromeda tossed her brown hair back over one shoulder and regarded him with familiar grey eyes. "Well, from the appointments of your potential Regent and your Heir, you're clearly ditching the pureblood and prejudiced mantra of the House of Black. Lord Potter is a halfblood. Simeon is a pureblood but he is also the son of a squib if I recall correctly. And I'm fairly certain, the young woman who showed us in here from the floo is a muggleborn."

Sirius grinned at her. "She is."

"You're upholding the tradition and honour of the House of Black in stating that our House bows to no-one including You-Know-Who." She continued. "That the family magic found in favour of your ruling backs up the truth that it is an oath-breaker to have been Marked by him." Her eyes flitted to her brother-in-law sat across from her before returning to Sirius. "You've made restitution to a Light family – not too surprising given that the Potters and the Longbottoms have been allied for years and not to make restitution would make things awkward given you're also the Regent of the House of Potter. But the Longbottoms and the Potters also stand for respect for wizarding culture and tradition, so it could also be a move to position the House of Black for our own alliance."

Sirius nodded. He waved at Narcissa. "Anything to add, cousin?"

Narcissa threw a superior look at her older sister. "What you did with the family magic to Bella and the LeStranges...it shows you're ruthless and you won't stand for the House to be placed lower than any other. What you did to secure the position as the Head of the House of Black, to clear your name and gain guardianship over the Boy Who Lived was cunning. These are traits that the House of Black has been known for and feared as a result." She tilted her blonde head. "They are not traits that Albus Dumbledore would champion. I'd say you're repositioning us in neutral territory rather than allying us with the Light."

"I have allied us with the House of Potter." Sirius stated calmly. "But you're quite right that Albus Dumbledore is unlikely to appreciate my actions so far as Lord Black."

Narcissa's eyes gleamed with sudden comprehension but she didn't speak further.

"He would approve of my next action though." Sirius pointed out, turning back to Andromeda. "Andy, I wish to reinstate you to the House of Black, welcome your husband and your daughter. Is this something that you would wish for?"

Andromeda glanced at Ted, her husband, and nodded. "We've discussed it, and as it is you, I would agree but only with the reassurance that Nymphadora will not face an arranged marriage."

"That's a fair point." Sirius said, noting how his cousin had winced at the full version of her name. "You have my word: no arranged marriages. But," he held up his hand before she could protest, "I will insist on a marriage contract to protect our assets and honour."

"I can live with that, Mum." Nymphadora said. "Could we also make it a condition that everyone calls me Tonks?"

"It'll have to be your full name for the oaths." Sirius pointed out with a grin. "But, Cousin Nymphie, I'm sure you'll remember what I used to call you."

Her hair cycled from brown to red then purple before settling into black.

Sirius took out his wand and swept it over the desk. The Black ritual bowl and knife appeared. He
ushered Andromeda up to the front.

"Familius magicus." Sirius intoned and tapped the bowl. Silver mist erupted to swirl in the hollow of the vessel once again. He cut his palm. "I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, declare Andromeda Ursula Tonks reinstated as a daughter of the House of Black by blood, by magic, and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

He could see Draco's open curiosity and knew it was possibly the first time he'd seen family magic in action as the Malfoys did not have any.

Andromeda cut her palm with a grimace. "I, Andromeda Ursula Tonks, daughter of the House of Black, accept my reinstatement and the duties that it entails, by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

She motioned for her husband to take her place.

Sirius smiled warmly and held out his uncut hand for Ted to shake. "Welcome to the mad house, Ted."

Ted smiled warmly. His rotund belly and appearance gave him a jolly air. "No middle name for me. Parents didn't see the need for it."

Sirius nodded and held his still dripping palm over the bowl. "I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, declare Theodore Tonks a son of the House of Black by law, by magic, and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Ted took the knife from his wife. "I, Theodore Tonks, son of the Tonks family, son of the House of Black, accept my place and the duties that it entails, by law, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Nymphadora exchanged places with her father.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, declare Nymphadora Janet Tonks a daughter of the House of Black by blood, by magic, and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be." Sirius said again.

"I, Nymphadora Janet Tonks, daughter of the Tonks family, daughter of the House of Black, accept my place and the duties that it entails, by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

The magic swirled upwards then, swarming over the Tonks family for a long moment before settling back into the bowl in the familiar totem. The snake bowed to Sirius and disappeared.

"Excellent," Sirius said, waving his wand again so the ritual bowl and knife vanished and two envelopes took their place, "I have some gifts."

The three new members of the House of Black smiled while the Malfoys glowered in the background.

"Firstly, Andy and Ted, here is the details of your new vault at Gringotts. You've received the dowry that would have been bestowed had the family agreed to the match at the time. There is also the deed for the Summer property in Spain which I know was always Andy's favourite. It is entailed to the House of Black though and will return to me or my Heir on your death but it is yours for the rest of your lives." Sirius handed over the envelope. "You'll need to speak to Remus about arranging a portkey and the state of the property."
Andromeda took it and, in a surprise move, hugged Sirius. He patted her back awkwardly as she sniffed and held back tears.

"Thank you." She said releasing him.

Sirius cleared his throat and picked up the last envelope. "Nym…Tonks," he corrected as she glared at him, "a trust vault has been set-up for you. Its value is equivalent to that should you have been recognised as a Black from birth. You're in paid employment as an Auror trainee now rather than continuing your education so there will be no additional funds. However, you should find this is a nice nest-egg."

Tonks hugged him too and took her envelope with a grin. "Thank you. You were always my favourite cousin when I was a kid."

Sirius didn't point out that until his incarceration he'd been the only cousin who had visited them when Tonks had been small. He turned to Andromeda. "A couple of things, Andy; firstly, I'd like you to teach our Heir about wizarding etiquette. He's lived among muggles and Dumbledore hasn't seen to this part of his education it seems."

"I'd be honoured." Andromeda said.

"Excellent," Sirius said, relieved that he wouldn't have to do it, "secondly; I owe a life debt to a Miss Hermione Granger. She's a muggleborn witch, very smart and Harry's best friend."

He ignored the ruckus in the background as Draco snorted and Narcissa berated him.

"I've agreed with her parents that the House of Black will sponsor her…"

"What?" Draco shouted, standing up. "I've heard enough, Mother, Father! If the House of Black wants to ruin itself with muggleborns and halfbloods let it! We Malfoys don't need them and are better…"

Sirius raised an eyebrow as Narcissa silenced her son while Lucius dragged him back down to the sofa and placed him in a body bind. Their faces were aflame and he knew that they knew that Draco's little outburst was going to cost them.

"As I was saying," Sirius continued returning his attention to Andromeda, "I've agreed the House of Black will sponsor her to repay the life debt. Obviously I'm not appropriate…"

"So you would like me to perform the duty?" Andromeda nodded. "I'd be happy to but we should probably meet before the ritual."

"They're waiting for you in the formal parlour with Harry. Remus is also there and will brief you on another ritual we'll be performing this afternoon." Sirius tapped an ornament on his desk and there was a brief knock on the door before it opened to reveal Penelope again. "Penelope, here, will show you the way. I'll see you after my discussion with cousin Narcissa."

Andromeda and Tonks smiled at him, Ted nodded and they all left. The door closed with a dull thud in their wake.

Sirius turned back to the Malfoys. Lucius was almost white with fear. Sirius knew he knew that Sirius knew he wore the Mark and given what had happened to the LeStranges, Lucius couldn't expect any other treatment. Narcissa was pale but rallying. He would bet every last galleon he had that she was trying to think of a way to wriggle out of the mess her husband and her son had created by their behaviour and turn it to their advantage. Draco continued to look mutinous but there was
also fear flickering in his eyes, a questioning anxiety about why his parents were so cowed and why
they hadn't fought back, hadn't attacked Sirius.

He moved to stand before them again and folded his arms. "So, Narcissa, do you want to list all the
ways the House of Malfoy has broken oath with the House of Black or shall I?"

Narcissa got to her feet. "What do you intend for us?" She asked bluntly.

Sirius tilted his head. "That's a good question. Here's another; what can you offer me that would
entice me to keep you alive?"

Draco's eyes widened dramatically.

"Yes, Draco," Sirius said, "I see you're starting to see the gravity of your situation but let me clarify it
for you completely."

"Sirius, please; he's a child." Narcissa said hurriedly.

"You should have thought about that before you brought him in here unprepared. You know the
protections this house and this room in particular offer me. If you attempted to draw your wand on
me, you'd be dead within a second. He's lucky that the defensive magic didn't take issue with his
insults. Let's see how he does without the silencing charm now that he knows." Sirius said
brusquely.

He turned back to Draco, who had paled at the realisation that Sirius was magically protected as the
Head of the House of Black, and waved his hand cancelling all magic in the room except his own.

"The House of Malfoy which left France for England during their Revolution petitioned to join the
Ancient and Noble House of Black. The House of Black agreed on several conditions, one of which
was that the House of Malfoy honoured the primacy of the House of Black," Sirius pointed at Draco,
"that included ensuring that any child knew their place in the pecking order and didn't stoop to
insulting the Head of the House of Black as you just did."

Draco flushed red but he'd apparently learned enough to remain silent of his own accord.

"It also included not being branded with the Mark of a halfblood bastard like Voldemort." Sirius
snarled, turning to Lucius.

Lucius's eyes widened fractionally. "The Dark Lord is the Heir to Slytherin." He blurted out.

"Through his mother who was a Gaunt, a witch with little more power than a squib," Sirius agreed,
reciting the research Remus had done, "but his father was a muggle who abandoned both of them.
Or did it not occur to you to look up the genealogy of Tom Riddle? How does it feel to know that
you've been bowing and kissing the robes of the son of a muggle? You who would place blood
purity as the thing to be valued above all others."

The shock adorning Lucius's face was hilarious.

"Who's Tom Riddle?" asked Draco unable to help himself.

"He's otherwise known as Voldemort." Sirius replied absently and missed Draco's appalled look of
horror. "And really, Lucius? Is this your defence for taking the Mark? That it's OK because he was
the heir to Slytherin?" His tone was scathing. "The House of Black will not be subjugated to anyone,
not even Merlin himself if he turns up. Loyalty to the House comes before all others."
"Sirius," Narcissa said hurriedly, "you can hardly blame Lucius – he simply followed the rest of our family. Your father and mother both took the Mark as did mine. Regulus took the Mark. The LeStranges took the Mark. Everyone took the Mark. Your grandfather didn't expressly forbid it."

"Did you take the Mark?" Sirius asked pointedly looking at her arm.

Narcissa sniffed and rolled her sleeve up to reveal pale creamy skin. He cast a spell for glamours but it came back negative and she looked at him triumphantly.

"Don't go celebrating all at once, Narcissa." Sirius warned her. "You may not wear the Mark but you clearly failed at teaching your son to respect the House of Black primacy."

Lucius stood up for the first time. "That was my fault." He said. "Narcissa bowed to my wishes that I see to Draco's education."

"And Narcissa should have invoked primacy." Sirius countered heatedly, understanding that Lucius was taking the blame in the hopes of salvaging his wife and his son from the mess he had created; a wife and a son whom he expected would get revenge for him somewhere down the line. "She was the Black."

"With respect, Sirius, who was I to turn to if Lucius objected?" Narcissa said defensively. "My father was dead, Mother took herself off to France, and your grandfather locked himself into the country estate and refused all visitors and owls. There was no agreed Heir upon his death. The House of Black has been disrepair and without guidance for years. Primacy seemed moot at the time I acquiesced on the issue of education."

"Do you fear your husband that much that you felt you would need to seek the intervention of the House of Black if you insisted on overseeing your child's education?" Sirius asked.

"I do not fear Lucius," Narcissa retorted, "I did insist on Hogwarts and Lucius did follow me in that regard so I would have stood my ground if I thought it necessary. I did not. The House of Malfoy was gaining prominence unlike the House of Black that was floundering. It was against the contract, yes, but at the time it seemed a sensible decision. Even you must see that."

"So Lucius has been a good husband then?" Sirius asked as though the answer didn't matter to him.

He could see Draco look bewildered at his father's continuing silence.

"Lucius has been an acceptable husband under the terms of our contract," Narcissa said, without looking at either her husband or her son, "he has always treated me with respect if not affection. We perhaps have not made the love match I hoped for on my wedding day but the only complaint that I have is that we only had the one child as contracted. I would have liked more children. However, I know that we both love our one son very much, Sirius, and are united in ensuring his safety and protection."

"Hmmm." Sirius paced a few steps and back again. "Take a seat." He ordered.

He perched on the front of his desk as Lucius and Narcissa sat back down either side of Draco.

"Draco, I'm going to start with you." Sirius said. "I have two issues with you; one is the issue of primacy. You've been brought up to be loyal to another House before the House of Black and that's a problem for me. However, I recognise that this isn't your fault."

Narcissa gave a relieved huff of breath as she placed a hand on Draco's shoulder.
"The second issue I have is that you have issues with my Heir and his friends, specifically Hermione Granger who after today will be a daughter of this House." Sirius said seriously. "For his part, Harry has said he is willing to agree a truce. I'm not sure after your behaviour today that you would keep it."

Draco looked down unable to hold Sirius's gaze and Sirius knew he'd guessed correctly; Draco would break any truce because he didn't want to declare one.

"So, what to do with you?" Sirius murmured. "I could claim you for the House of Black, deny you any communication with your parents, and send you abroad to be educated."

Narcissa looked as alarmed as Draco at that suggestion.

"I could bind your magic and send you to live in one of our properties as a squib." Sirius continued, knowing he was scaring Draco and hoping it would work to keep him in line in the future. "Or I could ask you to take an Unbreakable Vow of loyalty to the House of Black and leave it at that."

Draco glanced up at the sudden offer of hope.

"Narcissa," Sirius moved on, giving Draco time to mull over the options, "I find that you've broken your oath by allowing the primacy of the House of Black to be disregarded by your husband and your son. However in mitigation I will agree that you were left without guidance. As you haven't taken the Mark, in many respects I could consider your transgression minor. As with Draco, I am therefore uncertain as to what I shall do with you. I could cast you out. I could summon Judgement and see what the family magic makes of your actions – whether it would accept the mitigation you offer. I could ask you to take an Unbreakable Vow."

He let her stew over his words as he shifted his attention to the final member of the Malfoys.

"Lucius, I find that you've broken your oath by allowing the primacy of the House of Black to be disregarded by your son, by ignoring the primacy of your wife within your relationship in regards to your son's education and the number of children she bore, by taking the Mark of Voldemort and subjugating yourself to the will of Voldemort." Sirius said. "If that were the extent of your crimes you might be in the same boat as your wife and child but I know the truth of how a Death Eater qualifies for that Mark."

Draco sent a questioning look towards his father which Lucius ignored. Sirius didn't.

"Has he never told you, Draco?" Sirius asked.

"Sirius, please…" Narcissa tried to intervene again.

"To gain the Mark in the service of Voldemort requires a blood sacrifice – a murder." Sirius stated firmly.

Draco actually did look horrified as he stared at his father. "You…you murdered someone?"

"It was a war, Draco. People died." Lucius said coldly, his hand twisting atop the cane he held. "Do you think people just believed Lord Black here was a mass murderer without prior reason? He killed twenty-three of the Dark Lord’s supporters himself. I killed once in the service of the Dark Lord and did not kill again. He has more blood on his hands."

"I think my official count was eighteen actually." Sirius corrected with a humourless smile. "Twenty if you count the LeStranges."
Draco was aghast.

"However, the difference between you and I, Lucius," Sirius continued unperturbed, "is that every Death Eater life I took, I took in defence of my life or others as a Hit Wizard. You, on the other hand, took the life of an innocent who wasn't even part of the fight. You targeted someone based on their blood status, tortured and killed them, and so like the LeStranges you have brought dishonour to the House of Black."

"There is no dishonour it was only a muggle!" Lucius retorted. He flushed red then white as he realised he'd admitted to murder.

Draco looked relieved that it was a muggle as he'd clearly been brought up to believe that wizards were better and muggles were no more than cattle, but his expression changed to abashment at Sirius's hard look.

"A life is a life, Malfoy." Sirius said with icy anger.

"I didn't have a choice!" Lucius shot back.

Sirius glared at him. "Are you really going to try that idiotic Imperius defence on me?"

Lucius glared right back at him. "I was under the Imperius curse when I was captured at the Ministry the day after the Dark Lord was vanquished."

"But not when you killed the muggle." Sirius pointed out ruthlessly.

"I might as well have been!" Lucius protested. "I was taken by my father and my father-in-law! I was surrounded by friends and business associates. I had about as much choice in the matter as someone under the Imperius! After the muggle, I claimed that if I was to truly exploit my position with the Ministry and the Wizengamot to the Dark Lord's benefit, my wand had to remain clean of Dark magic. I won't deny that I agreed with his politics and his agenda but I wanted nothing to do with the killing."

"There were other choices, Lucius," Sirius said, "and I'm not sure I believe that the muggle was your one and only. I'm not sure you were that clean."

"We don't all have your Gryffindor courage, Sirius!" Narcissa spoke up fiercely. "Where were we supposed to go for help? The Great Albus Dumbledore?"

Her words were a sneer and on one level Sirius knew she was right. The war had offered two sides and each was very unwelcoming to the other, fanatical in being as different as possible from each other. He had no idea how the neutral families had held out pulled between them.

"We would have ended up like Severus: a slave to two masters." Narcissa continued unabated.

Her words had her son's mouth dropping open in surprise. Sirius wondered what had surprised him – that Severus had been a double agent or that Narcissa had expressed the view that service to the Dark Lord was the equivalent of slavery. Evidently much of Draco's worldview was taking a battering.

"Look, Sirius," Narcissa took a deep breath, calming herself, "you asked what we could offer to entice you to keep us alive and to that I say that I meant every word in our letter of reply to the announcement that there was a Lord Black. We have political connections and wealth to aid and support the House of Black." She smoothed the fall of her robes. "The two Houses you've mentioned to date are Light, egalitarian about blood status but with a history of respect for wizarding tradition. I believe you will probably make headway in gaining a number of neutral families by
showing an independence from Dumbledore. Many of the old Black alliances will not resume
though; they are committed to a pureblood agenda as you know. However, we could provide the
bridge for mutual areas of agreement and use our wealth to support that. You need us alive to do
that."

Sirius admired her spunk and political insight. She had always had a flair for it. And she was right; it
was the reason why Cornelius and he had agreed that it would be better to have Lucius remain in the
game rather than take him out.

"Your argument is sound, Narcissa," Sirius said, "but I think knowing I didn't hesitate to kill off the
LeStranges and Lucius will bring most of the old alliances to heel. My reputation as a mass murderer
may come in very handy, don't you think? And for those that don't bow to the threat…well,
Cornelius turns out to be quite the player; the amount of dirt he had on everyone was truly
impressive." He held her gaze coldly. "What else do you have for me?"

There was a tense silence as Narcissa looked away unable to argue with him.

"I have something else that I will willingly provide if you can guarantee that the House of Black will
never be subjugated to the will of Dumbledore." Lucius sneered the last name but otherwise his tone
was civil if a touch tentative.

Sirius examined Lucius's expression and found it surprisingly sincere. "I won't allow the Ancient and
Noble House of Black or Potter to be subjugated to the House of Dumbledore."

"And you would take a Vow to that?" Lucius pressed.

"I would." Sirius answered candidly.

Lucius nodded slowly. His hands tightened atop the cane as he debated internally for another
moment before sighing and conceding. "I believe the Dark Lord is alive."

Narcissa's head snapped around to her husband so fast Sirius figured she would have whiplash.
"What?!" She looked torn between anger and terror.

"Why do you think that?" Sirius asked, refusing to show that he already knew.

"I won't say anything further until I have an assurance that you won't kill me." Lucius said firmly.
"My offer is information about the Dark Lord and espionage if required when he returns."

Sirius considered his reply for a long moment. "You talk as though I should want this information
and your spying service but I don't see why. Dumbledore is the leader of the Light. I'm sure if
Voldepants is still alive and will return, he'll lead the fight again. My priority will be to protect Harry
and I'll take him abroad rather than have that monster try for him again."

It was a bluff but he figured Lucius would fall for it. After all, Lucius had no idea how much Sirius
already knew.

"If you truly wish to protect the boy then you'll listen to my information." Lucius retorted. He shifted
on the sofa. "There is a prophecy, one that labels Potter as the vanquisher of the Dark Lord. They are
fated to fight, Black."

"What?!" It was Draco's turn to splutter with shock.

Lucius's chin came up sharply. "This is only some of the information I could give you but I won't say
another word until we come to an agreement."
Sirius simply smiled. "I already know about the prophecy, Lucius."

Lucius looked momentarily startled. "Then you know that you will need someone in Voldemort's camp when he returns, and he will return."

"Sirius," Narcissa spoke up again, "I do not wish to have anything to do with the Dark Lord and request the protection of the House of Black for myself and my son. We will happily take Vows."

"Narcissa…" Lucius began.

"I will not go through it again, Lucius." Narcissa snapped. "The Dark Lord is a madman bent on the destruction of everyone who isn't him! Regulus saw the truth and he paid with his life for it! I will not have the same happen to Draco!"

Draco watched his two parents argue with an open mouth; obviously it wasn't a typical event.

Sirius made his decision and harrumphed to regain their attention. "Narcissa, Draco: you will take an Unbreakable Vow of loyalty to the House of Black."

Narcissa tried to hide her relief but it played across her face regardless.

"I assume, Draco, that you know of the penalty of breaking the Vow?" Sirius asked brusquely.

Draco nodded quickly.

"Good." Sirius turned back to Lucius. "I'll be honest with you, Lucius; my first thought was to simply kill you as restitution for the life you took. However, my advisors inform me that you have value politically, pretty much using the same argument as your wife. On the other hand, I don't trust you and Narcissa would make an excellent Regent for the House of Malfoy."

Lucius paled but he kept his gaze on Sirius.

He pushed off the desk and rocked back on his heels. "So what to do with you?" He waited a beat before he laid out the offer. "You have to pay for the life you took. So for that crime, you will donate a million galleons to the Ministry for a new Department – the Department of Muggle Affairs." He held up a hand when Narcissa would have interrupted. "I, or rather my steward, will assume responsibility of your vaults and investments for the next three years. You will not protest this in any way and you will be thankful that I haven't had you thrown in Azkaban."

"Sirius…” Narcissa said hurriedly while Draco gaped worriedly.

"Don't worry, Narcissa, I don't intend to impose spending limits per se," Sirius said, his eyes flickering to her son where he did intend to set boundaries, "I'm aware that you need to project a certain image. But every transaction will need authorisation from me. You can all spend Friday morning with Remus at Gringotts transferring everything to him and agreeing standard payments and funds. You may pretend to everyone else that you are simply choosing to use Remus as your steward."

Narcissa nodded her agreement and stared pointedly at Lucius who did the same with reluctance.

"If you refrain from killing or assaulting anyone by the time my Heir comes of age, and if you have made yourself useful, I may return your financial assets to you, Lucius." Sirius said.

"Very well." Lucius agreed stiffly.
Sirius clapped his hands together. "Good. You will also, like your wife and son, take an Unbreakable Vow of loyalty to the House of Black. After which, Lucius, I will put you under familius magicus veritus while you give me the information you offered." It was a type of truth spell, compelling any family member to reply to the Head of the House with honesty. "If I hear anything in your answers that I dislike, you will face Judgement."

Lucius scowled and nodded.

"Vows then." Sirius drew his wand and tapped the desk. A sheet of parchment appeared. "Here are some I prepared earlier." He handed them over to Narcissa.

She raised one perfectly arched eyebrow at him. "These are very specific."

"You're free to refuse and I'll choose another option for you." Sirius said.

All three Malfoys squirmed under his hard gaze but nodded. Sirius tapped the ornament on his desk with his wand again. After a few tense moments, there was a sharp knock on the door and Remus entered the room.

He took in the sight of the huddled Malfoys and smiled at Sirius, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Vows?"

"If you could act as Bonder?" Sirius requested with a nod.

Remus drew his wand. "Mrs Malfoy, perhaps it would be best if you went first to demonstrate the process to Draco. If you could stand beside Sirius and join hands please."

Narcissa rose from the sofa, smoothed her blue robes and glided over to Sirius's side. He held out his hand to her and she clasped it gently.

Remus placed his wand on their joined hands.

"Will you Narcissa Druella Malfoy be loyal to the House of Black, placing duty to the House above all others, keeping the secrets of the House of Black unless authorised and working to ensure its success?" Sirius began.

"I will." She replied.

A thin stream of fire shot out from the wand and bound their hands together.

"And will you be loyal to me, Sirius Orion Black, the Head of the House of Black, keeping my secrets unless authorised and following my orders?" Sirius continued.

Narcissa nodded. "I will."

Another stream joined the first.

"And will you be loyal to the Heir to the House of Black, Lord Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, protecting him, keeping his secrets unless authorised to speak of them, and following his orders in the absence of mine?"

"I will." Narcissa replied.

The bond was joined by a third stream of flame.

"I, Remus John Lupin, swear as your Bonder that I have witnessed the Vow undertaken between
you." Remus intoned. "So have you sworn; so mote it be." He gently hit their joined hands with his wand and the bond of flame disappeared.

Sirius released his cousin and she returned to the sofa. "Draco."

Draco looked at both his parents questioningly as though asking if they were serious about going through with it. They gave him sharp nods in return. He got to his feet and shakily took Sirius's hand. He repeated the same vows in regards to the House of Black and Sirius but Sirius changed the vow in respect to Harry, understanding that too much enmity existed between his godson and Draco for a Vow of loyalty to work especially with Draco's young age.

"And will you remain neutral in your dealings with the Heir to the House of Black, Lord Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, never attacking him unless in defence, keeping his secrets unless authorised to speak of them, and following his orders in the absence of mine in respect to the House of Black?"

Draco looked as though he'd swallowed a lemon but he nodded and made the vow. Once Remus had confirmed the vow, Draco made his way back to the sofa where his mother smoothed a hand through his hair in comfort.

Lucius took his place and willingly made the same vows as Narcissa. As soon as the bond disappeared, Sirius drew his wand and pointed it at Lucius.

"Familius magicus veritus."

Immediately, Lucius was surrounded by the silver mist of the Black family magic.

"Why did you join Voldemort?" Sirius asked tersely.

Lucius struggled for a moment against the magic but he eventually sighed. "I agreed with his plan to create a pureblood ruling elite and he was the heir to Slytherin."

"Why did you take his Mark?" Sirius continued, wanting to check how honest Lucius had been with him previously.

"My father and father-in-law took me before the Dark Lord to be Marked. They considered it an honour."

Sirius's eyebrows rose. "Did you want to be Marked?"

"Yes and no." Lucius looked furious as the words forced their way out of his mouth. "I believed it to be an honour but had no wish to perform the initiation rite of killing someone to earn it."

"You've admitted you killed a muggle. What other crimes did you perform in the service of your Dark Lord?"

"I gave him refuge, kept Dark items for him banned by the Ministry, bribed Ministry and Wizengamot officials on his behalf and attempted to steal a prophecy orb from the Department of Mysteries." He battled against the magic once more before giving way. "I tortured muggles captured by the Dark Lord when ordered and other Death Eaters for failures."

He could live with Lucius torturing Death Eaters, Sirius mused, but the muggle torture – which he had expected – was going to cost Lucius another chunk of galleons. He moved onto the next question. "What do you know of the prophecy involving Voldemort and Harry Potter?"
"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..." Lucius intoned. "This much was overheard by Severus Snape and told to the Dark Lord immediately after its pronouncement by Sybil Trelawney to Albus Dumbledore."

Sirius stiffened. Snape had been the Death Eater to overhear the prophecy! He exchanged a furious and concerned look with Remus who looked like he wouldn't need to be a werewolf to kill Snape.

"The Dark Lord did not initially believe the prophecy and I do not know what changed his mind. I suspect that when reports from a spy within Dumbledore's ranks informed him that the Potter child displayed magic on a regular basis, despite a childhood binding, he determined to remove the threat." Lucius continued.

"Wormtail." Sirius snarled, finding another target for his anger. He turned and paced away, collecting himself again and ignoring Draco's wide eyes and Remus's growl. "You said you believed Voldemort was still alive; explain."

"I initially believed as others that he was dead," Lucius explained, "but Draco informed me of a strange wraith drinking unicorn blood in the Forest during his first year which raised my suspicions. Then, there was a report that Quirrell had died and Draco told me that Potter had been in the infirmary for days. I began then to suspect that he was still alive and working to return to power." He paused. "In addition, my Mark has grown darker within the last few days. It is a sign that he gains strength."

"Do you want him to return?" Sirius questioned harshly.

"No!" Lucius snarled. "I've worked hard to undo the damage to my reputation and my House from the last war! I have power and influence now. I make the laws and have been successful where he failed in promoting a pureblood agenda. Why would I want to allow someone else to benefit from my work especially now I know the truth of his origins?"

Sirius nodded. "If I don't offer you another choice and he returns as you say, what will happen?"

"There will be no choice." Lucius stated grimly. "He will expect us to return to his side. He will demand it and he will kill any who disobey." He glowered defiantly at Sirius. "He will control us as surely as though he had us under the Imperius curse..." he paused momentarily, "unless there is another choice."

Sirius threw a look at Remus who nodded gravely. It was something to work with, at least; Lucius didn't want to give up his own position. He was the Top Dog – or he had been until Sirius had reinstated the House of Black – still would be within his own alliances. But Voldemort would take that away and make him a servant again. Lucius didn't want to bow down before someone else. Which meant Sirius had to be careful; if he humiliated the man too much, he'd turn on Sirius and Harry regardless of the Vow – there were always ways and means of working within Vows. But Sirius could use Lucius's desire for power to help protect Harry just as he was using Cornelius's desire to remain Minister of Magic.

"Tell me about Tom Riddle's diary, Lucius." Sirius said, returning to perch against his desk again, his arms folded.

Remus moved to sit beside him.

Lucius was once again attempting to fight the magic that swarmed over him but he hefted another sigh eventually and gave in once more. "One night the Dark Lord called together myself, Bella and..."
Regulus. He told us that we were his most loyal and favoured followers; all of us members of the House of Black, the only House whose knowledge of the Dark Arts was equal to his own."

Sirius snorted at that. The House of Black collectively had probably forgotten more Dark magic than Voldemort had ever learned.

"We were to be rewarded. He sent myself and Regulus to the outer chamber. Bella exited holding some kind of cup but I was summoned before I could get a good look at it." Lucius continued. "He gave me a diary and told me to guard it well. He told me to send in Regulus and ordered Bella and I to leave; we followed the order. I placed the diary in a safe location in Malfoy Manor and I know Bella placed the cup in her vault."

Sirius waited impatiently as Lucius caught his breath, disturbed at hearing what must have been the initial event that had led to Regulus's death.

"After I realised the Dark Lord might still be alive, I removed the diary from its hiding place and opened it. The pages were blank. I felt a compulsion to write and I introduced myself. The diary responded. It ordered me to tell it what had happened since I had been given the diary. It proclaimed to be an echo of the Dark Lord and held the key to returning him to life. It instructed me to give it to my son who attended Hogwarts so it could get close to Potter. I convinced it that it would be better to give it to another instead."

Remus's eyes flashed and for a worrying second Sirius thought he might actually punch Lucius.

Draco was open-mouthed again, shock rippling across his pointy features.

"You gave the diary to Ginny Weasley." Sirius commented. "Why beyond that she was expendable in your eyes?"

"Primarily because I was compelled. Secondly, her father was trying to get legislation through that I disagreed with; the political embarrassment of his only daughter being found in possession of a Dark object would likely derail it. Thirdly, I knew through Draco that the Weasleys were close to Potter." Lucius said. "And lastly, I believed it likely that her overbearing mother would find the cursed thing before it ever made it to Hogwarts or that she herself would hand it to her father."

"You intended for it to be found?" Remus asked surprised.

Sirius hurriedly repeated Remus's question knowing unless he asked the veritus magic would not compel the truth.

"Yes," Lucius said sharply, "Draco attends Hogwarts. I had no wish for him to be hurt. I tried to get Dumbledore replaced when it was clear that he wasn't doing enough to stop the monster the Dark Lord had set loose."

Sirius and Remus exchanged a look of surprise.

"Are you sincere in your Vow?" Sirius asked as the final question.

"Yes." Lucius glared at Sirius. "I will not follow that bumbling old fool but I will follow the House of Black, even one headed by you and Potter, rather than the Dark Lord if it means I keep my magic and my life is spared."

Honesty was a beautiful thing, Sirius thought as he registered Lucius's selfish motivations. He cancelled the veritus with a wave of his wand and Lucius sagged as though tired.
Sirius pondered his words carefully.

"My first order, Lucius, is that you will make restitution to the House of Weasley. I will approach them on your behalf with an offer to assume financial responsibility for Ginny Weasley's remaining education up to and including a Mastery, and pay any medical bills associated with healing the possession of the diary." Sirius said firmly. "I will request this is a private restitution rather than a public one given the sensitive nature of what occurred; I doubt Arthur Weasley will argue. That will protect your political reputation. Similarly, the one and a half million galleon donation for the new Department in restitution for the death of the muggle and torture of others will be through me, protecting you from the fallout of donating to a cause that would horrify your alliances."

Lucius bowed his head in relief.

"My second order to all three of you is that you will do nothing willingly to harm me, my Heir, the associates and the allies of the House of Black." Sirius glanced toward Draco. "I gave you some leeway in your Vow in regards Harry because you're young and stupid."

Draco flushed.

"But realise this is an order; under the terms of the Vow that means you follow it or lose your life. You therefore cannot harm Harry or Hermione with this order. You cannot call them names or taunt them as that constitutes bullying behaviour that harms them. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded rapidly.

"You will tell your Slytherin cohorts that you have been instructed by your parents to follow my orders in this matter in order to ingratiate yourself with me in the hopes of one day changing my mind as to who should be my Heir." Sirius said firmly. "That will protect you from any fallout at school from your changed behaviour."

"Thank you, Sirius." Narcissa said.

"Draco," Sirius continued, "you are young and could yet learn a different path. If you are loyal to the House of Black, you will be rewarded. You saw the generous gifts that I gave to your cousin and aunt. If at the end of the year, you have performed well, I will give you a reward. Do you understand?"

Draco darted a look at his parents and nodded swiftly to Sirius.

Sirius turned to Narcissa. "Is there an arrangement for your son?"

"With the House of Parkinson." Lucius answered. "The decision was mine not Narcissa's."

"Then the arrangement is annulled." Sirius said firmly. "The House of Black will let its children choose their own partner."

Draco’s face lit up and Sirius figured he hadn't wanted the arrangement. It was a small boon but perhaps it was enough to help Draco realise that there were benefits of being in the House of Black.

"You will all keep what was discussed between us today a secret only to be discussed with those in the room and my Heir – Malfoy, you have leave to discuss the dissolution of the marriage arrangement with the House of Parkinson. Finally, your main order is this: you will help me and my Heir defeat Voldemort otherwise known as Tom Riddle by assisting whenever I ask in the plan that I have in motion." Sirius declared fiercely. "Understood?"
"Understood." Lucius had regained some of his usual arrogance. His eyes narrowed on Sirius. "You were already aware that he was alive."

"Since I heard about how Harry sent his wraith packing again at the end of his first year, yes." Sirius said. "But he will try and get a body, and try and regain power. We're going to stop him."

"We will do everything we can to assist you." Narcissa said.

"Good. Narcissa; you will take part in a blessing ritual this afternoon for Harry." Sirius said.

"Of course, my Lord Black." Narcissa bowed her head.

Sirius regarded them with an intent expression. "I am giving you this one chance: work with me, help me protect Harry and you will be rewarded. Cross me, harm Harry in any way and I will end you."

He examined their faces with satisfaction as they registered his final words, turned and tapped the ornament. Penelope knocked softly on the door before opening it.

"Please escort the Malfoys to one of the guest rooms on the first floor, Penelope, so they can freshen up before lunch." Sirius requested.

The Malfoys got to their feet; Narcissa curtseyed and Draco awkwardly followed his father in bowing his head briefly before they left. The door closed behind them and Sirius let out a slow breath, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension that had gathered there.

Remus gave a small cough. "You OK, Padfoot?"

"I feel dirty." Sirius admitted. "I feel like I'll take a million showers and will never be clean again."

"Well, we have made a deal with the Devil." Remus murmured. "But politically this will be easier. Lucius is the key to at least neutralising the pureblood supremacists within the Wizengamot. If he died, even with Narcissa as a Regent, they would likely choose some other leader who would make things much more difficult."

He sighed. "I'm not looking forward to telling Harry about the prophecy and Snape."

"Do you think it's wise to tell him?" Remus demanded. "They already have a difficult relationship."

"I don't know," Sirius said, "I don't want him blindsided with information that others are holding secret like a Sword of Damocles over his head, Moony." He sighed. "We'll discuss it with Minerva but not today; today should be about the adoption and the blessing ritual."

"I won't argue with that." Remus said in heartfelt agreement. He peered at Sirius. "Something else is bothering you."

"You mean apart from the fact that Lucius has just confirmed old Voldie is on his way back to getting a body and we really need to work out where Peter went and what he's likely to be doing?"

Remus simply gave him a look that said 'you don't fool me. '

Sirius grimaced and looked away from his friend. "Malfoy gleefully pointed out why so many people were quick to believe I was a mass murderer by reminding me of how many people I killed during the war."

"In self-defence." Remus pointed out.
"I don't even remember killing ten of them, Remus!" Sirius retorted.

"You were captured when you were undercover, tortured, and you were half-dead when recovered." Remus said dryly. "The evidence for self-defence was rather overwhelming."

"And what about the LeStranges?" Sirius said before he could help himself. "I knew calling Judgement through the family magic would probably kill them. Bella probably won't be alive this time next week."

"Yes, you did know," Remus acknowledged, "and that you feel…regret makes you the good guy."

"That's the problem, Moony," Sirius confessed, "I don't feel regret. I feel…relieved that they won't be around anymore to hurt anyone else, or to help Voldemort when he comes back – if we can't stop it. A part of me still thinks I should have just done the same to Lucius."

Remus placed a hand on his shoulder. "You did what you did to protect Harry. I'm not going to tell you that doing it was the wrong thing to do." He squeezed Sirius's shoulder. "I'll never tell you that protecting Harry is the wrong thing to do, and Sirius; I'd kill to protect him too."

Sirius nodded slowly, letting Remus's words wash away the doubts that had plagued him.

"Come on, we should get back. Hermione was in the middle of a discussion with Andromeda about ritual magic and its place within wizarding culture when I got your signal and Harry looked terrified at being left alone with them." Remus said cheeringly. "We should go rescue him."

Yes. That's what it all came down to in the end. Rescuing Harry.

And Sirius could do that.
Lunch had been brilliant in one respect and awkward in another, Harry mused.

Sirius had taken the top of the table with Harry on his right-hand side; Andromeda Tonks to his left. Her husband sat next to her, Tonks next to him, and then the Malfoys; Draco, Narcissa and Lucius. Hermione sat next to Harry, her father next to her, followed by her mother, then Remus and Penelope with Professor McGonagall – his Aunt Minerva at the table end.

Harry ignored the looks Draco kept shooting him and focused instead on enjoying the light meal and hearing stories from Andy about Sirius and his Dad as young school boys. Sirius kept butting into her reminiscences, ostensibly correcting her but with a wink and a smile that told Harry that he was joking and teasing. Andy took it in good humour and Harry found himself liking the older witch more and more as the lunch went on; she had a good sense of humour, a quiet intelligence, and a warm personality that had made it easy to talk to her.

The Grangers loved the Tonks' and the two families had quickly bonded. As a muggleborn Ted had a lot of common experiences to share with Hermione and he was quickly able to relate wizarding terms to understandable muggle concepts. Ted was a Healer in a small clinic on the outskirts of London; he had compared it to being a GP – a family doctor – while those Healers in St Mungo's were the equivalent of muggle hospital consultants and doctors. Hermione had been very interested, confessing her early childhood ambition had been to be a family GP. Harry was also interested after his time with Noshi, and Ted had been keen to hear all about the Valley clinic.

If the conversation at the top of the table had flowed, Harry couldn't help notice the more stilted atmosphere at the bottom where the Malfoys resided along with Remus, Penelope and his Aunt Minerva. He caught faint hints that Tonks had tried to engage her cousin, Draco, in a conversation about Quidditch, Remus, Penelope and Narcissa were debating ritual magic, and Lucius and Minerva were discussing Hogwarts. But it was clear that they were all uncomfortable to varying degrees with their dining companions. Harry had thanked Merlin that apparently there was a protocol they were following and the Malfoys couldn't claim they'd been slighted.

But lunch was over and they were all making their way to the formal parlour to greet the additional guests joining them for the various rituals. Harry entered at Sirius's side. He'd been coached in the protocol for this that morning and it had all the makings of being a half-hour of sheer hell, Harry decided, as they walked in and immediately became the focus of attention.

"Madame Longbottom," Sirius kissed her knuckles, performed the introduction of Harry with flawless aplomb, and Harry quickly took her hand and gave his thanks for her attending.

Augusta Longbottom gave a stern nod of approval and motioned to her left where Neville stood awkwardly in formal robes with the crest of Longbottom on his breast. Harry shook hands with his dorm mate and realised Neville wore his Heir ring.

"It's good to see you, Neville." Harry said warmly as Sirius carried on with the introductions to Augusta. "You're joining me for the culture and politics lessons, right?"

"Right, and estate management." Neville smiled back at him. "Gran thought it would be good for me and for us to get to know each other better. I didn't realise your parents were my godparents."

"I had no idea your Mum was my godmother either." Harry admitted. Sirius nudged his shoulder gently and Harry grimaced. "We'll catch up later, Neville."
Neville beamed happily at him and Harry allowed Sirius to direct him to Arthur, Molly, Bill and Ron. Arthur had decided the rest of the Weasleys had no need to be present although they had all been invited. Ron glared at the Malfoys.

Sirius stepped in smoothly, pretending nothing was amiss. "Arthur, Molly. Lovely to see you, Bill and Ronald again. You obviously know Harry."

Molly broke away from glowering at Lucius Malfoy and smiled at Harry as he took her hand to kiss. "Oh, don't you look smart, Harry."

Bill winked at Harry, easing the tension, as Harry made his way down the line of Weasleys.

Ron was dressed in what were clearly his school robes. He leaned in when Harry took his hand. "What is Malfoy doing here?"

"Cousins." Harry said succinctly. "We're kind of stuck with them."

Ron didn't look happy and Harry thanked Merlin when Sirius moved them on again.

"Minister Fudge, I believe you've met my godson Harry before?" Sirius said, with a sly smile in Harry's direction.

"Yes, indeed." Cornelius smiled at him brightly. "You're looking very well, Harry. Obviously being with your godfather suits you."

"Thank you," Harry said politely, "and for coming today to be a witness. And for helping to clear Sirius."

Cornelius waved a hand. "My pleasure, Harry. I'm only sorry I didn't listen when we met at Hogwarts, I'm afraid I took far too much note of your Professor Snape. I can promise it won't happen again."

"Thank you, sir." Harry responded formally.

"Cornelius, please." Cornelius said, still smiling.

Sirius stepped in to Harry's relief and a moment later they stood in front of Amelia Bones.

"Good to see you again, Harry." Amelia said as he kissed her knuckles.

"You too," he gave her a genuine smile, "thank you for coming and for everything you and Auror Moody did for Sirius."

Amelia merely smiled at him and allowed Sirius to do the rest of the introductions so they could greet Wilbert Croaker.

"I'm glad to finally meet you. Call me Bertie." He gave a friendly smile to Harry.

Harry smiled back, liking the older man instantly. "Thank you for attending the adoption. My friend Hermione will probably have a hundred questions for you. She's really smart."

"That's a good trait to look for in a woman, Harry," Bertie teased, "glad to see you starting early."

Harry felt his cheeks heating up and was grateful again when Sirius intervened to introduce the Tonks' to the Head of the Unspeakables.
The final two attendees were Brian Cutter and Mary Baron, their solicitors. Harry had already met them both before he and Sirius had returned from the States and their greetings were performed swiftly.

Sirius led them all back through to his study which had been changed by Kreacher. All the furniture had been cleared out and replaced with rows of comfortably padded but straight-backed chairs facing the mantel-piece with its ornate rendering of the crest of the House of Black. Just in front of the fireplace, a pedestal had been set-up with the ritual bowl and knife.

The guests made their way to their seats as did Harry. He sat at the front with Remus on one side and Minerva on the other. He glanced over his shoulders at the Grangers just behind him. He gave Hermione an encouraging smile as she was nervously chewing her lip.

Sirius cleared his throat and everyone became quiet. "Thank you, friends and family, for attending today. We actually have three rituals to do. The first is a sponsor ritual between Hermione Granger and Andromeda Tonks. The second will be the adoption ritual between myself and Harry. And lastly, we will do a blessing ritual for Harry." He smiled at the gathering. "So, let's begin: Hermione, Andy?"

Hermione walked out to the front and Harry felt a rush of pride. He was really grateful that Sirius had come up with such a brilliant way of saying thank you to Hermione for helping to save his life.

Sirius gave Hermione a warm smile and directed her to stand on the left of the pedestal facing Andromeda who stood on the right. Sirius moved to stand behind it and tapped the ritual bowl invoking the family magic which erupted in its usual silver swirl.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, invoke our magic to witness the repayment of a life debt between the House of Black and Hermione Jean Granger. In gratitude for her part in saving my life, I bid Andromeda Ursula Tonks, daughter of the House of Black, sponsor Hermione Jean Granger within the House of Black by blood, by magic and by oath, providing her with the protection and sanctuary of the House of Black."

Harry held his breath in the reverent silence as Sirius nodded at Andromeda.

Andromeda picked up the knife and carefully sliced her palm, allowing a few drops of blood to fall into the bowl. "I, Andromeda Ursula Tonks, daughter of the House of Black, swear to sponsor Hermione Jean Granger in the wizarding world; to provide her with knowledge, with tools, with love; to protect and give her sanctuary. I undertake this solemn duty by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

She passed the knife to Hermione who threw Sirius a quick look to check it was OK for her to go ahead. At his nod, she sliced her palm with a grimace and allowed the blood to trickle into the bowl.

"I, Hermione Jean Granger," her voice shook a little, "am honoured to accept the sponsorship offered to me by the House of Black. I swear to consider Andromeda Ursula Tonks, daughter of the House of Black, sponsor Hermione Jean Granger in the wizarding world; to provide her with knowledge, with tools, with love; to protect and give her sanctuary. I accept this solemn duty by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Andromeda held out her cut hand and Hermione took it so their clasped hands were positioned over the bowl. The family magic rose up forming its snake totem and wrapped itself around their wrists so they were bound together. The snake hissed over their hands.

"I accept this bond." The snake said.
Harry smiled at the totem but held back from speaking to it, knowing he was the only one who had understood what it said.

Sirius grinned at the two women. "I have witnessed this bonding between you and declare Hermione Jean Granger a daughter of the House of Black." He said formally. "So have I sworn; so mote it be." He tapped the bowl and the magic vanished.

Andromeda turned Hermione's palm face upwards and healed it quickly before doing the same to her own as the room erupted in pleased applause.

Harry looked around as he clapped enthusiastically. Tonks was grinning ear to ear, her hair cycling through a variety of colours. Draco looked subdued but he was clapping politely along with his parents. Arthur and Molly both looked delighted while Ron looked…angry? Harry frowned and wondered what the problem was. He turned back to see Hermione walking back towards him. He grinned at her and she smiled shyly back at him.

"OK," Sirius said loudly, regaining everyone's attention, "Harry, if you'd like to come up, and Remus, who as an old friend of James and Lily, will stand as the magical witness." He smiled at their guests. "I would just like to remind everyone that Harry is a parslemouth and as you've already witnessed the Black family totem is a snake. Needless to say the totem is over the moon at having someone to talk with after years of silence so if you hear an exchange between them, please don't worry or panic or assume that Harry's being turned into a Dark wizard."

Harry had mixed feelings about Sirius's openness but he guessed it was better to be up front then have someone yell something horrible in the middle of their adoption ritual.

Remus took Sirius's position behind the pedestal facing out at the audience while Sirius moved to where Andromeda had stood; Harry in Hermione's place. Harry noted the bowl and knife looked pristinely clean and realised Sirius must have handled that while his attention had been elsewhere after Hermione's ritual.

Sirius winked at him, Remus smiled, and Harry remembered to breathe.

"Ready?" Sirius asked quietly.

Harry nodded.

They both tapped the ritual bowl at the same time and called their family magic. Gold and silver sparkles swirled into the air.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, invoke the magic of the House of Black to witness our adoption of Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir to the House of Black, by blood, by magic, and by oath."

"I, Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, invoke the magic of the House of Potter to witness my adoption by Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, son of the House of Potter, by blood, by magic, and by oath."

There was a surprised murmur as the audience remembered that Sirius had been given sanctuary within the Potter family; that unusually both family magics would come into play with the adoption.

"I, Remus John Lupin, steward of the House of Black, steward of the House of Potter, brother by magic, by spirit, by heart to James Charlus Potter and Lily Elizabeth Potter, stand witness to this adoption."
Sirius picked up the knife and cut his palm, dripping the blood into the bowl. "I, Sirius Orion Black, son of the House of Black, son of the House of Potter, brother by blood, by spirit, by heart to James Charlus Potter and Lily Elizabeth Potter, invite Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir to the House of Black, to be my son by blood, by magic, by law; my son by blood, by spirit, by heart; my son by blood, by will, and by oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Harry wasn't keen on slicing his palm open but he did it with the faintest of frowns and his blood fell from his palm to join Sirius's within the bowl. "I, Harry James Potter, son of the House of Potter, son of the House of Black, son by blood, by spirit, by heart to James Charlus Potter and Lily Elizabeth Potter, accept Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, son of the House of Potter, as my father by blood, by magic, by law; my father by blood, by spirit, by heart; my father by blood, by will, and by oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

They joined hands and the magic responded immediately; the snake bound them as it had Andromeda and Hermione but it waited until the griffin flew up from the bowl and rested atop their hands and gave a fierce cry before it hissed.

"The griffin and I welcome this bond, youngling." The snake said.

"Thank you." Harry replied. He looked up into Sirius's inquisitive eyes. "The griffin and the snake welcome our bond."

Sirius grinned. "Thank you." He said to the totems.

Remus smiled happily at the two of them. "I have witnessed this bonding between you and know it to be true. Sirius Orion Black you are now the father of Harry James Potter by blood, by magic and by this oath." He said formally. "So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Harry and Sirius raised their wands and tapped the bowl together. With a final cry and a hiss goodbye the totems disappeared once more.

Applause filled the room again. Harry looked out at the sea of faces. Neville gave him two thumbs up; Hermione was clapping hard enough to hurt her hands, and Ron…still looked less than chuffed. Harry shook away the thought. Maybe Ron was just uncomfortable with the pomp and ceremony.

His attention snapped back to his palm as Sirius carefully healed it. Sirius squeezed his hand gently before letting go.

"OK there, Harry?" Sirius asked quietly.

Harry nodded.

"You ready for the next bit?" Sirius asked, again keeping his voice low.

"I think so," Harry smiled warmly, "Padfoot."

They'd agreed the night before that 'Dad' had too much association with James for both of them to be comfortable with Harry calling Sirius that; instead Harry would call Sirius his Marauder nickname as a way of acknowledging the change in their relationship.

"Pronglet." Sirius's eyes sparkled at Harry proudly.

Remus couldn't contain himself any longer. He cleared his throat and clapped his hands in delight. With a single mischievous look Harry knew what Sirius wanted them to do. They both pounced on him in unison, gathering the three of them into a brief group hug.
Sirius clapped Remus's shoulder and raised his voice. "Thank you, Moony."

He quietened the room again and Remus returned to his seat.

"Lastly, we have a blessing ritual for a child's protection by their new adopted family." Sirius explained. "It's based on Witch magic so I will stand witness but not take part."

It wasn't the full story about the protection spell but as Sirius and Remus had argued they didn't want too many people realising the exact spell Harry's mother had performed as then they could find a way to undo it. Harry thought it was a sensible precaution given the presence of Malfoy in the room.

"Will the ladies of the House of Black and Minerva McGonagall please step forward?" Sirius requested briskly.

Harry found himself facing Minerva over the ritual bowl. She relaxed her stern visage to give him a small smile and he smiled back.

"Harry, you'll need to take the lead on this one." Sirius said softly.

He took a deep breath and calmed his magic before tapping the bowl. Silver and gold erupted in the bowl

"I, Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir of the House of Black invoke the magic of the House of Potter and the House of Black to witness this blessing."

A gasp went up by someone as whoever it was caught onto the fact that Harry could summon both family magics.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, son of the House of Potter, father to Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir of the House of Black, stand witness to this blessing of my son."

Sirius handed Harry the ritual knife.

Harry drew it over his palm again, knowing that they had to do it afresh for the magic to work. He frantically tried to remember the ritual words, knowing the form of them changed in the old spell. "I, Harry of the House of Potter and the House of Black, son of Lily of the House of Potter, give my blood willingly in this blessing." He placed the knife down beside the bowl.

Sirius drew a small vial of blood and a velvet pouch from the pocket of his robes and handed them to Minerva.

"I, Minerva of the Clan McGonagall, stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter, mother by blood of Harry of the House of Potter and the House of Black." She withdrew a gold locket from the velvet bag and held it over the ritual bowl. "This locket is the symbol of Lily, given to her mother by blood, Marigold of the family Evans, in celebration of motherhood."

Harry took hold of the locket with his hand, the chain rubbing painfully against the cut and sending fresh blood running down his palm. He knew he had to remain with his hand holding the locket for the rest of the ritual.

Minerva continued. "I stand in the place of Petunia of the family Dursley, sister by blood to Lily, aunt by blood to Harry and who gives her blood freely in this blessing."

Harry knew Remus had spent hours convincing his aunt to give up the blood and the locket. He
watched as Minerva tipped out the vial into the ritual bowl and set it aside. She clasped her right hand atop Harry's over the bowl, holding the locket with him. She dipped a finger into the bowl with her other, reached across the space and drew a rune of protection on his forehead.

"I recognise the willing sacrifice of Lily of the House of Potter in protection of her son. In the place of Lily and Petunia, I welcome his new family by blood, the House of Black, and invite them to anchor this blessing by blood, magic and oath." She smiled at him. "So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Minerva stepped aside and walked around him to place a hand on Harry's right shoulder, looking over towards the remaining women.

Andromeda was up next. She gave a brilliant smile and picked up the ritual knife, quickly making a cut. "I, Andromeda, Elder of the House of Black, welcome Harry of the House of Potter and the House of Black. I stand now in the place of Lily of the House of Potter," she placed her cut hand over Harry's and the locket, dipped her finger and traced the rune on his forehead, "I renew her blessing by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

She let go and walked to stand behind him, placing her hand on his left shoulder.

Harry tried not to flinch when Narcissa stepped up and neatly cut her palm open.

"I, Narcissa, Mother of the House of Black, welcome Harry of the House of Potter and the House of Black. I stand now in the place of Lily of the House of Potter," she wrapped her hand around Harry's hand gently as she coated a finger with her other and drew the rune, "I renew her blessing by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

She walked swiftly away to take her position behind him.

Tonks was next and she winked broadly at Harry as she went through the familiar motions. "I, Nymphadora, Maiden of the House of Black, welcome Harry of the House of Potter and the House of Black. I stand now in the place of Lily of the House of Potter," she took hold of his hand and made the rune on his forehead, "I renew her blessing by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Hermione was last, stepping up as Tonks placed her hand on Harry's shoulder with her mother and aunt. Harry grinned at Hermione in relief.

She carefully cut her palm and let the blood mingle with the others in the bowl. "I, Hermione, daughter of the House of Black, daughter of the family Granger, welcome Harry of the House of Potter and the House of Black, my friend by magic, by spirit, by heart. I stand now in the place of Lily of the House of Potter," her hand clasped his and he squeezed it comfortingly as he felt her tremble; she made the rune carefully, keeping her other hand steady, "I renew her blessing by blood, by magic, by willing sacrifice; by blood, by spirit, by heart; by blood, by will, and by oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Harry's eyes widened as the magic flared brilliantly between them, a fountain of silver and gold that swirled around the two of them until they formed solid shapes either side of Hermione; a huge gold griffin stood on her right, and a massive silver snake on her left.

She looked at him with wide scared eyes and he kept tight hold of her hand as he darted a look towards Sirius and then at Remus but they both looked as stunned as everyone else.

The griffin morphed suddenly into the shape of a misty golden woman, a woman he had only seen in pictures – his mother! She shifted forward and placed her hand over his and Hermione's.
"Mum." Harry whispered, tears springing to his eyes.

Sirius stood beside him, frozen at the sight of the spirit of his dead friend.

"I, the spirit of Lily of the House of Potter called forth by my son, proclaim my blessing of love and protection is renewed by the House of Black." Lily said softly. "By blood, by magic, by oath."

She stepped up and kissed his forehead. Warmth and love flowed through him, almost making him dizzy. It was like the best hug ever. She smiled at Harry before she moved away to stand behind Hermione's right shoulder.

Harry drank in the sight of her and only vaguely realised that the snake was also shifting shape into a woman. He dragged his gaze away from his mother to look at her but he didn't recognise her all; she was beautiful, long flowing hair and dressed in an old fashioned robe.

She moved to stand next to Hermione on her left, reached out her hand and placed it over Harry's and Hermione's. Her gentle gaze met Harry's across the ritual bowl.

"I, the spirit of Morgana of the line of Le Fey, called forth by the magic of this son of Black, judge thee Harry, child of Merlin, of the House of Potter and the House of Black. Thou have been blessed with love but cursed with loss; thou will stand betwixt the light and the dark; thou will yet perish or master Death." The spirit smiled sadly at him. "This I See, my child; but thou has spirit to arm thee, and heart to spur thee, and this gift of my blessing to shield thee. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

She kept hold of his hand as she glided forward and placed a kiss over his forehead. It was icy and cold but he felt a rush of powerful magic through his veins.

She moved away. As soon as her hand met Hermione's left shoulder, the spirits of Morgana and his mother – his mother! She couldn't leave him! – fell in a shower of magic back into the forms of the totems.

There was silence in the room.

Harry was breathing heavily and his eyes met Hermione's shocked gaze. She gently extracted her hand from his and stepped around to take her place at his left shoulder, leaving the griffin and snake behind. Harry swayed and the hands on his shoulders steadied him.

Sirius made a small movement, catching Harry's attention. "I have witnessed this blessing and know it to be true by blood, by magic and by this oath." He said shakily. "So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Harry raised his wand. He glanced at the snake which bowed its head before he stared at the griffin desperately wanting to see his mother again; the griffin gave a heartfelt cry as though it too wanted the same as Harry. Sirius cleared his throat and Harry knew he had to end the ritual. He tapped the bowl. The totems dissipated into a cloud of light and then disappeared.

"Merlin's bloody balls!" Someone said in the background.

Harry's frantic gaze met Sirius's and as Sirius took a step towards him, Harry felt darkness beckon him and he fell into it gratefully.

o-O-o

Sirius caught Harry before he hit the floor; adrenaline surging through him. "Harry!" He felt his panic start to escalate as he remained unresponsive. He lowered him down to the floor and searched Harry's neck for a pulse. There was a strong beat against his fingers and he gave a shaky breath.
Ted was suddenly beside him waving his wand in a familiar diagnostic pattern. "Magical exhaustion." He said crisply. "He'll be fine; he just needs bed rest."

"Which when you consider he managed to call forth the spirit of Morgana Le Fey isn't too surprising." Bertie said beside Ted, peering over his shoulder at Harry. He straightened up. "By my authority, this magical event is deemed need-to-know. Everybody here will take a Vow or be obliviated."

An outbreak of protests erupted but Sirius ignored them as Remus finally pushed his way through to them. Sirius placed Harry's arm around his neck and lifted him into his arms, staggering as he got up from the floor with Remus's help. "Remus, can you work on the Vow with Bertie, please."

"I'll help." Amelia offered immediately, understanding the need for confidentiality.

"Is Harry going to be OK?" Molly asked worriedly, hurrying over as Sirius started for the door.

"He'll be fine." Sirius said quickly. "Minerva…can you come with me?"

Molly immediately moved to his side. "I'll be happy to…"

"I'm sorry, Molly, but the house is under Fidelius and I'm not the Secret Keeper. Minerva is already aware of where it is." Sirius said, adjusting his hold on Harry as he shifted away from Molly's outstretched arms that had reached for Harry. "Thank you for your concern though." He walked out with Minerva just behind him.

"You're taking him home?" Minerva asked as soon as she closed the door behind them.

Sirius nodded. He sealed the doorway with a thought. No-one would be able to leave until Sirius returned and let them out. "He's safest there. I'm going to need you to watch him, please, while I sort this out."

"Of course." Minerva said, summoning her bag and outer robe that had been left in a closet in the hallway.

They flooed through to Griffin House and Sirius took the stairs swiftly.

Dobby popped in as Sirius laid Harry down on the bed. "Harry Potter is injured!"

"Magically exhausted, Dobby." Sirius carefully untangled the locket from Harry's hand and placed it on the bedside table.

Minerva immediately healed the wound on Harry's palm while Sirius vanished Harry's clothing with a wave of his wand, leaving him in his underwear. He levitated him under the covers with Dobby and Minerva's help. He traced a hand over Harry's forehead. Lily – Lily! – and Morgana's blessing had cleaned away the blood rune that had been drawn over and over.

He hovered; he wanted nothing more than to stay with Harry, with his son.

"It's alright, Sirius." Minerva said briskly. "I'll watch over him. You return and make sure nobody can tell anyone about what just happened. The sooner you go, the sooner you can come back and have my Vow."

Sirius pushed a hand through his hair and nodded. He dropped a kiss of his own on Harry's forehead and got off the bed. He made his way back to Black Manor with his mind was swimming with what he had witnessed – Lily! – and he wasn't certain that he could make sense of it. The power of Harry's
magic had summoned the most notorious witch in the history of the wizarding world – who had blessed him and called him a child of Merlin! And the totems – the totems had formed both spirits…

He found himself suddenly in front of his study door, breathing heavily. He could hear the cacophony of voices within the room and took a breath, gathering his poise and authority. He cancelled the seal with a wave of his hand and marched in, closing the door behind him. He was quite surprised at the orderly scene in front of him.

There was a group consisting of Brian, Remus, Augusta, Bertie, Amelia and Cornelius, all gathered around the pedestal scribbling on a piece of parchment as they agreed the Vow to be taken.

Hermione spotted Sirius and hurried over, trailed by Ron. "Harry?"

"In bed." Sirius said succinctly. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure you're OK?"

She nodded, her bushy hair flying everywhere. "It was just incredible and a little scary; the feel of the magic was..." she blushed, "I was just worried that I'd messed up the blessing because I thought I must have messed it up and..."

"Hermione!" barked Ron. "It wasn't your magic that summoned the Dark Witch."

Sirius's eyebrows shot up at the implied insult to Harry.

"Ron," Hermione's eyes gleamed fiercely, "Morgana Le Fey was not a Dark Witch. It's a common misconception based on the patriarchal and chauvinistic myths and legends around Merlin which glorify him and make her, the woman, out to be the villain of the piece when she simply stood for a different religious ideology. In fact, many believe that Rowena Ravenclaw followed the same religious belief and she was well known to be a Light witch so I don't see..."

"Indeed, Rowena was a Priestess in the old way." Narcissa interrupted. She had glided up beside them without anyone noticing; Hermione jumped visibly. "It is documented in older versions of Hogwarts: A History."

Sirius could see Ron fighting not to say something insulting and decided to remove his cousin from the youngster's presence.

"If you'll excuse us," he said politely, taking Narcissa's elbow and leading her back to where Lucius and Draco stood away from everyone else in the room. "I take it you wished to speak to me?"

"We wish permission to tell others of the agenda of the House of Black. Specifically, the decisions and announcements you made to us today will be shared with others in our alliance ahead of the Wizengamot session tomorrow." Narcissa said.

Sirius noted absently that Lucius was deferring to his wife; clearly he had gotten the message about the primacy. "You have my authorisation."

Narcissa hesitated for a moment and then forged ahead. "We also wish permission to mention that we have witnessed the power of the Boy Who Lived."

"Something unspecific but along the lines that I having witnessed his power for myself now believe he did defeat the Dark Lord should suffice," Lucius said, "for the purposes of swaying my allies to the Boy Who Lived. We won't, of course, discuss the details."
Sirius met Lucius's cold gaze and read the truth in his hard eyes; Lucius *did* believe it now. Not surprisingly; Ron had put it rather inelegantly but Harry's magic had summoned the spirit of the most powerful witch of all time.

"You have my authorisation." Sirius repeated, knowing that if he took away the Dark Lord's political allies half the battle was won. He sighed. "You're already covered by the Vows you took this morning but you can stay and take this additional one or leave."

"We will take our leave." Narcissa said, her hand falling to Draco's shoulder. "My Lord Black." She curtseyed; her husband and son bowed their heads and Sirius escorted them to the door where Kreacher appeared to take them to the floo.

Sirius shook his head and made his way to Andy and her family. "Like dear Cousin Narcissa and her family, you're covered by your oaths to the family magic. If you wish to leave, you may do so."

Ted looked surprised and Andromeda shook her head. "I can stand on behalf of the House of Black for the Vow for some people, speed things up."

"Thank you." Sirius said truly grateful for her assistance.

"I won't ask how powerful he is, Sirius," Andromeda said quietly, "but that was incredible. I felt the magic flow through him. It was unlike anything I've ever felt."

Sirius nodded tiredly. "He's...just a kid though, Andy. I would never have agreed to the blessing ritual if..."

"I think everyone knows that, Sirius." Andromeda comforted him. She nodded towards the front of the room. "I think they have a Vow they can work with."

Sirius made his way to the front and Remus handed him the parchment.

"Harry?" asked Remus.

"Asleep; Minerva's watching over him." Sirius answered quickly. He read the Vow. *Will you [insert name] keep the blessing of the ritual by Lily Potter's spirit secret? Will you keep the blessing of Harry Potter by Morgana Le Fey and the words she spoke secret?* He nodded. "OK, let's get on with it."

Molly coughed and caught his attention. "I'm sorry but I'm still not really comfortable with the children undertaking this kind of Vow. They are too young to accept the responsibility."

"Mrs Weasley, we have been through this already," Bertie beat Sirius to the punch, "children as young as twelve have taken the Vow before and lived enormously long and fruitful lives because they understood that to break the Vow will mean serious consequences. If you are unwilling to trust that your child can keep the Vow, then we will need your permission to obliviate him."

"Mum!" The uproar from Ron was immediate.

"I'm not sure that you have the authority..."

"And as we've already established: I do." Bertie forcefully, suddenly looking like the very powerful wizard he was rather than an eccentric old man. "As Head of the DOM I can declare any magical event to be need-to-know. I have issued that declaration for the blessing ritual."

"And he has my support as Minister of Magic." Cornelius added, puffing up with responsibility.
"And mine as the Head of the DMLE." Amelia confirmed grimly.

Arthur sighed and placed a hand on his wife's arm. "I share your concern, Molly, but as Bertie has said we've already been through this and I think Ron and the others of his age here are aware of how serious it is to keep a Vow."

Molly subsided again into a chair with a huff.

"Madame Longbottom?" Sirius said. "Would you be willing to go first? Remus will act as our Bonder."

"Of course." Augusta said.

"Andy, can you perform the Vow for the Weasleys, please? Bertie, if you could be Bonder?" Sirius requested as Augusta took her place beside him.

For the next half an hour, there was a stream of Vow taking that blurred in Sirius's mind until the last was done. He had escorted people out as each family or individual had completed the Vow and they were free to leave. The adult Grangers, being muggles, in the end had to be obliviated of witnessing the spirits although they were left with their memory intact otherwise; Hermione was able to take the Vow. Finally, there was only Sirius, Remus and Bertie left. They'd encouraged Penelope to head out.

"I should take the Vow too." Remus argued.

"You're under oath to both the House of Black and the House of Potter," Sirius pointed out exasperatedly, "and not to mention you'd die before you'd betray any of our secrets to anyone ever."

Bertie looked on amused.

Remus sighed. "Director Croaker?"

"I would normally insist on it, but I agree with Lord Black," Bertie said, "you are covered by the oaths just as the Tonks' and the Malfoys." He paused. "And you would never betray the secret to anyone."

"We should get back home," Sirius said urgently, worried about Harry, "Minerva's waiting for us."

"Sirius, if I could have a word?" Bertie said with enough authority that Sirius knew it was a demand rather than a request however it had been phrased.

"Remus, can you…"

"Head back." Remus nodded. "I want to check on Harry myself. I can't help feeling this was my fault."

"Your research and calculations looked impeccable, Mister Lupin," Bertie assured him, "and I doubt very much for any other wizard, their magic would have been powerful enough to call forth spirits in such a way."

Remus sighed. "Perhaps you're right."

"It wasn't your fault, Moony." Sirius comforted him. "Now, go on and check on my son."

Remus's eyes gleamed with a brief flash of happiness as he recalled the earlier and less tumultuous adoption ritual. He patted Sirius on the arm as he passed – a silent message that it wasn't Sirius's fault
Bertie waited until the study door was closed before he turned back to Sirius. "There's something you should see. Do you have the pensieve handy?"

Sirius frowned and called for Kreacher. A moment later the pensieve was on the pedestal and Bertie was filling it with a silvery strand.

Falling into Bertie's memory was disconcerting especially when he found himself in the past and the old War Office of the Ministry. It was quite a gathering, Sirius realised; old Barty Crouch Senior, Millicent Bagnold, Dumbledore, a less scarred Moody, a young female Auror who Sirius recognised as Annette Kelp, Charlus Potter, James and a heavily pregnant Lily.

Sirius blinked back tears at the sight of his friends. He knew immediately what they were gathered to discuss: him. He tensed as he understood where he was right at that moment in the past – in the hands of Death Eaters.

"Croaker?" Crouch asked sharply. "News?"

"Our intelligence sources have nothing. Wherever they've taken Black…it's masked to our magic." Bertie replied all-business. "What exactly happened?"

"That's what I would like to know and have been trying to find out for far too long." Charlus said forcefully.

"Lord Potter," Bagnold said crisply, "you are here as a courtesy nothing more."

Charlus's eyes narrowed on the Minister. "And you are here because I helped to vote you in. Keep in mind, I can vote you out."

"And I would help him."

The sound of his grandfather's voice had Sirius whipping around.

Arcturus Black stood framed in the doorway; immaculate robes adorned with the Black crest fell from his shoulders to the floor in a sweep of black; his greying hair was tied back in a similar style to Charlus; the Black ring glinted in the dim light.

He entered the room as though uncaring of the glowers and stares. "I understand my grandson is missing?"

Bagnold straightened up sharply. "Who told you?"

"Probably a Death Eater." Moody snarled.

Arcturus merely smiled at him darkly. "Somebody will tell me what has happened to my grandson and what is being done to retrieve him or I will call for a full Wizengamot session and vote this entire administration incompetent."

Sirius had to admit his grandfather had always had style.

"And I would help him." Charlus said tersely, folding his arms and staring at his rival.

Charlus on the other hand had always had integrity. Sirius missed him badly.

Arcturus inclined his head. "Potter."
"Black."

The two elder statesmen turned to glare in unison at Bagnold.

"Gentlemen, I'm sure this can be quickly resolved." Dumbledore said smoothly. "Young Miss Kelp was just about to give us her report of events; she was unconscious in St Mungo's until one hour ago. She may be able to shed some light on what has happened to our missing friend."

Kelp straightened into a position that Sirius remembered from boot-camp. "I was sent to work with Hit Wizard Black undercover two months ago. I posed as his girlfriend. Two nights ago, at a party, we came across a muggle smuggling operation where the women were being sold as sex slaves to Death Eaters on the continent. I believed we should perform our duty and protect them. Hit Wizard Black ordered me not to intervene citing it would blow our cover and that we should wait and report it so a rescue mission could be mounted by others. I disregarded that order believing Black did not want to intervene because he did not want to save muggles."

Ah, yes. Sirius remembered how the halfblood Kelp had spent every moment of the assignment questioning his orders because of his name; suspicious of his family history and not believing he was on the side of the Light.

"At midnight I entered the room where the muggles were being kept without Black to release them."
She paused. "I inadvertently set off an alarm. I was, uh, duelling two guards when Hit Wizard Black turned up and took out one guard. I stunned the other guard but not before Hit Wizard Black had been hit by some kind of spell. He was alive but unconscious when I checked him. I rescued the muggles and as I could hear more guards approaching, I used my emergency portkey to travel directly to St Mungo's with the muggles and was hit by a hex rendering me unconscious just as the portkey activated."

Sirius snorted. He had requested several times for Kelp to be replaced in the belief that she was prejudiced against him and wouldn't follow his orders in a critical situation, and he'd been proven right.

"Let me get this straight," Moody snarled before anyone else could speak, "you disregarded a direct order from a senior officer, who by the way was following protocol and correct in his assessment, took it upon yourself to mount a half-arsed rescue mission forcing him into assisting you to save your goddamn life and then you left him behind, unconscious and defenceless? You screwed months of undercover work and you screwed Black's cover!"

"Sorry," older Bertie muttered beside him, "I should have started the memory later. Still, you'll get a kick out of what happens next."

Kelp stiffened. "With respect, sir, I believe Black is a Death Eater and..."

Lily moved faster than Sirius believed possible given her pregnancy and punched her. "You miserable bitch! Sirius would never be a Death Eater! You just don't like him because he's a Black!"

"Lils," James pulled her away, "calm down! It's not good for the baby for you to get upset!" He led her away to a chair.

"Charlus, I can see why your daughter-in-law is called the smartest witch of her generation." Arcturus's icy stare landed on Kelp. "You will be charged with the endangerment of the Black heir."

"See!" Kelp spluttered, pointing a shaking finger at Arcturus, "he admits it!"

"Lord Black has simply confirmed that Sirius is the blood heir to the House of Black, something that
everyone here was already well aware of, you foolish girl!” Bagnold snapped.

"Sirius is also a son of the House of Potter and he is no Death Eater," Charlus stressed. "He has spent every moment of this war fighting for the Light! You will be charged."

Kelp flushed bright red. "I saved those muggles!"

"And condemned the best Hit Wizard in the whole damn team!" Moody growled.

"Now, now, perhaps we shouldn't be too hasty," Dumbledore intervened, "Miss Kelp may have misjudged the situation and Mister Black's character but surely we cannot afford for any able-bodied Auror to be dismissed in these grave times."

"I agree." Crouch stated.

"Of course, you do," James said sarcastically, "exactly how many times has Sirius asked for this woman to be removed from his team? I bet he's done it every report. He'd know she was prejudiced against him and he'd request the transfer rather than risk the mission. Only you suspect him just as much as she does, so you disregarded his requests and kept her on the job probably to 'keep an eye on him.'" He stabbed a finger towards Crouch. "I hold you responsible for this!"

"You seem to have forgotten that I'm your boss, Potter!" Crouch said coldly.

"And you seem to have forgotten that you're talking to the Heir of an Ancient and Noble House!" snapped Charlus.

"The girl will be charged," Arcturus stated firmly, "remove her from my presence."

Moody grumbled under his breath. "Come on, Kelp. Let's get you to a holding cell and a healer for that shiner." He swung around to wink at Lily as he marched Kelp out. "Excellent right hook, Mrs Potter."

Lily blushed.

"It was a very good right hook," Sirius commented, blinking back new tears at the sight of his old friends defending him. "She punched me once."

"That doesn't surprise me." Bertie said dryly. "It all descends into a bit of a shouting match now."

It did. Bagnold and Crouch were arguing they didn't have the resources to track Sirius down; James was arguing with them that they did along with his grandfather and Charlus who both were offering to fund European wide searches for him as he'd been captured in Romania. Younger Bertie was trying to calm everyone down along with Dumbledore. It was mayhem.

"Enough!" Lily cried out.

Silence descended as they all turned to the pregnant woman.

"This isn't helping to find Sirius and we have to find him!" Lily burst into tears which she wiped away angrily. "He's been in their hands all this time; it'll be a wonder if he isn't dead and…"

James started over to her but magic was stirring – the air thick with it.

"…and we need to get him back, we need to…” Lily's robes were swirling around her, her hair flying as magic whirled like tornado with her at the centre.
“Lily!” James cried out, his face a picture of panic.

Sirius felt his own panic rise. What was going on?!

Suddenly, she stiffened and her hand snapped out, palm face downwards, directing the magic that swarmed over her, down her arm and through her palm to fall in two separate streams of gold and silver that gave form to two very familiar family totems.

Arcturus jerked, offended that the Black family magic had been stolen by a muggleborn woman – even one who had married into another Ancient and Noble House.

“No, Arcturus!” Charlus reached out and prevented Sirius's Grandfather from drawing his wand. “I don't think it's Lily that's summoned them!”

Sirius's eyes widened as he turned again to look at his dear friend.

She looked formidable; red hair streaming backwards, her robes billowing and her green eyes alight with magic.

"Mummy upset! Mummy wants Padfoot now!" Lily said in a childish voice. "Go get Padfoot!"

The griffin and the snake looked at her and looked at each other. The griffin stooped and the snake wrapped itself around it; the griffin took wing, flying around the room once before surging to the outer wall and disappearing.

Sirius tore his eyes away from the sight of the totems being commanded in such a way.

James took a hesitant step towards his wife. "Lily?"

"That's not Lily, James," Young Bertie commented warily.

"Indeed not," Dumbledore agreed, his eyes twinkling, "to whom are we speaking?"

"Daddy calls me Pronglet." The voice said cheerfully. "Mummy calls me Harry."

"The baby?" asked Arcturus in disbelief. "It's the baby?"

"It has both Black and Potter blood." Charlus said shakily. "That must be how it summoned both our family magics."

Young Bertie turned to look at Lily with open curiosity. "Incredible."

"There is no doubt that the child will be a powerful wizard if its unborn spirit can manifest in such a way." Dumbledore agreed.

"Pronglet?"

James looked calm but Sirius could tell his old friend was worried out of his mind.

"Pronglet, is Mummy OK?" James asked.

Lily's head nodded sharply before her eyes widened dramatically. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh?" James paled.

"Mummy called me Harry James Potter. Mummy mad at Harry." Her lips trembled as her eyes
filled with tears.

"Well, you did take over Mummy's body, Harry," James said reasonably with a shaky laugh.

"I'm sure Mummy understands that you only wanted to help." Charlus added warmly. "But you will need to give Mummy her body back now and return the Potter family magic to me."

"Your Grandfather Potter is quite right, young Harry," Arcturus added, "you'll need to give the Black family magic back to me, your Grandfather Black. It's quite dangerous for you."

Lily – or rather Harry – pouted.

"I'm sure, young Harry, you will get both back in time." Arcturus said with a smile.

Sirius gaped at his grandfather.

"In fact I give you my oath, Harry James Potter, Heir of the House of Potter, Heir to the House of Black that the Black family magic will one day be yours to command." Arcturus promised.

"And I give you my oath Harry James Potter, Heir of the House of Potter, Heir to the House of Black that the Potter family magic will one day be yours to command." Charlus said formally.

"Merlin!" Sirius breathed out in shock. "They both named Harry as an Heir back then?! Before his birth even?"

Bertie nodded beside him as his younger version continued to watch. "I believe they both meant for Harry to follow after you and James but yes, they couldn't deny what was rightfully his; what he had successfully summoned."

"Magic back now." A finger pointed to the centre of the room.

The griffin flashed in and deposited a form wrapped in a silver snake which slithered away to reveal Sirius; naked, half-dead and bloody.

Lily's eyes rolled up and she swooned. James caught her before she hit the floor.

"He's injured!" Arcturus said waving his wand over Sirius. "We have to get him to St Mungo's!"

"Lily needs a healer too!" James called out.

"And I am declaring this a need-to-know event under my authority as Head of the DOM." Younger Bertie stated forcefully.

They dropped out of the memory and back into Sirius's study.

"Albus made a portkey and everyone was whisked away to St Mungo's. You healed but couldn't remember anything except being captured and tortured; Charlus died not long after, and we had a war to contend with. I had…not forgotten, but hadn't thought of it for some time." Bertie sighed heavily and sat down in a nearby chair.

Sirius paced back and forth trying to make sense of what he had seen in the memory; what he had seen in the blessing ritual. He stopped. "He called the family magic to him when he was an unborn child and it obeyed?!" He shook his head, closed his eyes briefly and reopened them with a fierce protectiveness turning the grey dark and foreboding. "Did everyone in the room take a Vow not to disclose what had happened?"
"No," Bertie said, "Arcturus and Charlus in a surprise move teamed up and immediately used their family magics to obliterate everyone except James and Lily. They also left me because both of them agreed that someone else outside of the families should have the memory of what had happened and I had been quick to declare the event need-to-know. I have wondered since your exoneration whether the obliteration caused Albus, Bagnold and Crouch to distrust you more, especially after the place where the Death Eaters had kept you was discovered and the men there found dead without any explanation of how you achieved it when tortured so badly. I assume that the family magics that retrieved you enacted justice upon discovering you harmed."

Sirius sighed. He guessed it was possible but it was all magic through the wand.

Bertie gazed at Sirius resolutely. "Your ward…your son has an amazing affinity for family magic, a powerful connection. It's almost like he has a familiar bond with the totems." He said. "It is fascinating."

"If you think I'm going to let you experiment on him…" snarled Sirius.

"No," Bertie held up a hand in supplication, "I didn't mean that, he is a child and shouldn't be subjected to experiments I agree, but you have to admit, on an intellectual level, it is fascinating."

"You sound like Remus." Sirius said dryly.

Bertie smiled. "I take that as a compliment. If it weren't for the werewolf laws I would look at stealing him away from you."

"He wouldn't leave Harry either way." Sirius said confidently.

"No, I guess not." Bertie said. "My reason for showing you this memory is to give you fair warning that now Harry is a position where he is the recognised Heir of the House of Black and he has control of the House of Potter's magic that there may be more instances of this type of thing occurring."

"Bugger!" Sirius swore.

Bertie nodded.

Sirius paced again, considering his options. In some ways Harry having the kind of affinity with the family magics was a good thing. It would protect him that much was clear. On the other hand, it gave away just how powerful and unique Harry was. And they didn't understand enough about what was going on, about Harry's strange relationships with the totems; whether ultimately it would be harmful for him.

"We're coming in next week to look at the prophecy in detail," Sirius began, "I think it might be a good idea for us to explore Harry's affinity with the totems with you. We need to know more if we're to protect him properly."

"I suggest you do the prophecy next week and I'll get some research started in the meantime." Bertie said. "I'd like to have a theoretical basis on which to start posing questions."

Sirius nodded his agreement. "Thank you, Bertie."

"I'll let you get to your son." Bertie said.

Sirius walked Bertie out to the floo. He called Kreacher briefly, thanking him for his work that day and arranging the clean-up of the study. Sirius finally flooed back to Griffin House. He made his
way to Harry's room and wasn't surprised to see both Remus and Minerva grouped around Harry's bed with Dobby sat protectively at the end of the bed and Hedwig on the headboard.

He conjured up a chair of his own and picked up Harry's limp hand. "How is he?"

"Sleeping peacefully." Minerva said dryly.

Sirius smoothed Harry's fringe back from his forehead. His scar was faded; a thin sharp zig-zagging line was all that remained – one that Noshi had assured him would fade away completely in time. He traced it lovingly before he sat back tiredly.

Dobby popped away and back again with a mug of hot chocolate.

Sirius took it gratefully and fortified himself with a sip before he began telling them about Bertie and the memory.

"Well, I'll do some research too." Remus said. "It won't hurt to have a second viewpoint."

"Thank you, Moony." Sirius said.

"I will discreetly check out the Hogwarts library tomorrow while Albus is out at the Wizengamot." Minerva offered. She smiled sympathetically. "I believe Lord Black is going to have a busy day."

Sirius grimaced and took a big sip of his chocolate; he let the warmth comfort him.

"Well, I should leave you to it." Minerva said, getting to her feet. "Shall we do the Vow now or do you want me to come back early tomorrow?"

"It's OK, Minerva." Sirius said. "We trust you not to tell anyone; no Vow."

Minerva looked momentarily shocked before she gave a brief nod. "You'd better not tell that to Bertie. Try to get some rest, Sirius." She gently tucked Harry's blanket closer and departed the room.

Dobby popped off after her, presumably seeing to dinner. Sirius couldn't think about eating something – not when Harry was lying unconscious.

"This isn't how I thought we'd spend this evening." Sirius said sadly.

"We can celebrate when he wakes up." Remus motioned towards Harry. "I know looking at him it's hard to feel like celebrating anything but today was a good day, Padfoot. He's your son and nobody can interfere with that. Brian was going straight to the WOO with Amelia to register the adoption. And…despite the unusualness of what happened in the blessing ritual, it was successful. He's protected and that protection is now anchored by Black blood and, uh, the blessing of Morgana Le Fey."

"I know." Sirius said, picking up Harry's hand again. "I just…I want to protect him, Remus, and…"

"You are protecting him." Remus said firmly. "He'll be right as rain after a couple of days, well except for the very probable mortification at passing out in front of everyone."

Sirius gave a weak chuckle. "Thank you, Moony."

"I'll go check what Dobby's cooking up and get started on that research." Remus said pushing out of the chair. "You'll be OK here?"

Sirius nodded. "I'm just going to stay and watch over Harry."
For a moment it looked as though Remus was going to say something but he turned and walked away, leaving Sirius with Harry. Hedwig gave a hoot, launching off the headboard to glide across the room to her perch.

Sirius stroked a thumb over Harry's knuckles, remembering how he'd done the same thing at the clinic after the scar cleansing; how strangely the family magic totems had acted then. His mind drifted to the fragment of the prophecy Lucius had told him. "The one with the power…" Was the power Harry's strange connection with the family magics? As he watched him sleep, Sirius promised his son that he would do everything he could to find out.
"Thank you for inviting me to breakfast and indulging my curiosity."

Lucius patted his mouth with a napkin and looked over at Severus Snape coolly. "Your curiosity or Dumbledore's?"

There was a hint of amusement on Severus's dark eyes. "In truth, his, of course. What possible reason would I have to care whether there's a new Lord Black?" He sneered before his sallow face grew contemplative. "It did give me...a needed excuse to see you."

Lucius tossed his napkin down and picked up the finer cup filled to the brim with the best coffee money could buy. "The Mark is getting stronger."

"Yes." Severus said simply.

"Shall we dispense with the usual song and dance?" Lucius asked bluntly.

Severus blinked, as much surprise as the Slytherin Head ever allowed himself to show. "Dispense by all means, Lucius."

"He's not dead." Lucius stated.

"No," Severus agreed, "Dumbledore has been aware for some time that he is not. He lives as a wraith, out of body, but alive."

"Quirrell?" asked Lucius careful to make this tone careless.

"I believe the Dark Lord possessed him although I did not know it at the time." Severus admitted.

"Potter drove him away again." Lucius commented dryly. He took a sip of his coffee, enjoying the bitter aromatic flavour that danced over his tongue and the sour expression on Severus's face.

"I assume the diary was a way for him to return?" Severus countered. "Dumbledore refused to share anything about it with me."

Lucius nodded. He didn't share that it wasn't the only trinket; Severus didn't need to know that and certainly it was something Lucius didn't want getting back to the Dark Lord that could be traced to him. "Potter stopped that attempt too." He said in reply.

Severus's left eye twitched and Lucius hid his amusement by focusing on his coffee. Potter was Severus's weakness, as much a thorn under Severus's skin as the boy's father had been. Really, it was too easy.

"And now the Mark is darkening." Lucius returned to the original trigger for the discussion. "Obviously, the Dark Lord gains strength."

"Pettigrew escaped at Hogwarts." Severus informed him. "Dumbledore believes he will have sought out the Dark Lord to protect him from the wrath of the rest of the Marauders. It is the rat who will assist the Dark Lord in returning to power."

Lucius allowed himself a small grimace. Pettigrew had been the Dark Lord's ace in the hole, one kept completely secret; that the cowardly boy had been a Death Eater...the mind boggled.
"You have a meeting organised with the others?" asked Severus slyly.

"A meeting of my allies is not unusual ahead of a Wizengamot session." Lucius demurred.

"What strategy will be discussed?" Severus requested.

Lucius drained his cup and set it down. "Tell me, Severus, if the Dark Lord shows up tomorrow, what will he expect of those that followed him before?"

Severus made a careful motion with his hand. "That we will serve him."

"Yes," Lucius agreed mildly, "he will expect that we will throw ourselves upon his mercy; to be forgiven for not seeking him out and helping him return to power earlier; for believing a mere baby had destroyed him utterly when he bragged that he was immortal."

"If he shows up returned to strength then it will be the height of foolishness not to beg for his mercy." Severus pointed out. "He never suffered failure or disobedience lightly."

"He is a powerful wizard." Lucius looked at Severus keenly. "So tell me, Severus, what should our strategy be?"

"Mitigation of our apparent betrayal. A very public show of support of some kind," Severus surmised, "a spot of muggle-baiting, perhaps? The Quidditch World Cup would lend itself quite well as a stage."

"Wouldn't it?" Lucius mused. "And indeed until yesterday that was my thought."

Severus's dark eyes narrowed on him. "The Black family meeting."

"The House of Black has invoked its primacy." Lucius stated. "It will not serve anyone. It will especially not serve a halfblood bastard of a muggle."

Severus blinked again. "You don't intend to serve the Dark Lord?"

Lucius raised an eyebrow in silent reproach while quietly taking note of the fact that Severus was already aware of the Dark Lord's less than impressive origins. "All I will say is this: after seeing the magic invoked in the rituals yesterday, I serve the House of Black willingly and will watch it crush its enemies." He smiled evilly.

Severus took a sip of his juice and Lucius knew he was trying to process the new world order. "I see." He smoothed his robes. "One can assume it will not ally with him then as in the past."

"You can reassure your Headmaster of that much." Lucius allowed. He glanced at the clock and rose from his chair with elegant grace. "You will see yourself out, Severus?"

"I will." Severus said. "Thank you for an enlightening conversation."

"Severus," Lucius paused for a moment, contemplating the advice he was about to give the other man whether it served Lucius to give Severus such a warning, "the truth of Lord Black will be revealed at the Wizengamot but he was raised Slytherin and you should keep that in mind."

Severus blinked and Lucius departed in the knowledge that Severus had received the message. He liked Severus, not that he would ever admit it to the man himself. Severus was deeply intelligent; a Slytherin capable of cunning and stratagems that left nobody any the wiser to his true position. Lucius knew he had been seduced by his friends Avery and MacNair into supporting the Dark Lord
and the Dark Lord himself had wanted Severus for his potions knowledge; it had elevated him in the ranks despite his blood status. Severus was also a man who spied for both sides and convinced both his masters that they had his true allegiance. Lucius rather suspected Severus's true allegiance lay elsewhere but Potter was his weakness and Potter would be his downfall if Severus did not choose another path.

He made his way to his study and waited patiently for the influx of his allies. In no time at all, Lucius found himself sat at the large conference table in the room just off the study.

It was a simple room in comparison to the grandeur of the rest of the Manor. Dark green walls were complemented by cream accents; the furniture was polished cherry wood; the chairs upholstered in the same green colour as the walls. He cleared his throat and looked around the table as everyone fell silent.

There were very familiar faces seated around the table: Wilkes, Gibbon, Nott, and Selwyn were all Lords from Ancient and Noble Houses. Crabbe, Goyle, Avery, Jugson and Parkinson held Wizengamot formal seats but were minor Houses. Yaxley, Rowle, MacNair and Travers worked for the Ministry. Of the Dark Lord's favourites who were not residing in Azkaban, only Dolohov and the Carrows were missing as they were abroad – and Snape, of course, who was ostensibly a spy.

"Thank you for attending this gathering on short notice." Lucius said. For the second time in a day he decided that he would dispense with the usual verbal thrust and parry that came with dealing with a group of mostly Slytherin graduates. "I will not waste time; we have two items on our agenda. The new Lord Black and the changes to the Mark of the Dark Lord we wear."

Avery seemed to wilt visibly with the mention of the Dark Lord and Lucius wasn't the only one sending him a contemptuous glance.

"I believe it would be beneficial to speak of the former first before we come to a decision on the latter." Lucius said firmly.

Selwyn's plucked eyebrows rose. "What could possibly be more important than anything to do with the Dark Lord?"

"Indulge me." Lucius said in a tone of cold steel that told everyone in the room it was an order not a request. He had long ago taken the reins of leadership from the so-called Lords in the group and he would not allow them to take it back.

He leaned back in his chair. It was going to be a nightmare to work within the parameters of the Vow and convey the message required. "Yesterday, my wife and I attended the Black family meeting."

"Is it the squib's son as we had thought?" Wilkes sneered, his gruff features turning stony.

"Lord Black is the rightful heir by blood, magic and law." Lucius stated.

A few frowned as they worked through the meaning of his announcement.

"But that would mean Sirius Black is the…" Gibbon stumbled to a halt, his eyes wide.

A rippled of shock ran around the gathering.

"You remember of course how many of us Sirius Black killed when he was a Hit Wizard, I trust?" Lucius posed the question idly. "Yesterday, he called Judgement on the LeStranges and the body count went up by two. Bellatrix will no doubt be dead before the week is out, as it is she is stripped
of her magic, her name and the LeStrange fortune has been seized to pay reparations to the House of Longbottom."

"Dear Merlin!" Avery breathed out in horror.

"I only escaped a similar fate by the skin of my teeth," Lucius conceded, "as Lord Black believes to be Marked is to have betrayed the purity of the House of Black."

"The House of Black supported the Dark Lord!" snapped Selwyn.

"Arcturus was never Marked." Lucius pointed out calmly. "He never indicated support or censure. The fact is that he evidently kept Sirius as Heir – one presumes because he was the only Black in the line not Marked. So I would suggest your argument is void, Stewart."

"It is disappointing for a House with the pedigree of Black to fall into the snare of the old fool Dumbledore…" Wilkes began.

"Oh, Lord Black has no intention of the House being subjugated to the will of Dumbledore any more than he intends it being subjugated to the will of the Dark Lord." Lucius let his lips curve in a humourless arc as there was another wave of mutterings and shock.

"He will take a neutral stance?" Gibbon had too much apparent hope for the Slytherin he was supposed to be.

"Politically, I believe Lord Black means to own the centre," Lucius said, gesturing for them to halt their questions, "his agenda is one of egalitarianism." He allowed himself to sneer genuinely at that. "But he insisted in all other respects on following tradition and protocol."

"You forget though that he may not have a choice but to ally with Dumbledore should the Dark Lord return," Nott spoke up, "Black was awarded custody of the Boy Who Lived."

"He may have been awarded it but Dumbledore will never allow him to take custody." Jugson stated with a hard laugh.

"Lord Black already has taken custody." Lucius said simply. "Potter has claimed his Head of House ring. Black is confirmed as the Potter Regent. Potter was announced as the Heir of Black."

Another round of shock rushed through the gathering.

"He outmanoeuvred Dumbledore and took control of the boy?!" Selwyn laughed in delight, banging a fist on the arm of his chair. "Now that is outstanding! Arcturus will be laughing himself silly in the afterlife!"

"So Black now controls both the holdings of the House of Black and the House of Potter." Nott said quietly. It silenced the rest of the room as they started to contemplate Nott's statement.

"The Potter alliance will reform on the Light side," Parkinson said with certainty, "and most of the neutrals will go over if they're given another option besides allying with Dumbledore."

"Merlin's teeth!" Gibbon stuttered out. "Never mind owning the centre, Black will own the Wizengamot!"

"We may need to make concessions certainly but I believe there is a great deal of room in which to manoeuvre with Black's respect for tradition." Lucius allowed, tapping his fingers gently against the table top.
"Well, bugger it!" Travers finally made his presence known. He stabbed a meaty finger toward Lucius. "I say we wait until the Dark Lord comes back and let him sort out Black and Potter. Once he's back in power, we can do what we want."

Lucius looked over at Travers coolly. "Do you believe the Dark Lord will simply let us do what we want? If the Dark Lord returns and wins, we will all do what he wants."

"You say that like it's a bad thing, Lucius." Wilkes noted, his dark eyes gleaming malevolently.

"Why did we follow the Dark Lord, Norman?" Lucius asked politely. "Because he espoused a pureblood agenda and promised us a place of power at his side? Because he was the Heir of Slytherin? Because he was to be feared as a Dark wizard with knowledge of the Arts beyond most of us and had the power to kill us if we did not?"

Everyone stirred uncomfortably.

"Let me take each argument singularly. Yes, he espoused a pureblood agenda but how many purebloods in our ranks did the Dark Lord kill simply because he was angry at them for some misdemeanour?" Lucius saw the question hit home. "How many purebloods were held under the Cruciatus curse for the same reason? How many died in skirmishes and raids due to the war he waged?"

"On both sides," Nott added with his usual quiet assurance, "blood traitors they may have been but we lost a number of families because we were ordered to eliminate them."

"It is interesting, is it not," Lucius added, "how we managed to secure most of the agenda we wanted in the days after the war without bloodshed?"

"You make a good point but to what end?" Selwyn said bluntly.

"I'm older and perhaps wiser," Lucius said, "I question the decisions made back then in a way that I didn't in my youth."

Travers looked at him with a glower. "You are heading down a traitorous path."

"I admit," Lucius said calmly, "that I would never have questioned the past in such a way except I have recently learned that the Dark Lord is not a pureblood."

The outcry was immediate.

"Lies!" It was Travers again that spoke out. "Traitorous lies!" He yelled at him. "The Dark Lord is the Heir to Slytherin!"

Lucius simply raised an eyebrow. "I did not claim he wasn't. He is indeed the Heir. Tom Marvolo Riddle was born of Merope Gaunt, descendent of Slytherin. His father, however, was a mere muggle who disowned both Merope and his son. The Dark Lord is no pureblood."

"What makes you think this Riddle fellow is our Lord?" Avery's voice quavered.

"I was given a possession of the Dark Lord's which bore his name and Black filled me in on the rest." Lucius said candidly.

"Well, Black lied to you! He has filled your head with a story!" Travers insisted.

Selwyn was the one who shook his head sadly. "No, Lucius tells the truth. The Dark Lord hid his
secret well. I only discovered it when my niece investigated the Heir of Slytherin nonsense at Hogwarts a year or so ago and found Riddle's name and history in an old genealogy book in my family library."

"You also forget, Travers, that some of us are old enough to have known Tom Riddle." Nott said with authority. "Lucius is quite correct."

"Why didn't you say something?" Wilkes demanded.

Nott raised one dark eyebrow. "Those of us aware of the Dark Lord's true name swore never to reveal it. I'm rather surprised that Selwyn's niece and Black found anything; I thought the records had been destroyed."

Most of the gathering looked appalled to realise they had followed a halfblood in a war of his making that had decimated so many purebloods. Travers looked belligerent.

"And so we come to the final reason why we would follow him; his magical power and knowledge." Lucius stated. "His knowledge of the Dark Arts is certainly extensive and vast." He motioned with his hand. "But it is not equal to the House of Black. He courted all of us associated with the House so fiercely because he wanted that knowledge."

"But he is unequalled in power!" Travers pointed out. "You cannot deny that!"

Lucius smiled cruelly. "As much as we all don't want to admit it, he was bested by a baby; a baby that has grown into a powerful young wizard."

"Pah!" Wilkes said. "The Boy Who Lived is a myth of Dumbledore's making!"

Lucius inclined his head. "I believed the same but yesterday I saw his power. Croaker was present and declared the event need-to-know."

Another wave of muttering swept around the table.

"The Potter boy is truly that powerful?" Selwyn looked at him sceptically. "The reports coming out of Hogwarts suggest an average child."

"Academically, perhaps," Parkinson countered, "but there are rumours that abound of his adventures. A troll? The whole mystery over what actually happened Quirrell? A basilisk? Dementors? How many of these tales have we heard from our children and dismissed assuming childish exaggeration or more myth-building by Dumbledore?"

"I can confirm that those incidents occurred." Lucius murmured.

"Well, something doesn't add up." Nott observed. "On one hand we have a child who is average and yet who apparently can take on Dark creatures and come out the victor."

"He could be hiding his power – that would explain the average performance." Gibbon suggested brightly.

"That's a Slytherin trait and the boy's a Gryffindor!" Wilkes countered.

"There may be a reason for his hiding his abilities within his upbringing." Yaxley interjected. He lifted a hand from the table. "Bones kept the Black investigation close to her chest but checking it out since – she visited Potter at his muggle residence and the next day had Potter's guardianship changed to Black."
"Abuse?" Gibbon looked horrified.

Yaxley nodded slowly. "I believe so. There is a detailed report filed with the WOO but it is under seal."

"Muggles!" Wilkes said darkly. "Why the old fool thought placing a wizarding child with muggles was a good idea is beyond me!"

Lucius refrained from pointing out the many meetings in the days just after the Dark Lord's defeat where they had discussed tracking down and killing the boy only to be stumped on how to navigate the muggle world.

Nott motioned at Lucius. "You say you saw his power yesterday? Can you give any details?"

"I cannot due to a Vow," Lucius said with frankness knowing they would assume he meant one authorised by the Head of the DOM, "but it was... incredible."

"So the boy's powerful, I fail to see what this has to do with anything!" Jugson stated impatiently.

"You cannot see why we would wish to know these things before we begin discussing the possible return of the Dark Lord?" Selwyn replied before Lucius could. "Are you an idiot, Jugson?"

Lucius was amused to see MacNair, Crabbe and Goyle flush alongside Jugson; evidently they had all been thinking the same thing.

"From what Lucius has said, we now have an independent and powerful House of Black to contend with along with the resurrection of the House of Potter." Nott summarised. "Both of which are under the control – directly or indirectly – of Sirius Black who, despite being a blood traitor is in every way as mean a son-of-a-snake as every Lord Black before him. He's already shown ruthlessness in disposing of the LeStranges and cunning in his obtaining the guardianship of the Potter boy."

"In other words, make him an enemy at your peril." Selwyn nodded in agreement.

"The bad news is that if the Dark Lord returns, the House of Black will consider him and by extension his followers as an enemy." Parkinson chimed in. "However, the good news for us is that Lord Black doesn't seem inclined to bow down to Dumbledore as he did as a youth."

"No, the bad news for us is that if the House of Black stands against the Dark Lord and leads the fight instead of Dumbledore this time, the current Lord Black has no compunction about killing everyone who may threaten his charge." Nott contradicted. "A charge who evidently has the power to defeat the Dark Lord himself."

Selwyn coughed. "So last time there was the Dark Lord or Dumbledore; this time there will be the Dark Lord, Dumbledore or the House of Black – a third option that wasn't available in the last war."

Wilkes snorted.

"You're talking of betraying the Dark Lord!" Travers insisted.

"We are talking of how best to preserve and further our agenda." Lucius replied easily.

"By abandoning our Dark Lord!"

Nott smiled blandly. "The only one to suggest such a thing has been you, Travers." He motioned towards Lucius. "I believe we were merely drawing a picture of how the landscape is now and how
different it is from when we all took the Dark Lord's Mark."

Which meant Nott was on board and understood: they had another choice than following the Dark Lord.

Lucius gave him a cautious nod.

"I agree." Parkinson said.

"As do I." Selwyn confirmed.

Gibbon hurriedly nodded. While Crabbe and Goyle exchanged a look before mumbling their own agreements.

Avery simply looked bewildered, sensing that there was a way forward that had been agreed but not understanding what it was. Not for the first time Lucius wondered how he had ever been sorted into Slytherin. The others were frowning but Yaxley caught Lucius's eye and gave a small inclination of his head in acknowledgement.

"Speaking of the Dark Lord's Mark…” Lucius redirected the conversation.

"You've spoken with Snape?" Wilkes asked bluntly.

"Yes," Lucius nodded, "he has confirmed that Dumbledore believes the Dark Lord to be a wraith; that Peter Pettigrew has likely sought out the Dark Lord for protection against Black and is working to restore him to a body."

"Is Pettigrew capable?" wondered Avery. "I don't recall him being anything special for all he was part of Potter's little entourage."

Lucius thought that was the kettle calling the pot but he refrained from saying anything.

"Perhaps we should search him out and offer to help?" Travers suggested.

"An excellent idea," Lucius commented, "if you wish to incur the wrath of the Dark Lord." He raised an eyebrow as Travers grew purple in the face with anger. "Surely, you cannot have forgotten that every mission by the Dark Lord was a test for the individual assigned to lead it?" He flicked non-existent lint from his robes. "The punishment for someone interfering in someone else's mission especially one which was planned by the Dark Lord himself was quite brutal."

There were more than a few nods.

"So we wait?" demanded Travers. "What if Pettigrew falters?"

"Then we will discuss the matter again," Selwyn said firmly, "but Lucius is quite correct; unless Pettigrew approaches us on behalf of the Dark Lord, we must assume his lack of contact has been ordered by the Dark Lord."

"But Pettigrew will be garnering favour while we appear to have abandoned him," complained Jugson.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "And how long will that favour last? Just how useful is Pettigrew to the Dark Lord? He's a wanted man; a fugitive with a price on his head. And Merlin help him if Black gets to him first."
Jugson seemed mollified.

"But…but our Lord will be angry with us!" cried Avery almost wringing his hands in despair.

"For not realising that he was still alive? For not seeking him out as Pettigrew has done?" Lucius nodded slowly and carefully. "Perhaps. However, he cannot kill or maim us all when he returns if he wishes to regain the advantage that was lost when he…disappeared."

"We should do more. If we cannot help Pettigrew directly then why don't we show the Dark Lord that we are still loyal?" Travers pressed.

"Yes!" Avery declared. "Splendid idea!"

Lucius didn't allow the smile to cross his lips. "What do you suggest?"

Travers looked at him steadily. "The World Cup is set near muggles. It wouldn't be hard to do a spot of muggle-baiting in our old uniforms."

"Count me in." MacNair drawled. "I haven't killed a muggle in ages."

Lucius had always believed MacNair was an amoral sociopath. He didn't even believe MacNair cared anything about the agenda just so long as he got to kill and torture.

"I'm happy to volunteer too." Rowle said.

"Any other volunteers?" Lucius asked.

"You won't volunteer yourself, Lucius?" Travers sneered.

Lucius held his hard gaze with one of his own. "I have no doubt that Black will attend the cup final with Potter and that I will be called upon to attend as family. I believe it is in our best interests for me to ingratiate myself and my son with the House of Black." He waited a beat. "There is no point losing a valuable source of intelligence and wealth, after all."

The others accepted his position.

"Besides, Travers, I'm sure you will do well in leading this effort," Lucius flattered him while deriding him at the same time, "and will not require me."

"What about the rest of you?" Travers asked bluntly. "Who else will take part and show their loyalty to the Dark Lord?"

Selwyn glared at him. "Watch your tone, Travers! He is not back yet and you are reliant on our sponsorship and support within the Ministry or have you forgotten?"

Travers started to go purple again.

"Too many of us will provoke too much notice." Nott contributed. "A small strike team is best. It will be written off by Fudge as bad form but not serious. However, we can all honestly say to the Dark Lord if asked that we supported you all in your efforts."

"Although no doubt he will favour those who did take part." Lucius slid in slyly.

"I shall go!" Avery immediately volunteered.

Jugson also rose to the bait beautifully. "I will go too. Five should be enough, eh, Travers?"
Travers nodded unhappily.

"Then if we are in agreement, let us adjourn." Lucius said. "Some of us need to prepare for the Wizengamot session." He smiled. "I believe when Dumbledore finds out who Lord Black is there will be quite a floor show."

That provoked a few titters of laughter and they filed out obediently, Lucius catching Parkinson and asking him to remain a moment.

"Dinner on Friday, Lucius?" Nott offered before he stepped out.

Lucius inclined his head. "I'll owl the arrangements." Yes, Nott – older than most of them, very intelligent and cunning – was a superb ally. He had always regretted Draco not cultivating more of a friendship with young Nott.

Parkinson looked at him expectantly. "I assume this is about the arrangement?"

"Black has ordered it dropped. He's stated that all the children will have the right to choose their own spouses." Lucius confirmed. "My deepest apologies, Charles."

"It's a shame but not unexpected after what I heard today." Parkinson's dark eyes met his. "I'll tell Pansy or rather I'll tell her mother to tell her. Girls, you know!"

Lucius smiled tightly, thanked Parkinson for being so understanding (and wondered what that would cost him in future) and saw him to the floo. He returned to the breakfast room and sat down next to his wife who was eating a late breakfast of Eggs Benedict.

"Results?" asked Narcissa, sipping her tea.

"Most are with us; they don't wish to lose power to a halfblood who would just as soon as kill them as have them as a follower." Lucius said candidly. He paused. "Travers will be a problem."

"Your plan?"

"I'm certain Lord Black will be grateful for intelligence of any suspected Death Eater activity," Lucius said. "He, no doubt, will pass such information to the relevant authorities." He sighed. "Someone will have to get Avery out of it though; his vote is too easily obtained for it to be wasted by him being thrown into Azkaban."

Narcissa hummed.

"How is Draco this morning?" Lucius had expected to see his son at the table.

"How do you think he is?" Narcissa parried back. "He is currently throwing his toys out of the pram. I expect him to move onto stamping his feet by lunch time. By dinner, he will be convinced you can fix everything."

If Lucius were any other man he would fear the sharp edge to her tone.

"I will speak to him when I return from the Wizengamot." Lucius said stiffly.

Narcissa glanced up from her tea and sighed. "It is as much my fault as yours, Lucius. Sirius was right in that I should have insisted on taking the lead with his education. We have spoiled him and now our owls have come home to roost."

"Your plan?" Lucius asked.
"I will re-educate him over the rest of the Summer in politics and etiquette for a member of the House of Black." Narcissa said. "I may coordinate with Andy as she performs the etiquette lessons for Potter. It would do our son good to be exposed to dealing with the boy neutrally before he is tested at Hogwarts although it may well be August before we can attempt such a test."

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "I believed we had agreed you would not resume a relationship with your sister."

"No; you told me that I wasn't to speak to her some years ago, Lucius," Narcissa said coldly, "and while I understood your reasoning, it is now moot. Sirius will expect a level of reconciliation." She arched an eyebrow at him. "Sirius will also trust her more than us and Andy will be a useful source of information."

"Very well." Lucius conceded the point, too aware that if he ordered her not to proceed she could now seek the protection of her House.

"Remus Lupin has owled. We have a meeting scheduled at Gringotts with Kipbold tomorrow." Narcissa said. "If you give me a letter of authorisation, I will handle it. Remus and I had a civil relationship at Hogwarts."

"It surprises me given how close you were to Severus," Lucius said a little irked by her presumption. Her gaze was cool and told him he had disappointed her. "I was attempting to save you the humiliation of the punishment Sirius laid out for you. Lupin is a gentleman and will not humiliate me. However, if you wish to go through our household expenditure line item by line item with a werewolf, I will withdraw my offer."

Lucius felt his cheeks heat although his gaze remained level. "My apologies. I will write you the letter of authorisation." He cleared his throat. "I did give Severus a warning about the House of Black this morning."

"It will be disregarded as soon as he learns that Sirius is Lord Black." Narcissa said bluntly. "Severus is wonderfully intelligent until the name Potter, Black or Lupin is mentioned. He is clearly blinded by his hatred of the father since he cannot see the boy correctly."

"Maybe but some of today's discussion revolved around the possibility that Potter has been purposefully average at Hogwarts." Lucius raised a hand. "The muggles might have abused him."

Narcissa's eyes flashed. "There will be a reckoning if I know Sirius." She shook her head. "The power the boy has at his disposal...I could feel it running through him when I touched him during the ritual...that such a child should have been left with muggles..." She shook her head.

"Nott has invited himself to dinner on Friday so we can strategize." Lucius said. "I'd like you to attend."

"Of course." Narcissa said evenly.

Lucius noted the time and grasped his cane as he got to his feet. "Are you ready to leave? We should make our way to the Wizengamot. I have no wish to miss any of today."

Narcissa rose from the table. "I will meet you at the floo."

He watched her go with a frown before making his way to the floo. When his father had petitioned for a marriage to the House of Black, it had been Andromeda they had both had in mind. Unfortunately, Andromeda had run off with the mudblood and Narcissa had been offered as a
substitute. She was beautiful, intelligent and a true Black; he appreciated her cunning and political acumen. He felt some affection for her as the mother of his heir but he didn't love her. When the House of Black had ceased to be the power it had been, Lucius had taken advantage and asserted his authority. Now though…

He knew Narcissa could crush him. A word from her to Sirius and he would be stripped of his magic and cast out. He didn't like the new power dynamic but Lucius was pragmatic. Narcissa had spoken up in his defence during the family meeting; she was helping him navigate terms with her cousin. It seemed she was content if not happy to remain married to him.

Perhaps though, Lucius considered, he should acquiesce to her want for more children. He had not been to her bed for many years but Narcissa had always wanted a daughter and pregnancy would curtail her activities and make her more cautious. The sound of her footsteps approaching had him smoothing his expression. He would discuss it with her in a few days to avert any suspicion, Lucius determined as he indicated for her to precede him.

Yes, a pregnancy would ensure Narcissa remained in her place. He might have to follow the House of Black thanks to the Vow and the primacy agreement, but in his own home, he was the Lord and Master.

o-O-o

Sirius watched Harry scoop up the last of his cereal and took the bowl from him, setting it aside on the bedside table as Harry slumped back on his pillows. He still looked exhausted. He had woken up that morning but he'd been shaky when Sirius had helped him to the bathroom and back. The food seemed to have sated him and he looked sleepy again.

"You just need to rest." Sirius said, as much to reassure himself as Harry.

"Hmmm-hmmm." Harry said. "Don't worry; I'm just going to sleep for the rest of the day."

Sirius ruffled his hair. "OK, back under the covers."

Harry rolled his eyes but obediently snuggled down. "You should go get ready. You'll be late."

"So I'm late." Sirius shrugged it off. "It's considered fashionable."

"Not at the Wizengamot and you have an appointment with Brian and Arthur first." Remus said from the doorway.

Sirius nodded. He had owled Brian the night before to confirm the outcome of the discussion with Lucius Malfoy and to set up the various sanctions. He wasn't looking forward to telling Arthur about Lucius's involvement with the diary but he had agreed to do it.

"Go and get changed. I'll keep watch on Harry." Remus urged.

Harry frowned. "I wish I could go."

"You can watch the memory later." Sirius promised him. "Just rest, OK? No more summoning ancient spirits."

"I wish…" Harry's voice trailed away and Sirius supplied the rest: that Harry wished he could summon the spirit of Lily again.

"I know, Pronglet," Sirius said gently, "I like to think it was her way of saying she approved."
Harry's face brightened. "Yeah. Me too, Padfoot."

Sirius leaned down and dropped a kiss on Harry's forehead. "I'll be back before you know it." He walked away and Remus entered to take his place.

Thirty minutes later, Sirius was washed, dressed and ready for action. He wore his formal robes with the crests of Black and Potter on his breast; he went with the leather trousers underneath for ease of movement and to make a statement: he was a maverick, someone they couldn't put in a box. His own wand, newly returned to him, was holstered and he had secreted his great-grandfather's in a second holster on his other arm.

He peeked into Harry's room before he left. Harry was out; fast asleep. Remus looked up from the book he was reading and walked over to the doorway.

"Ready?" He asked quietly.

"As I'll ever be." Sirius responded in the same low tone. "I have my mirror so if anything happens..."

"I will contact you." Remus assured him. He patted Sirius on the shoulder. "Now, go be a Marauder, Padfoot, and get up to no good."

Sirius smirked a little and left before he could convince himself it was necessary for him to stay beside Harry.

He flooed to Black Manor first and then onto Brian's office.

Brian greeted him with a brisk handshake. "I should thank you for inviting me to one of the most wonderful events of my life. It's rare that you get to see that kind of magic."

"Me too." Arthur said in agreement as he offered his hand. "It was very special."

"It was all Harry." Sirius said roughly. He pointed at Arthur's finger. "You're wearing your ring?"

"Yes, well, with all the vows and oaths and alliance discussions, I thought it best to start wearing it again." Arthur's expression sobered. "How is Harry?"

"Recovering. He woke up this morning but went straight back to sleep after some breakfast. I, uh, didn't really want to leave him." Sirius admitted ruefully.

"Molly will be pleased to hear he's OK. She's been worried all night." Arthur said. "She's very fond of him – we both are."

Brian ushered them into seats and signalled for Sirius to begin. He set out what had happened at the Black family meeting and Malfoy's confession in straight language. When he was finished Arthur went as red as his hair. Gone was the affable, easy-going man and his place was an irate protective father. It took Brian pointing out the futility of trying to bring Lucius to justice – he would after all simply claim he was compelled – before Arthur would listen to the idea of restitution. He refused the educational fund on the basis that he didn't want Malfoy having anything to do with Ginny and instead accepted a political donation to his department. He left to walk and clear his head before the Wizengamot with the advice that telling Molly might not be the way to go as much as a Howler to Malfoy might have been amusing.

Sirius and Brian went over everything else quickly; confirming that all the correct procedures had been followed and documents filed before they flooed directly to the Minister's office.
"Brian! Sirius!" Cornelius smiled hugely at him. He was decked out in his Wizengamot robes and Sirius wondered idly who had thought lilac would be a good colour to represent the Ministry.

"Cornelius." Sirius nodded at him. "All set?"

"Absolutely," Cornelius said brightly, "and I have to say this place is abuzz this morning!"

"The news leaked out then." Sirius said, his lips twitching in amusement.

"Everyone is expecting the new Lord Black." Cornelius confirmed. "Albus is in the building and made a comment indicating that he knew that it was expected that Lord Black would take his seat. The old Potter alliance came together. I think Madame Longbottom has briefed that side. On the other side, I believe Lucius briefed the most important in his alliance this morning. They didn't arrive together because that would be too obvious but Selwyn, Wilkes and Gibbon have all hinted they know of something that will happen."

He grinned happily and Sirius was once again reminded that Cornelius was in his element.

"Good to know," commented Sirius neutrally.

Cornelius clapped his hands almost giddy with glee. "Shall we make our way to the Chamber?"

"Lead the way." Sirius said, noting to himself that Cornelius had yet to ask about Harry. He tried to remember as Cornelius chattered on beside him the format of what would happen, the protocol to be followed, but he soon lost track of his thought as he realised Cornelius had unusually understated the level of excitement within the Ministry corridors.

Everyone seemed to be huddled in groups and gossiping. His presence beside Cornelius raised some eyebrows but nobody seemed to cotton onto the fact that he was Lord Black. It amused him no end as they finally got to their destination.

The Wizengamot chamber was a beautiful piece of architecture. A domed circular room deep under the Ministry of Magic meant to provide a hint of King Arthur's infamous round table. The rows formed five tiers; the upper tier was the public gallery, open to all, and was a first come first served arrangement; there were no chairs simply standing room. The fourth tier was reserved for press, Ministry officials, family and retainers of the Wizengamot members with a bench provided for sitting. The third tier, with its chairs of silver upholstery, was for the newest members of the Wizengamot, the minor houses and Order of Merlin recipients; the second tier was reserved for the Ancient and Noble Houses who had gold upholstery; the final small lowest tier was on the floor and held the Chief Warlock's gold seat on the right alongside the scribe and the Wizengamot clerk who both had no voting rights; five similarly plain Ministry seats sat on the left.

Sirius nodded to Cornelius and broke away heading for the family tier where he and Brian would sit until called. He did, however, stop to say hello to Augusta who asked after Harry and gave him an invitation to a dinner for the weekend for the both of them; a dinner that Sirius knew would involve all of the old Potter alliance.

He and Lucius exchanged a nod as Sirius found Narcissa and Andromeda sat together at the end of the row, each saving a space beside them in the otherwise packed fourth tier; all the Ministry heads were in attendance including Arthur who gave him a wave. Sirius kissed both his cousins lightly on their knuckles and was aware of the stir that swept out from them at the gesture. He was sure the reconciliation of the House of Black had not been missed. He glanced up and found the public tier heaving with people.
Brian took the seat next to Narcissa and Sirius sat at the end of the row as Dumbledore entered the room.

Their eyes caught.

Dumbledore's widened slightly and he gave a nod to Sirius in acknowledgment. Sirius nodded back. He knew that as soon as the session ended, he and Dumbledore would have to talk. Dumbledore's gaze travelled down the row and his eyes widened again at the sight of the Black cousins sat together. As the clerk caught his attention, Dumbledore belatedly realised everyone was waiting on him to take his seat and start the proceedings.

"Seal the doors!" He ordered as he took his place.

"Seal the doors!" The Auror in charge of security repeated and the gathering quietened as the loud thud of the doors closing resounded in the chamber.

"The July Session of the Wizengamot is called to order!" Dumbledore intoned.

The clerk, Albert Dullard, rose and cleared his throat. "First order of business is any alterations to the membership of the Wizengamot! Our magic has registered that the Ancient and Noble House of Black has a new Head of House. Lord Black will approach and take the oath."

It felt like for a second everyone held their breath as they looked around the room for the much anticipated Lord Black.

Sirius stood and strode down the stairs to the floor of the chamber. He ignored the open mouths, the astounded and horrified expressions, the supportive looks from Amelia, Cornelius and Bertie, and stood opposite Dumbledore. Their eyes met again for the second time.

Dumbledore looked gobsmacked.

Sirius held up his wand for the oath, his Head of House ring visible.

Dumbledore continued to stare at him.

Sirius raised an eyebrow.

Dumbledore continued to stare at him.

Someone coughed in the tense silence.

Dullard cleared his throat and finally arrested Dumbledore's attention. "Chief Warlock, are you well? Is there a problem?"

"My apologies," Dumbledore said, turning back to Sirius, "this is just such a surprise, my boy. Where were we?"

"My oath, Chief Warlock." Sirius said calmly. His heart was racing though as he wondered if Dumbledore would try and prevent his taking the seat.

Dumbledore nodded though. He gathered his composure. "I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Chief Warlock witness the calling of Sirius Orion Black to take the Seat of the House of Black by blood, by law and by oath."

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, swear to act with honour and fairness in the name of justice, law and magic, and accept the Seat of the House of Black by blood, by law and by
oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

"I confirm your oath is valid, Lord Black." Dumbledore smiled warmly at Sirius. "Welcome to the Wizengamot." He lowered his voice to reach Sirius alone. "Perhaps we can talk later?"

"Later." Sirius agreed. He didn't move from the centre of the circle.

Dullard peered at him through thick round glasses. "Please take your seat, Lord Black."

"If you call the next change in membership, you'll see why I should stay here." Sirius said politely.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose but he nodded at Dullard's questioning look to whether he should continue or not.

"Our magic has registered that the Ancient and Noble House of Potter has a new Head of House. Harry James Potter is not yet of age and a Regent has been assigned in accordance with the will of James Charlus Potter, formerly Lord Potter." Dullard announced.

Sirius watched Dumbledore try unsuccessfully to hide his dismay at the realisation that Harry was no longer with the Dursleys; that he must be in Sirius's custody for him to have claimed the ring.

"Elmer Samson is released from his duty with thanks; Lord Black will stand and take the oath as the Potter Regent."

Sirius was barely aware of another loud outbreak of noise. He stood up as Dumbledore regrouped again to call for order.

Dumbledore looked up at Sirius and he could see the disappointment in the old wizard's eyes as he started to realise Sirius had never been in Thailand. "As Chief Warlock, I do have a point of order. It is usual for wills appointing regents to be validated by the Chief Warlock."

Cornelius stood up in reply. "A copy of the will is here for your perusal, Chief Warlock. You have been abroad these last few days which is why you have not yet seen it."

Dumbledore took the proffered document and glanced at it. Sirius got the impression that he had seen it before and he clamped down on his ire.

Dumbledore handed the will back. "Has it been confirmed that Frank and Alice Longbottom have refused guardianship?"

Sirius realised that Dumbledore was trying to prevent the proxy appointment and perhaps the guardianship on a technicality. He opened his mouth to say something but Augusta was on her feet so fast that Sirius thought if he'd blinked he would have missed her moving.

"Do not be absurd, Chief Warlock! Their claim to the guardianship was ceded by me as their representative under the condition that they were unable to perform their duty." She practically snarled the words at Dumbledore. "As per the will, the guardianship claim passed to Lord Black."

Amelia rose to her feet. "As executor of record, I can confirm the guardianship was awarded and executed in accordance with law as Madame Longbottom claims." She said dryly.

"Harry's guardianship is complicated due to his muggle relations having legal guardianship in their world." Dumbledore argued, rallying again.

"Lord Potter's muggle relations signed over their guardianship to Lord Black believing it was better
for him to be raised by wizards." Amelia corrected. "All the relevant paperwork has been filed with the WOO, Chief Warlock."

"Very well. I find the will and assumption of proxy valid." Dumbledore conceded and handed back the copy of the will. "We shall proceed with the oath." He turned to look at Sirius once again and Sirius noted that defeat was already giving way to calculation in the old wizard's eyes. "I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Chief Warlock witness the calling of Sirius Orion Black to assume the role of Regent for the House of Potter by law and by oath."

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of the House of Black, son of the House of Potter,"

A rush of whispers stirred in the background as people recalled he had been given sanctuary by the House of Potter.

"…swear to act with honour and fairness in the name of justice and magic, and accept the role of Regent for the House of Potter by law and by oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

Above them the empty Potter seat glowed gold.

"I confirm your oath is valid, Lord Black." Dumbledore stated quietly. "Please take your seat."

Sirius bowed his head to the Chief Warlock. He knew he cut an imposing figure as he took the stairs two at a time and walked to the empty Black seat. All of the Ancient and Noble Houses had risen to their feet as a mark of respect. He looked at each in turn acknowledging their gesture and when he sat, the Ancient and Noble Houses sat together as one.

It was a surprisingly comfortable seat and there was a part of Sirius that was awed by the tradition and the spectacle of what had just happened. He took advantage of the outbreak of chatter to catch his breath.

"There is a change to the Ministry appointees!" Dullard said loudly, silencing everyone. "The Minister of Magic is called forth."

Cornelius rose from his seat and took the central floor. "It was with great delight I promoted Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge yesterday morning to be our new Ambassador to Guyana. As can be seen by the empty chair beside me her promotion and new position unfortunately leave an opening in the Ministry appointees to the Wizengamot." He smiled and looked around the chamber. "I call forth Arthur Septimus Weasley to take the open Ministry Seat."

There was a shocked silence for a moment before the Chamber erupted into chaos much to Sirius's amusement. It was, he thought, almost as good as a prank.

"Order!" Dumbledore yelled. "Order!" Everyone stopped talking under his quelling look.

Sirius watched as Arthur made his way down from the fourth tier. Arthur wore a slightly stunned expression but there was no doubting his sincerity as he took his oath. Immediately, his Ministry robes transformed into formal Wizengamot versions as he took his seat in between Bertie Croaker and Rufus Scrimgeour.

"Next order of business!" Dullard announced briskly. "House notices pertaining to the Wizengamot!" He sighed as though anticipating what would happen next. "The floor is ceded to Lord Black!"

Sirius hid his grin as he got to his feet again; he did love alphabetical ordering. "I have several notices as you can imagine but I'll try to keep them brief." He paused mostly for effect. "It is my
utmost pleasure that the House of Black announces the adoption of Lord Harry James Potter by Lord Sirius Orion Black."

Chaos reigned.

Dumbledore was once again open-mouthed with astonishment and it took him a long moment before he could restore order. The old wizard pinned Sirius with a hard glare. "Who stands as witness to the adoption for the Wizengamot?"

"I do." Augusta rose to her feet again, scowling down at the Chief Warlock.

"I do." Lucius said, getting to his feet.

The chamber broke into more muttering; the House of Longbottom and the House of Malfoy represented the two poles of the political spectrum.

"And for the Ministry?" questioned Dumbledore.

Four of the five Ministry representatives rose across the floor from the old wizard. Sirius hid another smile as Dumbledore registered just how completely he had been kept out of the loop.

Dumbledore frowned. "I must as an interested party to Harry's health and well-being enquire whether the adoption was precipitous? He has only known Sirius for a brief period of time."

Amelia bristled and held up a hand before anyone else could speak. "The day after being awarded custody, Lord Black immediately took Lord Potter to The Village Clinic in the States. As you are aware, Chief Warlock, the clinic is encased in a time bubble and therefore while only a week passes outside the bubble, those receiving treatment within the clinic may spend many days and weeks there. I believe Lord Black and Lord Potter spent almost two months together." She took a breath. "Additionally, from what I have observed, there is no one who places a greater priority on Lord Potter's well-being than Lord Black. Their interaction at the adoption was a delight to behold."

"Very well." Dumbledore glanced up at Sirius and inclined his head. "Congratulations, my boy. The adoption notice is so recognised. I only wish I could have been a witness myself."

The witnesses retook their seats.

"My second notice," Sirius continued, "is to announce that Lord Harry James Potter has been accepted by blood, by law and by magic as the Heir of the House of Black."

This time the chamber reaction was more muted, the news probably expected with the announcement of the adoption.

"One moment, Sirius, my boy," Dumbledore declared, "surely there is a concern that this will ultimately lead to the line extinction of the House of Potter?"

"On my death, Lord Potter will become Harry James Potter, Lord Potter-Black. He has agreed at that time the lines will have different Heirs on the assumption they are accepted by blood and magic." Sirius said firmly. "Hence both the House of Black and the House of Potter are assured continuance."

"But…"

Tiberius Ogden, an old Potter ally, banged his cane and got to his feet. "Chief Warlock! The Head of an Ancient and Noble House, heck any House, can designate who he wants as his Heir! Unless you
wish to challenge that notion, which I would say would be the height of tomfoolery, I suggest we move on!"

"Well said, Lord Ogden." Nott stated loudly.

Most mouths dropped open in shock as for the second time representatives of opposing politics stood in agreement with each other.

Dumbledore sighed and conceded. "The Heir notice is so recognised."

Sirius nodded briskly. "My third notice is to register that Simeon Marius Black will be appointed as Regent to the House of Black in the event of my untimely demise."

There was a scattering of whispers and Dumbledore frowned again.

"And what of the House of Potter, Sirius?" He asked.

"Protocol would have me cover the House of Potter when called as proxy for that House." Sirius noted. "These are only notices pertaining to the House of Black."

"He's quite correct, Chief Warlock." Dullard spoke up. "I have a slot for the House of Potter noted on the order of business."

Dumbledore mumbled the recognition of the regent registration and Sirius launched into his fourth notice – Andromeda's reinstatement along with her family. Sirius finished that one to find Dumbledore beaming at him like a loon as he recognised the notice formally. Clearly reinstating Andy had met with the Chief Warlock's approval.

"My fifth notice," Sirius paused, "is to announce that the House of Black declared the House of LeStrange oath-breakers for accepting the Mark of Voldemort…"

Everyone flinched except Dumbledore who grew pensive as Sirius declared they had been subjected to Judgement and the restitution offered to the House of Longbottom. When he concluded there was total silence in contrast with the noise that had followed his previous notices.

Augusta stood proudly. "The House of Longbottom has accepted the restitution offered and the apology of the House of Black."

Dumbledore looked shocked. "Sirius, I feel I must protest to the use of Judgement…"

"Why?" Augusta was on her feet again instantly. "Do you suggest that my son and daughter-in-law are not worthy of such justice?"

"My dear Augusta," Dumbledore tried to calm her, "my point is that justice has already been served by the tribunal of the Wizengamot…"

"Which did not include those who had lost someone to the LeStranges!" Griselda Marchbanks stood up. "While a conflict of interest was to be avoided, those that were left to render justice did a piss poor job of considering the feelings of the victims and the survivors of their brutality!"

"The Lady Marchbanks is reminded that such language is…” Dullard began pompously.

"Yes, yes, censure me for language and forget to tell the Chief Warlock that he should be referring to people by their titles as a show of respect unless there has been a change of protocol which means I can start calling him Albus!" Marchbanks snapped.
Dullard flushed bright red and Dumbledore looked abashed.

"And once again," Wilkes spoke up, "I'd like to know if the Chief Warlock is challenging the right of the Ancient and Noble Houses to practice their family magic? Judgement is harsh but it is an acceptable way to deal with oath-breaking!"

"Exactly," Ogden agreed, "and Chief Warlock, if the LeStranges truly didn't deserve to be stripped of their magic, the family magic wouldn't have done it! Clearly magic thought justice hadn't been served simply by throwing those miserable wretches into Azkaban!" He glowered at Dumbledore. "Frankly, Albus, you question Lord Black's notices one more time in the manner you have done so to date in this session and I will take insult on his behalf!"

For a second, Dumbledore's expression was a mix of anger and embarrassment but it smoothed into a diplomatic mask.

"I apologise if I have caused offence," he said, "the notice of oath-breaking, marriage annulment and out-casting is so recognised."

Everybody but Sirius resumed their seats. Sirius moved onto the life debt arrangement with the Grangers announcing to all that Hermione Jean Granger was sponsored and considered a daughter of the House of Black.

Dumbledore ignored the outbreak of noise and whisperings about that to confirm the notice.

"I'm also pleased to announce a new alliance between the House of Black and the House of Potter. We now stand together." Sirius's lips twisted wryly. "As Potter Regent, I confirm the alliance between the Houses and echo that we now stand together."

A rush of whispers swarmed the Chamber again as Dumbledore recognised the alliance.

"My final notice as Lord Black for today," Sirius said easily, "is to reaffirm the agreement between the House of Black and the House of Malfoy."

Lucius stood briefly. "The House of Malfoy also reaffirms our agreement." He inclined his head in Sirius's direction.

"You'll be happy to know, I'm done." Sirius said. He sat down and let the chamber murmur about what the Black notices revealed.

Dullard gathered himself, looked at the order of business and blanched. "The floor is ceded to Mister Malfoy as proxy for the House of LeStrange."

Lucius held his cane lightly as he got to his feet. "The House of LeStrange announces the death of Rodolphus and Rabastan LeStrange as confirmed by the Warden of Azkaban yesterday."

Silence once again met the announcement. It didn't take a genius to put together the stripping of their magic and the harshness of Azkaban and come up with cause and effect to their deaths. Sirius was not unaware that he was being regarded with no small amount of horror by some in the chamber.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "The death notice is so registered."

Lucius lifted his cane. "As the marriage between the House of Black and the House of LeStrange was dissolved and the union bore no Heir, I declare line extinction. The LeStrange seat returns to the floor."
"So noted." Dumbledore said. "Nominations for the seat should be submitted to the clerk in advance of the August session of the Wizengamot when nominees will be presented and the seat voted upon."

Again a flurry of excited voices had to be shouted into order. It had been a long time since a seat had become vacant.

Dullard rose again. "The floor is ceded to Madame Longbottom."

Augusta stood up and smoothed her robes. "The first notice is to announce that Neville Frances Longbottom has been accepted by blood, by law and by magic as the Heir of the House of Longbottom."

Dumbledore regained his twinkle as he recognised the notice.

"My second notice is to announce the renewal of the ancient alliance between the House of Longbottom and the House of Potter. We once again stand together." Augusta proclaimed proudly.

Sirius got to his feet. "As Potter Regent, I confirm the renewal of the ancient alliance between the Houses and echo that we once again stand together."

"The alliance is so recognised," murmured Dumbledore.

Sirius's eyes narrowed as he sat down; was that a hint of alarm or worry in the old wizard's features?

Augusta sat and Dullard sprang up. "The floor is ceded to Lord Black as proxy for the House of Potter."

Sirius pushed himself out of his very comfortable seat once more. "My first notice is to register that Minerva Elaine McGonagall will be appointed as Regent to the House of Potter in the event of my untimely demise while Lord Potter remains a minor, as requested by the will of James and Lily Potter."

Dumbledore nodded and didn't argue; he recognised the notice as per protocol.

"The second notice is to announce the formation of an alliance of friendship between the House of Potter and the House of Weasley." Sirius nodded his head to a pleased Arthur who stood up and confirmed the alliance.

Sirius sat down again, pleased with the way the notices had gone. Once he and Bill Weasley came to an arrangement with Gringotts the life debt could be announced and settled too.

A brief recess was called and Sirius was pleased when Lord Bones – another old Potter ally – turned in his chair to talk with him about renewing the alliance. It prevented any further approaches especially that of Dumbledore's.

Legislative business then took precedence for a while; a new law governing transport regulations for portkeys was voted down as it attempted to restrict the rights of Heads of Houses to create and maintain portkeys to their own properties; a law that should have been presented regarding the rights of werewolves was withdrawn by the Minister for revision with apologies to the Wizengamot; revisions constituting some minor amendments to the European treaty on the Statute of Secrecy passed easily enough.

A lunch recess was called. Sirius ducked out for a bathroom break and to talk with Remus – Harry had woken briefly, eaten some soup and gone back to sleep. He caught up with Augusta who pulled him into the separate dining room available to Wizengamot members and watched amused as both
Bertie and Amelia ambushed Dumbledore on the other side of the room to prevent him from approaching Sirius.

The afternoon session of the Wizengamot shifted to the Ministerial budget review. Additional funding was approved for security at the Quidditch World Cup but only just. Sirius took note of who had voted against it with interest. He was sure Amelia had made the same observations.

Cornelius wound up for his final item. "Recently, I found to my dismayed surprise that the muggles world has advanced sharply in inventions, something they call technology, and in producing medicine and weapons thanks to something called science."

He looked around the chamber as whispers broke out.

"There are machines in the sky that can take pictures of our world; machines that can communicate these pictures instantaneously to all muggles with a push of the button on something called computers." He said gravely. "$There are reports of weapons based on biological information. Imagine a disease that could target wizards alone! I fear for the safety of the Statute of Secrecy and our population unless something is done!"

Wilkes raised his wand and was recognised. "Surely you exaggerate? I remain confident that we retain the advantage."

"The muggles are muggles; nothing special." Jugson declared as he was recognised.

A wand went up and was recognised; it was a witch called Alison Bunting; a muggleborn witch who had been awarded the Order of Merlin for saving a group of children in the last war. "As someone who actually spends time in the muggle world, I don't share your confidence, Lord Wilkes, or your view, Mister Jugson. The wizarding world may hold some advantages but what use is obliviation when the incident is recorded on a machine and played back like a wizarding picture in full technicolour glory?"

Sirius could see some people frowning in confusion at her words.

"I share Minister Fudge's concern and support his raising this issue." Bunting concluded.

Nott was next. "I am concerned that our Secrecy could be affected or that they are developing weapons for which we would have no knowledge to counter. If there is a threat, we would be idiots to stick our heads in the sand and ignore it until it was too late."

Another muggleborn Order of Merlin recipient stood up. "I'm not so concerned with the threat as the possibility that while the muggles advance we remain stagnant. There is much to be said for tradition but we would do well to take some of the muggle ideas and invigorate the wizarding world!"

That caused a small outcry of protest.

Griselda got to her feet. "The sad truth is that I agree with the Minister in that our knowledge is out of date. The Hogwarts curriculum hasn't been updated in some time."

Sirius ducked his head to hide his reaction to Dumbledore's sour look at the criticism.

"Whether or not there are things we could incorporate from the muggles into our lives or whether or not they constitute a threat, we cannot make any assessments in a vacuum."

"Well said, Lady Marchbanks," Cornelius said smoothly, "and indeed a muggleborn witch who I met recently informed me that the Muggle Studies elective at Hogwarts is decades out of date."
Arthur, perhaps you have something to add as the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts?"

Arthur got his feet. "It is certainly true that my office sees an increasing number of things we don't recognise and don't have a reference for. We struggle because we don't understand the technology and science upon which the muggle devices are based and therefore we don't always understand the way magic interacts with them. I, for one, would appreciate a move to increase our knowledge."

Bertie Croaker raised his wand and the chamber grew silent; it was rare the Head of the DOM spoke up during the Wizengamot sessions. "The DOM has observed the advancements of the muggles and is glad to see the Ministry tackling the issue. At the moment our world only has an annual meet-and-greet between the Minister and the muggle Prime Minister which doesn't cover a sharing of knowledge. If we are to truly protect ourselves we need a better relationship with those tasked with assisting us to keep the Statute of Secrecy."

His words had an effect. Sirius could see that some of the dismissive expressions from before grow serious and contemplative.

Ogden got to his feet and motioned at Fudge. "What exactly are you proposing, Minister?"

"A Committee to Determine The Need for A Permanent Muggle Affairs Department that would oversee the relationship with the muggle authorities, compile knowledge on muggle technology and science, and work with the DOM and DMLE to prepare countermeasures and legislation as required." Cornelius said promptly. "I would suggest five members of the Wizengamot, Arthur as the Ministry legislative representative to Chair, and either Director Bones and Director Croaker or their named representatives."

Greengrass was recognised. "Even if we agree in theory, from a financial perspective, I don't see that we have the budget without levying a tax either on the populace as a whole or on wizarding businesses."

That certainly caused some grumbling.

"I am not prepared to support such a levy!" Avery complained. "Not to find out more about muggles!"

Lucius was recognised and Sirius knew it would be strange if he didn't contribute to the debate. "While I agree that the whole idea that muggles could be a threat is somewhat fanciful, I also respect Director Croaker's viewpoint and that of the Minister's and therefore support the concept of the proposal. However, I am not in support of awarding additional budget. Perhaps the current budget of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office should be used?"

Sirius held up his wand and Dumbledore hesitated for a moment but recognised him. He got to his feet. "I support Minister Fudge's proposal. Our traditions are important but the need for us to re-examine our relationship and knowledge of the muggle world is urgent." He looked around the chamber. "The late Lady Potter made me very aware of the advancements that had been made prior to her death. My son, Lord Potter, has many tales of living in the muggle world which have amazed and horrified me in equal measure as they have revealed many things that from a wizarding perspective I would constitute a threat as well as many things where I wonder why we haven't explored a wizarding alternative."

The audience was attentive; their interest immediately caught by the mention of Harry.

"However, I would agree with Lord Greengrass's assessment of the Ministry budget. It is clear to me after my own perusal that the level of funding for the Ministry is at a critical and unsustainable level..."
going forward. Do we wish to levy harsh taxes on the populace and our businesses? No, but there is a realistic cost of government that is being ignored. How do we expect to have advancements in magic when we cut the DOM's budget to the marrow?” Sirius gestured towards Amelia. ”How do we expect to enforce our laws and keep our populace safe from the potential rise of another Dark Lord when we don't provide budget for recruitment and training to replace our retiring and injured Aurors? When we can only agree the bare minimum of funding for security for an international event that will bring thousands to our country?"

The chamber was hanging on his every word.

"The budget issues go beyond this proposal but to deal with that first; as the Head of the House of Black, I am authorising a personal donation of one and a half million galleons into the Ministry vault ring-fenced for the Committee proposed by Minister Fudge. Once the Committee reports on the Need for a Department, any funds remaining will go to set-up and implementation."

A rush of noise filled the chamber.

Dumbledore held up his hand. "Lord Black, I…that is a generous offer; are you certain?"

"Absolutely." Sirius didn't look at Malfoy for fear he'd burst out laughing since it was his money. "Additionally, Chief Warlock, the House of Black is donating a half million galleons for the DMLE and the DOM to be shared equally between them."

Ogden stood up. "I will match that donation for the DOM and the DMLE, Lord Black."

Greengrass stood up. "As will I."

Nott stood up. "I will donate the same again to round the numbers up to one million for each."

Dumbledore blinked. "Well, this is a surprising day. It is remarkable to see such support from such disparate parts of our political spectrum. Thank you gentlemen.” He looked over to Cornelius. "I trust this is acceptable?"

"More than," Cornelius said, smiling in delight, "I'm sure Director Bones and Director Croaker will be able to put the additional funds to good use. I will bring a revised budget to the August session."

He cleared his throat. "May we move to the vote for the proposed Committee now the funding for it has been sorted?"

The vote went swimmingly, passed with only a few votes to the negative, and it was the last order of business for the day.

Sirius let himself be ushered out and into a waiting press melee by Cornelius. He knew it was needed but he hated it.

"Daily Prophet! Rita Skeeter!" Rita grinned at him. "How is Harry enjoying his new guardianship situation?"

"I believe Harry's view can be determined from his agreement to the adoption we announced." Sirius said bluntly.

"He couldn't come with you today?" Rita pressed.

Sirius smiled tightly. "Harry's safety is paramount. As much as we would have both liked him to attend, we knew today would draw a great deal of attention and thought it best he remain at home."
"Lord Black!" Another reporter grabbed his attention. "Any comment on the miscarriage of justice that saw you incarcerated in Azkaban?"

"I am disappointed that the Ministry I worked for failed to provide me with my basic legal and human rights," Sirius said, recalling the prepared statements Brian and Remus had made him learn, "but I am grateful to the current administration for correcting the injustice, particularly the efforts of the Minister and Director Bones."

Cornelius puffed up beside him.

"Your political agenda seems to contradict the reputation of the House of Black, what do you say to that?" Another reporter yelled.

"That I am my own man as my family discovered when I was the first Black sorted to Gryffindor."

Sirius answered.

"Do you deny your actions led to the death of the LeStranges?" Someone else shouted.

Sirius pinned the seedy looking journalist with a hard stare that silenced the crowd. "The LeStranges tortured two very wonderful people, who were also my friends, into insanity. They as good as murdered them and certainly deprived a child of his parents as though they had. The LeStranges brought dishonour to the House of Black and were stripped of their magic. I have no regrets."

He held up a hand. "One more question?"

"How do you feel about taking over Harry's guardianship?" Rita got in before her rivals could.

Sirius smiled genuinely. "I'm honoured to finally be allowed to do the job that his parents tasked me to do as Harry's godfather. Nothing is more important to me than Harry. I will do everything in my power to protect him and ensure he has a happy life." He held up a hand. "If you'll excuse me, I must leave you in the very capable hands of the Minister. Thank you."

He headed for an open floo and wasn't surprised when he saw Dumbledore waiting.

It was past time for them to talk.
The atmosphere was thick enough to cut with a knife.

Albus glanced around the comfortable study with wonder. He had never been to London Black Manor before. Arcturus had preferred the Black country estate, not that Albus had been there often either given their differing politics and alliances but there had always been an invitation to the Black New Year Ball before Arcturus had gone into seclusion. His gaze landed finally on the young wizard sat behind his desk. Sirius surprisingly radiated a sense of belonging, rightness and authority for all that he had decried his family and heritage in the past.

Albus sat on the other side, contemplating his options and what to do. There were two critical items Albus had to address with Sirius; one was to return Harry to the Dursleys as soon as possible because of the blood protection and the other was to regain some favour with the man who now held Harry's guardianship. He wasn't foolish enough to think it was going to be easy. Evidently, Sirius had been very busy since he had flown away on the hippogriff – he had somehow broken the compulsion Albus had placed upon him for his safety, assumed the Lordship and manipulated events from there to gain custody of his godson. On one level, Albus admired what he'd done; Sirius had gotten Cornelius to do his job, the Ministry to award him guardianship and he'd sent Albus on the proverbial wild nargle chase to keep him away from England while Sirius made his first allies and they completed the adoption. The love that had prompted Sirius into taking on the mantle of the Black family history he had literally run away from must be great and powerful indeed, Albus mused silently, and it would make Albus's task that much more difficult, all the more so for where they were.

There had been a brief heated discussion on where to meet but Sirius had gotten his way. He had bluntly told Albus that he didn't trust him not to try something but the protections in Black Manor had enough of a reputation that he knew Albus would understand the consequences of trying something within the confines of the Black home. Albus had conceded the location as unimportant but sat within the study he could admit to himself that he was almost intimidated by the magic he could feel around him.

A house elf had popped in and out with refreshments, and Dumbledore picked up his tea, smiling a little at the lemon biscuits that accompanied it. He needed to take the first step towards reconciliation, Albus decided, and cleared his throat.

"Firstly, Sirius, let me begin by apologising to you for my part in the miscarriage of justice that you suffered." Albus began sincerely. He was truly horrified that his inaction had led to Sirius's suffering as an innocent man. "The days following the defeat of Voldemort were chaotic but I confess that when the dust settled I realised I could not remember a trial for you. I believed you guilty as you had been the Secret Keeper and determined if there had not been a trial, it was not worth the pain of dragging up memories that one would cause. I let my anger and grief for James and Lily blind me to doing the right thing. I am very sorry, my boy."

"And your reason for sending two kids to save me at Hogwarts rather than providing me with the protection of the Chief Warlock?" Sirius countered. He leaned back in his chair, regarding Albus almost impassively.

"Ah, well, there I have no excuse."

Albus could see that he'd taken Sirius by surprise in the slight flare of his nostrils; the widening of his eyes.
"Mea culpa as the Romans used to say. Once again in your regard, I did what was easy than what was right." Albus said.

"Why?" asked Sirius baldly.

"Several reasons," Albus prevaricated, taking a sip of his tea, "but I think you know the main one."

"The compulsion charm rather gave it away." Sirius pointed out dryly.

Albus winced. He had known from their discussion on where to hold their talk that Sirius was likely aware of the compulsion Albus had placed on him at Hogwarts and he was honestly embarrassed by it. "I believed it was for the best given Cornelius's determination to have you Kissed. Rather you were abroad and safe, dear boy, than close and…"

"Near to Harry." Sirius interrupted. He picked up his own tea and took a large gulp as though he required fortification.

"I was going to say dead." Albus corrected gently despite Sirius being right in that ensuring distance between the two had been one of Albus's other reasons. "Harry would have been devastated if something had happened to you."

"Forgive me if I think your motivation wasn't quite as pure as you make it out to be. If you'd added a destination to your compulsion, no doubt I'd still be a fugitive," Sirius retorted, "and I'm not certain you've ever made a decision for Harry that took into account his happiness."

His eyebrows shot up that. "Every decision I have made in regards to Harry has been to keep him safe."

"Safe is not the same as happy." Sirius argued fiercely and Albus conceded to himself that the other man had a point. "And I think we have very different definitions of safe."

That…rankled. He felt the first stirrings of annoyance. He frowned at the younger wizard. "I have to admit, Sirius," he said quietly, "that I'm surprised at the level of your animosity." He paused. "I had hoped you would extend to me the same forgiveness and chance for redemption that I showed you after your foolish dare to Severus."

Sirius looked at him with disbelief. Albus was suddenly aware of the anger in Sirius's grey eyes. It was like a potion simmering in a cauldron; one wrong ingredient and the whole thing would explode.

"Seriously? You're going to equate an idiotic dare made by school kid, a dare provoked by Snivellus in the first place and which was probably a set up to get Remus killed and me expelled – something I'm sure you were aware of at the time, with failing your duty as Chief Warlock and incarcerating an innocent man for twelve years? And not only failing once but twice when you decided not to protect me at Hogwarts? And let's not forget the highly illegal compulsion charm you placed on me."

Albus blushed, seeing the inequality of the comparison he'd made too late, and realising he'd erred once again in believing Sirius hadn't known that Albus had known Severus had set up the incident in question.

Sirius waved a hand to forestall Albus launching his defence. "But let's say quid pro quo that your forgiveness of my impetuous youth and decision not to expel me wipes out your part in my Azkaban torment and subsequent continuance as a fugitive even when you knew I was innocent…"

His tone was scathing and Albus winced again.
"...and it wouldn't make any difference to my level of animosity because I am not mad on my behalf so much as I am mad on Harry's." Sirius stabbed a finger in his direction.

Well, at least, Albus considered wryly, they'd gotten to the heart of the matter.

"There is no greater love than a parent for a child." Albus commented, his usual calm and good humour returning with the reason for Sirius's anger. "I assure you once again that I have always acted in Harry's best interests."

He ignored the voice in his head pointing out that he had used the boy as bait for Voldemort in his first year because yes, that had happened, but Albus had learned from it and he hadn't used the boy since. For a long moment, he thought Sirius might hex him but the new Head of the House of Black gave an angry huff and sat back.

"You know I think you actually believe that."

The reply disconcerted Albus.

"You really don't see what you've done wrong, do you?" Sirius gesticulated at him. "You don't see your mistakes as mistakes but as perfectly fine decisions."

Sirius was quite correct and, with the exception of the business with the stone, Albus couldn't see that he had made any major mistakes with the boy; Harry had been kept safe. But he realised that he wasn't going to get very far on the subject of Harry without addressing the mistakes Sirius believed Albus had made with Harry.

"I am willing to explain my actions if it will heal this rift between us, Sirius; for Harry's sake." Albus offered eagerly.

Sirius nodded slowly. "Well, let's start with the first decision: why did you decide to send Harry to his aunt's that night in 'eighty-one?"

It was the perfect opening to explain the blood protection, Albus thought happily.

"Initially, the thought came from one of my last conversations with Lily," Albus admitted, "she joked that if they ran out of safe places to hide, as a last resort there was always her sister's house where she had placed blood wards. She confessed that she'd known they were considered borderline illegal, but she'd lost her parents and despite the fact that she and her sister hadn't spoken in some time, she wanted to do everything in her power to protect her."

He picked up his tea and sipped it.

"The night of the tragedy, my monitoring spells at Godric's Hollow told me Harry was still alive. So my idea when I sent Hagrid to recover Harry was simply to hide him with his muggle relations providing some breathing space in the wizarding world to make sense of what had happened before long term decisions were made." Albus explained. "I thought, you see, that there had to be not one but two spies in the Order because of the information that had leaked out. I believed you were the Secret Keeper and had betrayed them fulfilling one role but I could not be certain of the second. It was imperative that Harry was placed beyond the reach of anyone in the Order. The only people I knew for certain were absolutely trustworthy at that point were Minerva, Poppy and Hagrid."

"I don't disagree with your reasoning yet," Sirius commented, "in fact, I agreed with it at the time bar the stuff on the spy side because I knew it was Pettigrew. You thought there were two spies; you didn't account for your spy being an animagus who could sneak into the meetings where he was excluded. If I hadn't been thrown straight to Azkaban, or if you had visited me or ensured that I'd had
"a trial, you would have found that out."

Albus frowned but he couldn't deny Sirius's charge. "I have admitted that was a mistake."

"Yes, equivalent to my school day misdemeanour daring Snape." Sirius waved a hand as Albus bristled at the intentional poke for his earlier faux pas. "Let's continue; I know you changed your mind and decided to leave Harry there for the long term by the evening of November 1st. Why?"

"While Hagrid brought Harry to Hogwarts, I tracked down Petunia Dursley and examined the blood wards on her home. Lily was always an impressively bright witch and they were outstanding wards. I added a few more to cover the general neighbourhood." Albus recounted. "Then I returned to Hogwarts and made my way to the infirmary where Harry was in the care of Poppy. Poppy had some unusual readings." He considered the best way to frame the information and decided the most straightforward would gain him points with Sirius. "Harry was – is – protected by a blood protection ward merged with his very skin."

Sirius didn't react.

Albus searched his expression and made an uncomfortable realisation. "You already knew."

"Harry has talked about his adventures," Sirius said quietly.

That was not good.

"...and when Remus and I theorised about how Harry had survived, Remus informed me that he had discussed such a spell with Lily." Sirius continued, shocking Albus from his rumination of how he was going to do damage control.

"Remus had…" Albus repeated with a splutter. He set his tea-cup down with a shaking hand. "Does he know the exact spell? Which reference book she used?"

"Yes as it happens." Sirius said. "I'm sure he would have told you had you informed him about the blood protection back then."

Another dig and Albus couldn't help but wince at the knowledge that he had missed out on such vital information because he had suspected Remus of being the other spy and hadn't confided in him. Of course in hindsight it was easy to see that Lily might have discussed the spell with someone and the obvious person in that circle would have been Remus given his leaning toward academia.

"But back to you," Sirius said, "you found the blood protection ward and…?" He gestured for Albus to continue.

"And came to the conclusion that Lily had obviously meant for Harry to reside with her sister; the blood ward around Harry and around the house provide him with an unparalleled level of protection. While he can call Privet Drive home, his blood maintains the ward around the house and imbues it with the same lethal nature of the ward around his skin. Voldemort cannot touch him there. But in addition to that, the presence of someone with his mother's blood within the house ward anchors the one around his skin." Albus said eagerly.

Surely now Sirius would see the need for Harry to return there. But there was no look of horror at having taken Harry away from such protection or dismay at possibly losing the protection that Harry carried.

Albus frowned. "If you have talked with Harry about his adventures then you surely realise the blood protection has saved his life twice; once that night when Voldemort attacked, and once when
Harry confronted his spirit when it possessed Quirrell."

"I do realise it, Headmaster, and you've confirmed the why of it pretty much for the reasons I and Remus suspected. I'm not sure how you jumped from Lily saying her sister was a last resort and she hadn't spoken to her in years, to believing she meant for Harry to go there," Sirius said. "and we'll come back to the protection no doubt in good time, but right now I'd rather discuss why you left Harry with the Dursleys without any oversight since Minerva warned you that they were the worst kind of muggles."

It was an insightful question. Albus sighed. "I didn't leave him without any oversight; Arabella Figg was soon stationed in the neighbourhood to keep watch once I was certain that she was not the spy. But I believed when Petunia took him in that she had put aside her differences with Lily and committed herself to looking after him regardless of the issues between she and Lily."

"Firstly, I know stationing anybody was Remus's idea," Sirius commented, "and secondly, did Figg ever enter the Dursley residence? Did she check out his bedroom? Investigate his living conditions? Were the Dursleys aware that they were being watched?"

"I had promised Petunia minimal contact and I did not see the need to inform her." Albus said defensively. "Arabella it is true was never able to get inside the house but she baby-sat for Harry albeit on an occasional basis in her own home."

"And she never reported any concerns about how the Dursleys treated him?" Sirius probed.

It was clear the issue Sirius was highlighting and Albus thought it best to tackle it head-on.

"She expressed a concern that the Dursleys might not love Harry as they did their own child following her first baby-sitting experience but she assured me he was fed and clothed. She never raised the matter again and I believed Harry was doing well from the odd photo she sent." Albus sighed. "I realise such an unloving environment isn't ideal but he arrived at Hogwarts a normal child, eager to learn magic, and I believe the Dursleys for all their faults have raised an admirable boy."

Sirius shook his head. "Unbelievable." He held up a hand before Albus could continue to defend the Dursleys and his hands-off position. He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a sheaf of bound parchment. He tossed it on the desk in front of Albus. "That is a report about Harry's home environment compiled by Amelia Bones and Alastor Moody from the visit they made to Harry to interview him about the incident involving me at Hogwarts."

Albus frowned as he warily took in the parchment.

"It's the reason why I was given immediate custody of Harry." Sirius continued in the same hard unrelenting tone. "They didn't deem his home environment unloving, Headmaster, they deemed it abusive." He gestured at the report. "I haven't read it because I prefer to have Harry confide in me of his own accord, but from what little he has confided in me, I have to say I agree with the conclusions of the report." He glared at Albus. "He slept in a cupboard under the stairs until they received his first Hogwarts letter which was addressed there!"

The information stunned Albus. Surely Petunia wouldn't have done that to a child? Surely there had been some mistake…

"He received nothing but second hand clothes and practically no birthday or Christmas presents – if he received something it was a mocking item to instil in him he wasn't worthy of actual presents." Sirius continued. "I know from what Remus found out that Harry was locked up in his bedroom the Summer after his first year and starved! I took Harry with me when I went off to get the healing the
Ministry ordered and you know what they found for Harry? Malnutrition and stunted growth. I wonder how that happened."

"I don't know what to say." Albus said dejectedly. Because what could he say? He had missed abuse – actual abuse! Certainly Poppy had told him about the malnutrition but he had dismissed it as the usual childish fussy eating habits he saw with many students – it was the reason why the Hogwarts food was laced with mild nutrient potions. He wanted to say that Harry had exaggerated his claims as Albus had assumed had happened with the story the Weasley twins had told their parents and Remus, but the official report compiled by an Auror that Albus himself trusted and the Head of the DMLE made a mockery of that want.

"You could have told the Dursleys in your letter that minimal contact included a yearly visit by you or Minerva if not Remus. You could have informed them that they were being watched by someone stationed in the neighbourhood. You could have paid more attention to Harry's health and his living situation when he entered Hogwarts."

Sirius berated him and Albus let him because he deserved every word. He ran over the reasons he had given for staying away and couldn't find an acceptable one. He wondered why Arabella hadn't informed him of the abuse – had she too been blind to it?

"Do you know that when we were coming out of the Shrieking Shack, before we got attacked by the Dementors, I asked Harry if he wanted to live with me then? And he said yes. Straight away." Sirius gestured impatiently at Albus. "No hesitation. What child does that? What must happen in a child's home that he believes he would be better off living with a complete stranger?!"

"You may scold me all you wish," Albus said tiredly, feeling every year of his age, "I shall not stop you. It appears that you are correct; I have made a mistake – mistakes in Harry's regard. I thought I was doing the right thing…"

Sirius regarded him with a hard look but he subsided, slumping back in his chair again. "Well, he won't go back there again."

Albus revived a little as a jolt of alarm ran through him. "He must!" He blurted out without thinking and regretted the words as soon as they passed his lips as Sirius straightened and regarded him with pure contempt.

"He will NEVER return to the Dursleys!" Sirius blazed.

"I realise that changes will need to be made," Albus said hurriedly, "but the value of the blood protection is vital now more than ever! I'll talk to the Dursleys obviously and warn them against any abusive behaviour, and perhaps you can stay with Harry to chaperone them and…"

"Are you INSANE?" Sirius rose to his feet and Albus could feel the house magic respond, crackling around him as it rose to meet its Master's anger. He marched away from Albus to a window and took some deep breaths.

Albus remained silent, understanding that Sirius was calming himself and his magic; it would be insane to disturb him.

"You don't send a child back into an abusive home for any reason." Sirius said forcefully, once he'd gotten his magic under control. "Forcing a child to be in the presence of people who hate him openly even with a chaperone…do you really think that does no harm? Merlin, you're supposed to be an educator of children!" He looked over his shoulder and glowered at Albus. "You intend to repeat your mistake, Headmaster? Put the supposed value of your all important blood protection ahead of
Harry having a warm and loving environment to nurture him?"

The words were sharply mocking and Albus sighed. "The blood protection is important if Harry is to survive when Voldemort returns. I am...deeply sorry that Harry has suffered to secure his protection but he owes his life to it."

"Yes," Sirius said, turning around and folding his arms over his chest, "let's talk about why he had to be saved by the blood protection again at the end of his first year, shall we?"

Albus blushed, knowing it was his fault. He raised a hand in weary acceptance. "I accept that I made mistakes that year with Harry and the situation with Quirrell and Voldemort. I believed the measures I had taken would guarantee Harry's safety but I admit I underestimated both him and Voldemort."

Sirius walked back to his desk and sat down. "I understand as an educator you prefer to allow children to express themselves and only step in when they go too far; to learn their lesson by getting their hands burned a little in the fire so they realise its hot; to have the opportunity and freedom to learn life lessons on their own."

He had no idea where Sirius was going with his sudden change in subject but Albus assumed it was nowhere good for Albus.

"So I get why you allowed Harry and his friends to investigate the mystery. I'm sure they weren't the only ones; declaring something a no-go area to children is like waving a red flag to a bull." The dryness of his tone was somehow even more chiding than his anger. "I know James and I would have been up to the third floor corridor in a flash."

Sirius pointed at Albus. "But to encourage their curiosity when you knew the danger – when you were responsible for the danger was beyond the pale. You set a trap for a Dark Lord in a school full of children, Headmaster." He said coldly. "You used my son, James's and Lily's son, as bait and he ended up in no less than four life-threatening situations. You allowed a man possessed by Voldemort to teach. You placed dangerous creatures within the school – within the school! You failed to fulfil your duty of care ten times over."

Albus couldn't argue with him. He nodded despondently. "It was not one of my better moments, Sirius, and believe me when I say I learned from it. I would not do the same again."

"Well, the second year disaster when Harry was almost killed by a basilisk wasn't your fault, I give you that," Sirius said.

Dear Merlin; the boy really had talked of his adventures. Albus sighed heavily.

"But you didn't do much to ensure the safety of the school either. What were you thinking allowing the school to remain open when there was a basilisk roaming the corridors?"

"I could not locate the Chamber to deal with the basilisk and there was no information on who was being possessed." Albus defended himself briskly. "If I had merely closed the school, neither issue would have been resolved and the problem would just have reoccurred once the students returned. I confess that I did overlook Myrtle quite badly as a source of information but alas, I assumed her place of death was meaningless as a clue."

Sirius nodded. "OK, I can accept that although there were other additional precautions you could have taken; hiring some more roosters once the first lot were killed, for instance. But then there's the whole matter of allowing Harry to be mostly ostracized for being a parselmouth." He held up a hand. "I know it goes with your theory of education; children need to learn to handle rejection and not..."
always being liked but you fail to realise that not stepping in condones the poor behaviour of prejudiced children being mean to another child. Just as never stepping into stop bullying behaviour allows it to continue and punishes the child being bullied."

"We have recently realised this and have agreed a new bullying policy." Albus rejoined, ignoring that his agreement had been grudging and given only after Minerva's sharp words on the subject.

"Does that include stopping the staff bullying the students too?" Sirius remarked crisply.

"You're referring to Severus." Albus said with a sigh. "I have talked with him about his behaviour with Harry."

Sirius harrumphed.

Albus decided he had been on the defensive too long. "Shall we discuss why Harry was in danger last year?"

Sirius gave a small laugh. "Oh, I accept my part and I'll even admit that I know you were forced to take the Dementors as guards under severe protest since Cornelius already confessed all to me, but you still didn't ward the passageways into the school; didn't think to leave an alarm on the Shrieking Shack; didn't think to specifically alarm Gryffindor tower. I got into the dorm! If I'd really been after killing Harry, I would have succeeded!"

The criticism hurt and Albus could see in hindsight that he should have done those things – it just hadn't occurred to him as he had been confident his security measures were sufficient. "Perhaps there needs to be a security review." He murmured. "I believed the usual wards would inform me if you entered the school which they failed to do."

"I have come this close," Sirius held up his forefinger and thumb showing a distance of less than an inch, "to finding Harry a different school."

Albus's eyes widened with horror. The financial impact if Harry withdrew would be tremendous as others would follow in his wake; the damage to Hogwarts' reputation would be immense; and, sentimentally, Albus wanted *Harry* himself to simply attend and enjoy Hogwarts as Albus had done, as James and Lily had done.

"However," Sirius said, "Harry loves Hogwarts. So he stays and I will be taking the Black seat on the Board of Governors." He looked over at Albus and for the first time the fire that had been in his eyes had disappeared. "A security review seems to be a good idea especially since you're opening up the school to the Tri-Wizard Tournament."

"I would appreciate your help," Albus said immediately, "and perhaps I can convince Amelia to put some of the new funds at her disposal towards the tournament." He smiled at Sirius proudly. "That was well done today, my boy, very well done indeed."

He could admit that Sirius had played the Wizengamot like a harp; just like Arcturus. The House of Black had always wielded immense wealth and power in pursuit of its political goals. He could even admit that he agreed with most of the decisions Sirius seemed to have made: that he had taken a position that placed the House of Black staunchly against the Dark Lord was fantastic news but his actions in regards to the LeStranges was worrying ruthlessness. Everybody deserved a chance for redemption.

Sirius waved away the praise. "We've meandered from the point."

"Yes, we have." Albus admitted. "I concede that Harry going back to the Dursleys would be difficult
for him but I don't see any other way to maintain the blood protection. Measures can be taken to ensure Harry had minimal contact with them, but I'm sorry, Sirius, I must insist he return there."

Sirius's eyes fired up again. "You just don't listen, do you? Firstly, you mustn't insist anything. You don't have the authority under any of your many positions to tell me to do anything in regards to MY son; I am his blood, legal and magical guardian NOT you! You are nothing more than his Headmaster and, if you ever get your head out of your arse, a possible friend and ally."

Albus blinked at the caustic tone and harsh language. "There's no need for that, my boy."

"I think there's every reason because you don't seem to understand that: Harry. Will. Never. Go. Back. To. The. Dursleys." He punctuated each word by stabbing his finger onto his desk.

"The blood protection…"

"The Dursleys are no longer at Privet Drive." Sirius cut him off harshly.

Albus froze and examined the younger wizard's intent expression. "What did you do?"

"I gave them a new house with new wards. Petunia was ecstatic about living in her dream town and without Harry." Sirius sat back, looking unconcerned.

"But the blood wards…"

"Will fail very shortly." Sirius pointed out. "With nobody of Lily's blood residing there."

Albus closed his eyes. "Then the blood protection…"

"Is fine." Sirius said.

Albus snapped his eyes open in shock.

"Remus tracked down the spell he and Lily had discussed. It mentioned that the blood protection would erode without an anchor of blood within a home. Luckily, Remus found an adoption blessing within the same text." Sirius explained. "We did the ritual yesterday as it has to be performed by the women of the House. Harry's blood protection is anchored by Black blood now."

"And you couldn't have told me this before?" Albus asked, genuinely irritated at how Sirius had allowed him to believe the blood protection was in danger and gone.

"No." Sirius wagged a finger at him. "I was interested to know if you'd put Harry's best interests first and whether you'd be willing to listen to someone else's view."

"Ah." Albus felt a rush of chagrin and reached for a lemon biscuit in the absence of his comforting muggle sweets. "I rather failed your test, I fear."

"I wouldn't say you'd get a Troll…" Sirius said dryly.

"Just a Dreadful." Albus sighed and munched his biscuit. He wasn't sure how he could patch things up. He'd been so certain that he knew best. On one hand, he was despondent at losing control of the situation and yet, on the other, he admired Sirius's and Remus's ingenuity. They had achieved both securing Harry a happy home where he was loved and the maintenance of the blood protection; something Albus had failed to do.

"If I was your Professor, I would say that you need to stop believing that you're the only one with the answers, share your problems with others and listen to them, and most importantly; acknowledge that
there are more important things in raising a child than simply keeping him alive." Sirius said crisply.

Sirius got back to his feet and walked over to the mantelpiece where he looked at the crest of the House of Black for a long moment, leaving Albus to consider his words of advice. Albus took a drink of tea to wash down the biscuit.

"So how is your search for the horcruxes going?" Sirius asked suddenly.

His tea went down the wrong way and Albus coughed violently in danger of choking for a long moment. He took a breath to recover and Sirius passed him a conjured glass of water. Albus drank deeply and sighed with relief as the soreness in his throat eased.

Sirius returned to his seat. "Anything you would like to share?"

Albus stared at him and wondered just how much Sirius knew. Did he know about the horcrux within Harry – he had mentioned that they'd attended a healing clinic…or was his knowledge restricted to the diary that Harry would have described in telling all about his second year adventure with the basilisk? He recalled that the discussion about the blood protection had been a test and he had failed. This was his second chance, Albus realised. If he did not give full disclosure here…

"I believe I have much to share and not all of it good news." Albus offered gravely. "You know of the diary, I presume?"

Sirius gave a slow nod. He propped his head up with one hand, his elbow resting on the table. His Head of House ring glinted at Albus.

"As soon as I saw it I knew what it was. Such a vile act; a vile trick to flee from death, indeed." Albus said, with renewed disgust at what Tom had done. "I'm not certain but I think the diary was an accident created by the death of Myrtle as Tom called the basilisk forth from the Chamber when he was a student at Hogwarts. He poured much of his personality between its pages and when he killed her, the damage to his soul caused it to fracture and a piece sheared away and became one with the diary." He sighed heavily. "Whether Tom's interest in horcruxes predated that incident or whether he had already started to learn of them…I rather believe when he realised that the diary had been turned into more than a journal when it wrote back to him, it prompted his curiosity and led him to a conversation with Horace."

"Old Slughorn?" Sirius grimaced. "Sluggy would have had access to a lot of Dark knowledge through his network. If he didn't know about horcruxes, I'm sure he would have known someone who did to point Tom at."

"And I fear he did." Albus said. "I tracked Horace down last summer but he refused outright to admit to any discussion. His entire demeanour was one of heavy guilt." He sipped his tea. "I believe once Tom had confirmed what the diary was, he stopped writing into it, possibly around the middle of his sixth year. But no doubt Tom made others – he would not have stopped at one. Three may have been his initial goal…seven is more likely. He had an obsession with the number. How many he made before his confrontation with Harry that night…"

Good Merlin, the prophecy! Another piece of vital information he had kept to himself for so long…was he meant to give that up too? Maybe he could offer what was already known by Tom…

His eyes sharpened on Sirius. "Tom believed, you see, that Harry was the one prophesised to vanquish him. The Death Eater who overheard and reported it to him only heard the first part of the prophecy but it was enough to identify Harry and young Neville as possible candidates; it was why I encouraged both families into hiding."
Sirius nodded. "You know the full prophecy?"

"I do but I would not want to burden Harry with the full weight of it at his age." Albus admitted frankly.

For a long moment, Albus thought Sirius was going to press him further and there was a worrying shimmer of rage that flickered across Sirius's face before it faded into an expressionless mask that simply made Albus more anxious.

"So you don't have any idea of the number of horcruxes Voldemort made before he was made a wraith?" Sirius returned to the topic of horcruxes much to Albus's relief.

"My intention this Summer is to start reviewing Tom's life and backtracking to see when and where he could have made them." Albus admitted.

Sirius nodded almost absently. He opened another desk drawer and another piece of parchment drifted out to hover in front of Albus. He took it and thanked Merlin he'd put his tea down. Regulus Black had just made his job much easier!

"Well, this is splendid!" Albus said, delighted. "I can make some guesses as to the items and locations using this list and…"

"The DOM is going to form a team to track them down and destroy them." Sirius said dryly.

Albus looked up in alarm. "You...you told Bertie about the horcruxes?"

"Bertie, Cornelius and Amelia in general terms; I called them objects that kept Voldemort from dying." Sirius confirmed to Albus's horror. "Bertie understood what I meant obviously; the DOM has researched horcruxes before and they know how to dispose of them. As I said, he's going to put a small team together. Bill Weasley will join it to provide his curse-breaking skills in repayment of his sister's life debt to Harry and to give me an inside man. He also knows the full picture; he's come across them in Egypt."

His plans unravelled before Albus's eyes. That Sirius could risk the information from leaking in such a way…

"All the team will be under vows; all capable of Occlumency." Sirius said as though he'd read Albus's mind. "We're calling it Operation Treasure Hunt."

Albus placed the parchment down and regarded Sirius with disappointment. "Nevertheless, the likelihood of this hunt getting back to Voldemort has increased substantially. We could have kept this between us and hunted them down ourselves."

"And how long would that take us?" asked Sirius pointedly. "I want this done quickly before Voldemort regains a body and is operating at full strength. Yes, there's a risk, but this is the DOM's specialty. They're trained for this." He paused. "Just as the DMLE is now on alert that Voldemort didn't die and may be attempting a comeback. They're going to start tracking the known Death Eaters that walked for lack of evidence."

"The Wizengamot today," Albus realised, his mind racing, "you and Cornelius were laying the foundation to undermine Tom's political power."

"And financial." Sirius said.

Albus nodded slowly because he could already see how Sirius would use the power of the House of
Black and the House of Potter to control the Ministry and the Wizengamot and reshape the wizarding world – all for the protection of the boy Sirius loved as a son. "Remarkable." He had always believed love was the power Tom knew not.

"There's a War Council," Sirius said, "and you're invited to be part of it. Everyone is agreed your help and advice would be welcome. Penelope will send you the details of the meeting times."

"I would be delighted to assist." Albus said.

He could still backtrack through Tom's life but it seemed he would not do so alone. He remembered Sirius's chiding comments after the blood protection discussion and mused that it might not be a bad thing although he still worried about so much vital information being so widely known.

Albus sighed heavily. "The next piece of information I have for you, I suggest you do not share with anyone." He held Sirius's curious gaze determinedly. "The night Tom attacked Harry I believe he created another accidental horcrux – within Harry." He gestured across the desk. "I bound Harry's core to prevent the remnant becoming powerful and assuming control of the child. It does restrict the conscious amount of power Harry can access although he is capable of overcoming that as his mastering of the Patronus charm demonstrates." He searched for the right words and found none. "To defeat Tom, I'm afraid Harry must also die."

"Harry had the horcrux removed at the healing clinic although he believes he simply had his scar cleansed of Dark magic. They removed your binding afterwards and we've been practicing bringing his magic under control." Sirius told him bluntly. "If you want confirmation you can write to Noshi Blackhawk."

The news that Harry was cleansed of Tom's darkness, that he would not need to die, rushed through Albus, and stole his breath; Harry could live, grow old. He felt his emotions surge; an enormous wave of relief followed immediately by an almost oppressive amount of guilt. Why had it never occurred to him to seek the counsel of someone like Noshi?

"You must think me a monster." Albus thought out loud, blinking back tears of remorse.

"Noshi told me you could have killed Harry that Halloween's night and you didn't so no, I don't think you're a monster." Sirius said calmly. "I'm not happy with you. You could have sought help and advice if not immediately at the time, certainly in the years since and especially before Harry got to school."

And there it was again; Sirius's painful lesson that Albus share information and listen to others. He could have approached Noshi; he knew the man was a good soul and a consummate healer who took issues of confidentiality seriously. He shook his head. "You are right to be angry with me. I have made many mistakes. All I can offer as mitigation is that I believed I was protecting him and that I do care for him tremendously."

Sirius sighed and sat back, looking at Albus pensively. "I'm angry at you, Albus."

The use of his given name didn't go unnoticed by Albus; it was the first time since they had talked that Sirius had consented to use it. He felt a stirring of hope.

"If Harry had been inclined to pursue a prosecution against the Dursleys, and if it wouldn't have completely destabilised our society which considers you a moral icon, I would have encouraged him to bring charges against you too for child endangerment and neglect." Sirius informed him briskly.

Albus flinched sharply.
"You have three important positions in our society, but you have made serious errors of judgement both as Chief Warlock and as Headmaster of Hogwarts," Sirius continued. "Any other person would have resigned following the disclosure that they had failed to give an innocent man a trial yet both you, and Crouch for that matter, have wriggled out of it, placing the blame on Bagnold who is dead and can't defend herself."

Another flinch; he couldn't deny it.

Sirius motioned at Albus. "Your decisions as Headmaster, certainly for Harry's first year if not his second, should also have led to dismissal." He pinned Albus with a hard grey stare. "Again, a noble man would have resigned." He sat back. "Yet, I can't deny that if Voldemort is attempting to rise again, if you were not Headmaster, he'd consider Hogwarts as vulnerable and so I can't demand you to do the noble thing in repayment for all the crap you've put Harry through."

Albus breathed out a little.

"And I'm mostly not the injured party." Sirius continued. "Harry believes you care about him and I… I have attempted to maintain that impression while trying to explain your actions or inaction when he's questioned it – such as your decision not to look in on him after you placed him with the Dursleys. In truth, I rather think he's already forgiven you. Personally I think he's too forgiving because of the self-esteem issues that living with the Dursleys have left him with. But he has too few people in his life who he believes genuinely care for him and I won't deny him any one of those people."

"I will offer him an unreserved apology." Albus said quickly.

Sirius nodded. "Understand this, Albus; Harry is mine to protect now. You're done making decisions about his home, his life and his future. I don't believe that prophecies are written in stone. I will do everything I can to remove Voldemort from existence so Harry doesn't have to face him again. You get in the way of that and I don't care how powerful you are, you and I will come to blows."

Albus bristled slightly at the tone but he knew Sirius meant every word of it and was quite capable of carrying out his threat. Albus was the more powerful wizard but Sirius had shown a sneakiness that had completely overturned all of Albus's plans within the space of a mere month. "I promise to work with you, Sirius, and I promise to do better in sharing and listening to others."

Sirius harrumphed and there was a definite air of 'I'll believe it when I see it' as he got to his feet. "I have to get back to Harry and I think we're done for today." He gestured at the report still on the desk while placing the parchment back in his desk. "That's your copy."

Albus stifled the urge to ask to see Harry, his want to know where Harry was so that he could monitor him. He picked up the report and let Sirius walk him to the floo. They exchanged brief words of goodbye before Albus entered the flames.

He walked out of the fireplace and into his office at Hogwarts; Fawkes trilled a comforting welcome. He placed the report on his desk, his fingers tracing over it thoughtfully. He wondered if he dared read it, and knew that he would. He had been a Gryffindor once and it was only right that he learn of the consequences of his decision. He glanced over to the set of monitoring instruments and waved his wand to shut down all but the one that kept track of Harry's life force.

He wandered over to the window to look over the grounds, letting the soothing familiarity of the school ease him. His plans were smashed to smithereens, Albus considered with wry amusement. Unsurprisingly when dealing with the Marauders, for he had no doubt that Remus had played his part in the scheme and would continue to do so. The group had been the best of their generation with
the exception of Pettigrew who had been inclined to laziness – and their generation had been exceptional; Severus, Lily, Alice – so many wonderful witches and wizards.

It was easy to see the bare bones of Sirius’s plan from the events at the Wizengamot; he intended to shut down Tom’s second grab for power before it began. The DOM would deal with the horcruxes, the DMLE with the Death Eaters, and the Ministry and Wizengamot would reshape the political and financial landscape and make it unfriendly to Tom, less of a breeding ground for followers which would make recruitment more difficult for him. It was a good plan despite Albus’s concerns that it involved too many people knowing critical information.

But Albus felt almost adrift – he no longer held the rudder but was reduced to a passenger in the boat. Oh, he had no doubt he would contribute – especially to the horcrux hunt and to the politics (he did have some sway on the Light side) – and no doubt his expertise would be valued but…he sighed heavily.

He felt so old.

Useless.

Fawkes trilled and swooped over from his perch to sit on Albus’s shoulder. Albus stroked his friend’s head gently, grateful for Fawke’s unwavering support.

Sirius’s plan also kept Harry well away from the fight, Albus mused idly, or at least tried to keep Harry away from the fight. But Albus thought Sirius was wrong about the prophecy. He hadn’t been a fan of Divination himself before witnessing Sybill’s declaration and could understand Sirius’s point of view but ultimately it didn’t matter because Tom believed the prophecy. So, no; Albus had no doubt that Harry would have face to Tom in battle again.

But, Harry no longer had to be the one to die; Albus didn’t need to shape the boy so he would sacrifice his own life. He didn’t need to hope beyond hope that Tom would seek to use Harry’s blood in creating a body and thus provide an anchor so Harry had an impossible chance to survive death; a long shot if ever there was one. The relief of that made his knees tremble. It had been the part of the plan that Albus had hated; had always hated. To know that he didn’t have to groom the boy in such a way, that such a stain would not be added to those already on his soul – ArianaGellert – was a weight off his shoulders.

He pursed his lips.

The problem was that if Harry was not to die in battle he would need to fight Tom and match him if not beat him. Nothing Albus had previously planned involved that scenario. Harry was a gifted DADA student – natural – but beyond that Albus hadn’t seen the need to offer additional training or education. In fact Albus would have denied Harry such a thing if he’d asked because when Harry discovered he needed to die, that Albus hadn’t given him any training to survive would underscore how much Albus believed that Harry needed to die. That Harry lacked confidence in his own worth because of the Dursleys would have just made convincing him easier albeit Albus hadn’t planned it that way and he honestly hadn’t realised that they’d been anything other than unloving.

Albus sighed.

Severus had informed him that the Dark Mark was growing stronger. Harry would no doubt meet Tom sooner rather than later. And Harry needed training – probably more than Sirius would allow if he knew the reason for it. But wasn’t Harry’s core unbound? Albus remembered how powerful Harry had been as a mere babe – everybody in the Order had heard James boast of Harry turning into a puppy at four months. Harry was a powerful wizard and he would need someone who understood
that power – who was just as powerful – someone like Albus.

He smiled.

He would do all he could to train Harry to fight Tom and he could do it all in the guise of helping Harry control his power so Sirius didn't worry that he was forcing the issue of Harry fighting Tom. He felt a touch of satisfaction fill him. He nudged Fawkes who flew back to his perch, and hurried back to his desk to start making plans for Harry's education but he stopped short at the sight of the report.

The front parchment with its seal of the Ministry stared up at him. Within was the truth of what Harry had suffered because of the decisions Albus had made. But he needed read it; he needed to understand the damage to Harry's confidence and what would need to be done to correct that.

Albus sat down at his desk, gathered his courage and opened the report.

"Oh, Harry…my poor boy."
Severus Snape prided himself that his behaviour was the epitome of everything Slytherin. He might only be a halfblood but he comported himself with the pureblood manners instilled in him by his mother and the cunning that dealing with his bigoted and intolerant muggle father had required. Even his obvious less than Slytherin behaviour – openly deriding the Gryffindors and specifically the Boy Who Lived, maintaining a stern deportment – all were a choice designed for a Slytherin purpose. However, sitting in front of the wireless listening to the early evening news report of the Wizengamot session, Severus's calm Slytherin mask was completely destroyed – his only boon that he was alone with no-one to witness his lack of composure (wide eyes, gaping mouth, pale face broken only by the slashes of red rage upon his cheeks) as he absorbed the shocking news.

Sirius Black was Lord Black. Black! Potter was Lord Potter, had been adopted by Black, and was now the Heir of the House of Black. The Longbottom and Potter alliance was restored. It was blow after blow as the inane commentator waffled on about how handsome Black had looked in leather pants and wasn't it a shame that Potter hadn't accompanied him.

He waved his wand with a gesture that rather looked like the muggle equivalent of giving someone the finger (his father had been a rather coarse man), and shut the infernal machine up. The news had left him more than a little horrified as he remembered Lucius's hints that morning.

Severus snorted as he paced the small living area in his quarters at Hogwarts. If Black had called Judgement and stripped the LeStranges of their magic for wearing the Dark Mark he could understand why Lucius had bowed to Black. The Head of the House of Malfoy was nothing if not a survivor, a true Slytherin able to talk his way out of every sticky situation. It would be galling for Lucius to have to conform to the will of Sirius Black but he would do it if it meant keeping his magic.

And there had been the interesting slip of information that Lucius knew of the Dark Lord's origins; clearly Lucius found them lacking. Severus had been told the truth by Albus once he had been taken on as a spy and found it more than a little amusing that the purebloods that so prostrated themselves at the feet of the Dark Lord had no idea that his origins were closer to Severus's than their own.

Severus's brief smile faded. Lucius was now aligned with Black – and Potter! –and would work with him against the Dark Lord that much was clear even if the message had been coached in formal language that would give Lucius leeway with the Dark Lord should Severus ever mention it to him. Not that he would. Severus was proud of the fact that his own allegiances were well obscured. The former Death Eaters believed he was their spy among the Light and Albus believed he was his spy among the Dark. Truthfully, Severus only had one allegiance...

Lily Elizabeth Evans.

He walked over to the small liquor cabinet and poured himself a small finger of oak-matured twenty year old Scotch. Raised in the muggle world he had a preference for it rather than the dratted Ogden's that the wizarding world favoured. He downed the glass in one go, savouring the peaty taste.

Lily had been his only friend as a child; the only one to see past a strange lank-haired, hook-nosed sallow youth and acknowledge the intelligent if serious boy inside. He had gloried in being able to introduce her to the wizarding world and revelled in her innocent affection for him.

All that had come tumbling down because of Hogwarts. In many ways he regretted ever setting foot
in the school. Perhaps if they hadn't been separated by the House divides, if he had been home-schooled as his late mother had wanted and avoided the influence of those who would willingly serve the Dark Lord…

But he had long accepted that it was his own fault their friendship had come to an end.

In the Summer before their fifth year he had asked her to pretend not to be friends with him anymore because he was under pressure from the rest of Slytherin House to conform to their prejudices, and with the rising influence of the Dark Lord, Severus was under no illusions that he would suffer if he didn't. Lily had been sympathetic and had agreed. But he could tell as the school year progressed and he didn't shield her from the comments of his friends but agreed with them, as he stood aside and watched as the Slytherin girls tripped her with hexes and did nothing (although Lily fought back quite splendidly), that her patience and understanding were eroding. They disappeared entirely when he called a mudblood.

Shame heated his cheeks to burning once again as the memory flooded back; James Potter turning him upside down to humiliate him and Lily defending Severus only for Severus to deny her so harshly…and he hadn't meant it. He had never thought of her that way.

But the damage had been done and when he'd tried to apologise to her, she had told him that she had had enough. He had made his choice perfectly clear and she would thank him to stay away from her. He'd left her alone at Hogwarts believing they had the Summer to mend fences but instead he'd had the Summer to stew over his mistake further when Lily had pointedly refused to come to the door of her muggle home and had instructed her sister to turn him away, something which Petunia had done with relish.

In his anger, he had blamed the Marauders for the loss of Lily. He had spent the rest of the Summer plotting. When he'd returned to Hogwarts he'd overheard Regulus Black talking with his friend Mathias Flint about his brother running away from home because their mother had finally flipped and beaten Black half to death. It was the perfect bait for his lure. He had easily provoked Black into telling him about the Whomping Willow and on the night of the full moon he had made his move to kill the werewolf and have Black expelled leaving Potter alone and vulnerable.

Only he had miscalculated, assuming Lupin's meek mild manner would carry over to his werewolf personality when it didn't; that Lupin in his werewolf form would be an easy target. The werewolf he had glimpsed had been angry and fierce and scared him half to death. When Potter had turned up and saved him, Severus had actually been grateful and so angry at being grateful that he could have obliterated half of Hogsmeade. And then to rub salt in the wound, Albus bloody Dumbledore had seen right through him, warned him against further action against the werewolf, and had refused to punish the Gryffindors harshly; a few detentions and a ban from Quidditch for Black and nothing, nothing for Potter and Lupin.

Worse was to come though at the end of his Sixth year when Lily had caved into Potter's pursuit of her and agreed to date him!

Severus had gone to the Dark Lord willingly after that, taking the Mark that Summer and killing some poor muggle man that had already been tortured half to death by Mulciber Senior and who hadn't even defended himself as Severus had levelled his wand at him and pretended it was his father. The killing hadn't bothered him at the time – he had after all plotted to kill Lupin (as far as Severus was concerned werewolves were creatures that should be put down as soon as they were discovered no matter what anyone – Dumbledore – said) – but he had come to regret it as an older and wiser man, understanding the sin that stained his soul better.

In retrospect he was thankful, the Dark Lord had appreciated Severus's talent with potions and so he
had been excused the usual revelry and muggle baiting. In his stupidity, he had decried not being able to attend, believing he was missing out on truly serving the Dark Lord. Then he had heard the beginning of a prophecy. He'd run, run, to the Dark Lord with it…

Severus bowed and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robes. "My Lord, I have something I must tell you but I believe it would be best to do so in confidence."

The Dark Lord stared at him with hard red eyes and Severus felt a pain deep in his head. He flinched as it left abruptly. The Dark Lord dismissed everyone from the room.

"Now rise and tell me, Severus, what did you overhear?" The Dark Lord asked smoothly.

Severus got to his feet and bowed his head respectfully. "Dumbledore was interviewing a woman for the position of Divination and she gave him a prophecy… 'the one to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…born as the seventh month dies…born to those who have thrice defied him…'," he paused and caught his breath, "unfortunately, I didn't hear anything more before I was ushered out by the barman."

"I see." The Dark Lord rose and circled Severus silently.

Severus swallowed hard. Hadn't he done his duty? Wasn't his Lord pleased with him?

"Do you believe in prophecies, my dear Severus?" The Dark Lord asked suddenly.

He had to swallow against a surge of fear before he could answer. "Honestly, no, my Lord."

"Then why such haste in bringing me this news?"

The inference that Severus believed that someone would be born that could defeat his Lord slid into Severus's mind like a sharp knife. He thought furiously.

"I merely wished to warn you that the old fool Dumbledore had heard such a thing and may believe it." Severus hurried out, bowing his head again.

The Dark Lord laughed harshly. "It would be the first time. He and I both have never put stock in the vagaries of tea leaves and dull predictions of cards." He whirled away back to his throne, his robes billowing out before he sat. "Still, there may be those who will believe and it would be better to keep this…drivel in mind." His red eyes met Severus's again. "You have done well, Severus. You will be rewarded in time."

Some months later, Severus had read the St Mungo's birth announcements and realised that one of the babies born at the end of July was Lily's child. Severus had tried to put it to the back of his mind, to tell himself the child was also the spawn of James Potter and he didn't care what happened to it, to Lily. He had worried though knowing the depravities that the rest of the Death Eaters engaged in; the cruelty the Dark Lord was capable of employing against his enemies. Then Severus had been called alone to dine with the Dark Lord; a tremendous honour…

"You have seen the birth announcements, I trust, Severus?" The Dark Lord asked once the meal was over.

"I have, my Lord." Severus admitted and he knew two babies could fulfil the conditions in the prophecy; both sets of parents had defied his Lord; both children born at the end of July.

"I have been told that Dumbledore visits the families regularly." The Dark Lord sneered. "Obviously he has succumbed finally to senility to place his hopes in such a flimsy thing as a prophecy."
"He is desperate, my Lord." Severus replied sincerely. "Your side wins more ground every day."

"Yes," the Dark Lord muttered, "desperate, and desperate men do desperate things." He conjured two glasses of cognac and handed one to Severus. "I believe Dumbledore will try and use one of these infants against me. I need a spy to determine which he will use." He swirled the liquid around the glass and pinned Severus with unrelenting red eyes. "You were once friends with the wife of the blood traitor Potter?"

"To my shame, we grew up in the same neighbourhood." Severus knew it was folly to lie to the man.

"You are aware that Dumbledore knows that it was you who overheard the prophecy?" The Dark Lord smiled menacingly as Severus had nodded jerkily. "There will soon be a vacancy for the position of Potions Professor at Hogwarts. You will apply for the job and at the interview request sanctuary within the walls of Hogwarts having felt remorse for placing the son of your old childhood friend at risk after informing me of the prophecy. You will tell the old fool that you have changed your mind about serving me."

"My Lord..." Severus stuttered. "He will know! I cannot..."

"You will, Severus." The Dark Lord said bluntly. "You will train with Bellatrix in the art of Occlumency between now and your meeting with Dumbledore. It will hide your thoughts and true allegiance from him. You will take your place in his band of blood traitors and inform me of everything but especially anything to do with the prophecy."

He had agreed – what else could he do?

It had turned out to be his salvation.

Occlumency had been difficult but working through his memories with Bellatrix laughing derisively at his upbringing and his friendship with Lily had seeded doubts in his own mind about whether he had chosen the right path. And by the time he had attended his interview and wept crocodile tears on Dumbledore's robes about regretting his choices, he had in truth been wavering and thankful that his Occlumency was good enough that he could keep both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord from knowing what was really going on in his head.

Dumbledore's request for him to be a spy had been approved by the Dark Lord who had laughed when Severus had reported to him.

"Let him think you are his," the Dark Lord smiled, "but you and I know you will always be mine."

The Dark Mark had ached for days after that; the Dark Lord's subtle reminder of who Severus had sworn his life to serving.

And as the months had passed and Severus spent more time with Dumbledore, with the rest of the Hogwarts staff and away from the Death Eaters; as he had seen the crushed faces of children who lost their parents and families to the Dark Lord's thirst for power and blood, he had become less enthralled with his own Death Eater identity.

He had instead embraced his spy role. The spying had come naturally to him and he had quickly realised he occupied a position of power within both camps. He decided which raids to share; who was saved and who was lost to an extent. He controlled vital information – not all of it but some of it. He secretly gloried in his position.

But the events of Halloween in 'eighty-one had shattered his delusion (and it was a delusion, he could see it with hindsight); the Dark Lord had summoned him and informed him of his plan to
He should have known she would die trying to save her son. He should have known the Dark Lord would not choose to stun her when he could kill her.

The harsh reality was that he had led the Dark Lord to the Potters, to Lily. He had signed their death warrants by informing the Dark Lord of the prophecy. In the aftermath, Dumbledore had guilted him into promising to help her son. Severus hated that he had made the promise in his weakness. It served its purpose in solidifying for Dumbledore that Severus worked for the Light but Potter wasn't the reason; his promise wasn't the reason.

The Dark Lord had killed Lily and for that he would pay; Severus had always been Lily's despite the fact that she had only briefly been his, and he would avenge her death by making certain the Dark Lord went to his. Protecting Potter was necessary for that to happen; that was the only reason he protected the boy.

Severus poured another glass of whiskey.

The truth was that he would always want to trade the Brat Who Lived for the Mother Who Died; Harry Potter for Lily Evans. That Lily would hate him if he did, would hex him to the end of the Earth and back for thinking such a thing…he sighed heavily. He couldn't stop himself from hating the child who Lily had died to save, believing deep down that if Harry Potter had never existed, never been born, Lily would never have been targeted, would never have died.

His hate was only exacerbated by the fact that Harry Potter was a miniature James (except for Lily's eyes staring out at him accusingly); entirely too Gryffindorish; entirely too arrogant without regard for the rules or authority; entirely too...too...

Thin.

And small.

Severus rolled his eyes expressively and pinched the bridge of his nose. He would not think consider that the Headmaster was right in his statement that Potter was not spoiled. Of course, Black would soon rectify that, Severus thought darkly.

A pop alerted him to the presence of a house elf.

"What?"

"The Headmaster is requesting Headsies of Houses come directly to his office."

"Very well." Severus put down his whiskey glass with a thunk, cast a brief mouth-freshening charm and strode out of his quarters. No doubt the old fool wanted to talk about Black's Lordship.

Black was going to be insufferable. Severus snorted. What did he mean 'was going to be'? Black already was insufferable; always had been.

He was the last to arrive and he slid into the remaining chair by a grumpy looking Poppy. A brief glance at his other colleagues confirmed they were all disgruntled at being called so peremptorily.

Albus appeared oblivious to their irritation; he sat sedately behind his desk with a bulky sheaf of parchments in front of him.
"Thank you for coming and on short notice," Albus said. "I called you together for two reasons but both are related, and are to do with Harry Potter."

"If this is an announcement that Sirius Black is also Lord Black," Filius interrupted, "I think we're all aware – the wireless has been filled with news of little else."

"In a way it is and in another, not at all." Albus held up one wrinkled and aged spotted hand. "Let me explain. I met with Sirius this afternoon after the Wizengamot session. As you have no doubt heard, he has already taken custody of Harry Potter." His expression fell suddenly and Severus felt a twinge of concern at how old Albus looked. "The reason why he was given immediate custody was because of this document." He tapped the parchment. "It is a report compiled by Amelia Bones and Alastor Moody about Harry's home environment with his aunt and uncle. It concludes that the environment was abusive and recommended Harry's immediate removal from it."

"My word!" Filius muttered in shock.

Minerva bristled angrily beside Filius. "I told you!" She snapped at Albus, her Scottish brogue thick with anger. "I told you when you left him there that they were the worst kind of muggles! But did you listen to me?! No!"

Severus was taken aback at her ferocity.

"He didn't listen to me either!" Poppy all but snarled. "Every year I've reported the boy is malnourished and suffering the signs of physical neglect and care; that he has stunted growth and health issues; and every year, Albus, you've waved me away with what were obviously empty assurances!"

Albus didn't defend himself. "You may berate me all you wish, Minerva, Poppy. I regret that I did not listen to you as I should have done in my belief that I knew best. I erred badly."

If the topic had been anything other than Potter, Severus would be amused at Albus's self-pitying guilt. The Headmaster only had himself to blame for the hurts done to his Golden Boy; Albus had been the one to place him and the one to cavarlierly dismiss the signs of abuse.

Pomona cleared her throat. "What specifically did his relatives do to Mister Potter?"

"In general terms, most of the abuse was verbal. He was never called by his name but rather 'Freak' or 'Boy' or some other derogatory term. He was regularly told he was a burden. Physically, he was set to chores above his age range and inappropriately dangerous for a child to attempt. He received slaps and hits with various implements at an early age but apparently learned how to duck and avoid them by the age of six."

"It explains his talent as a Seeker," commented Severus snidely.

Minerva glared at him.

"Continue, please, Albus." Pomona said briskly. "If we are to know how to help the child we must know of what damage has been done just as always in these cases."

"He was denied food on a regular basis and underfed as a matter of course. Beyond that…his cousin bullied him badly, injuring him severely on two documented occasions although his magic usually healed him. Materially, he was neglected; second hand clothes, no toys or books were given to him beyond the bare minimum required for his school work, no meaningful presents. He slept in a cupboard under the stairs until the age of eleven when he was given the smallest room in the house." Albus sighed heavily. "Possibly that was because of the arrival of his first Hogwarts letter. The abuse
also diminished somewhat after he was collected by Hagrid although each Summer there have been...reoccurrences in some form."

"My word!" Filius said again. "How could they!"

"They could because they had no reason to think that they couldn't!" Minerva said heatedly. "You never once checked up on him, Albus! Not once! You kept all of us with any tie to his parents away from him for his own safety and look! He wasn't safe at all!"

"Arabella Figg was stationed nearby and meant to keep an eye on him and I have talked with her via floo since reading the report wondering how she could have missed this." Albus said defensively. "Unfortunately, we had a miscommunication and she believed I was aware of the full extent of his treatment at the hands of his relatives whereas I believed they were perhaps unloving toward him but otherwise tolerant and certainly not abusive!"

"Does it matter?" asked Severus, impatiently. He flicked some lint off his robes. "So the boy was abused. I fail to see why that merits special treatment..."

"It merits the same treatment as all abused children in this school! We always discuss the best approach to take with an abused child!" Pomona remonstrated with him sharply. "You forget the majority of those come into my House!"

She was right; most of the abused sorted into Hufflepuff where they received the affection and friendship they yearned for; the security and stability their magic required to settle down. However those abused children who retained some spirit usually sorted into Slytherin as cunning and sneakiness were both required in the retention of that spirit.

Severus refused to think of Potter sympathetically or to pity him. Many were abused worse than Potter and his own childhood hadn't been a picnic. No, Potter might have reasons for some of his more irritating traits, including his lack of respect for authority, but he was still a detestable brat.

"And the rest usually come into mine!" Severus retorted. "My point is why are we having this discussion now in the middle of the holidays when it should be scheduled for the start of year preparation when we discuss all such cases!"

"Perhaps if I was allowed to finish, you would all discover the reason, Severus." Albus said tersely. Everyone, not just Severus, squirmed under the rebuke.

"Firstly, I agree with Severus that deciding what the educational approach to Harry should be discussed in our usual meeting ahead of the term's start," Albus said crisply, "however, there are medical concerns that need to be addressed immediately. Realising there had been abuse, Sirius took Harry to The Valley Clinic in the States. They have corrected much of the physical consequences and I believe have dealt with some of the emotional issues. They also released a binding that I had placed on Harry's magic related to his scar. Harry has had a substantial increase in power and will need to relearn control before the school starts."

"I'll owl and offer my services for Charms." Filius said immediately.

"I'm already engaged for Transfiguration." Minerva informed Albus frostily.

Albus's eyebrows rose. "I see. I did wonder with the Potter announcements whether you were aware that Sirius was Lord Black and of events generally. I had hoped you would have confided in me."

Minerva harrumphed. "I had hoped that you had used a modicum of sense in placing Harry. It seems
"we've both lived to be disappointed."

Severus exchanged an unsettled look with Pomona at the chilly glare between the Head and his Deputy.

"Albus," Poppy was the one to break the tension, "I assume you wish me to write to the clinic and get a full accounting of his medical records?"

"Yes, Poppy. Harry's Healer was Noshi Blackhawk; Sirius has given us permission to approach him." Albus agreed. He shifted position and folded his hands on top of the parchment. "The second reason why I called you together is that Sirius raised concerns over the standards and safety here at the school to the point where he informed me he had considered withdrawing Harry."

Severus snorted. "If he wants to withdraw the brat, let him!"

"Severus, don't be absurd!" Filius replied before Albus could. "Apart from the severe damage to our reputation such an event would incur, where Potter goes, many would follow! We'd be lucky to have a school left!"

"And therein lies the heart of the issue." Albus said. "I would like your ideas and thoughts on how we can improve things. I have already decided to invite our new DADA Professor, Alastor Moody, to move in for the rest of the Summer and do a full security review of the school's wards and grounds."

"Well, that's a start." Pomona said, adjusting her robes. "Personally, I'd like something to be done about Binns!"

"His and a number of other subjects don't perform well at OWL level and should be audited." Minerva agreed. "Divination should be dropped and Muggle Studies needs a complete overhaul."

"I am in agreement." Filius said. "I'd also add that Potions is another area of concern. Many of my students employ tutors in the Summer to make up for deficits in their understanding."

Severus glowered at him. "It is not my fault most of them are dunderheads who can't understand the first thing to do with potions!"

"Perhaps if you taught rather than simply bullied them it would help!" Minerva snapped back.

"And perhaps…"

"Enough!" shouted Albus. "We are not here to criticise each other's teaching styles." He took a deep breath. "If there are no more ideas?"

They all shook their heads.

"Then thank you for your time. Please come to me with other suggestions as they occur to you." Albus said briskly. "Severus, if you could remain behind, please."

The others trooped out although Minerva remained behind briefly and waited until it was the three of them.

"Did you know, Albus, that I was considered as a potential guardian by Lily and James?" Minerva asked bluntly.

Albus sighed and nodded gravely. "I did not think to bring it your attention, Minerva, because the
will was missing and your claim was weak. And while you did caution me against the Dursleys, you did agree with me before we departed that it was for the best to leave him there."

And for the first time Severus could remember, Minerva looked truly devastated. "To my everlasting shame, I did, Albus, and I will never forgive myself." She swept out before Albus could reply.

For a long moment there was silence and Albus looked as though his thoughts were far away. Severus cleared his throat.

"Ah, Severus, my apologies for my wool-gathering." Albus said, seemingly shaking off whatever had distracted him. "I need to inform you that Sirius is well aware of the prophecy and of the reality of Voldemort's imminent resurrection."

"You informed him?" Severus spluttered, losing his cool for the second time that day.

"He was aware of the latter and I believe in hindsight knew or suspected the former as he didn't press me about it." Albus said. "Sirius has a plan to defeat Voldemort and I have agreed we will work with him."

Severus felt his lip curling up in disgust.

"Additionally, it is more important than ever for you to be civil to Harry," Albus continued, "otherwise I have no doubt Sirius will call for an end to your tenure here or withdraw Harry."

Of course he was to be civil to the brat; it didn't matter how cheeky and disrespectful the brat was to him.

"I implore you to put the enmity with Sirius in the past…"

Of course he was simply to forgive and forget being bullied and thrown to a werewolf by Black; it didn't matter that Black had tried to murder him.

"For the sake of Lily's memory…"

"Do not use her name in this!" Severus snapped, surging out of his chair and striding to the window. He looked unseeing at the grounds beyond unknowing that Albus had done much the same earlier that day.

Albus remained silent and Severus was glad of that as he brought his tumbling emotions back under control.

"Lucius reported that the House of Black was strong again. He will stand with the House of Black." Severus reported calmly. "Clearly whatever else is uncertain, Black's abhorrence of the Dark Lord and his known ruthlessness will help decimate the Dark Lord's support among purebloods. He will work to end the Dark Lord once and for all."

"Agreed." Albus said softly.

"What is also certain is that Black will protect Potter," he paused for effect, "even from you."

He could see from the reflection in the window that Albus flushed with embarrassment.

"You need not worry, Headmaster," Severus sniped tersely, "I will continue to keep my promise and help protect Potter to defeat the Dark Lord since Black and I share those goals. But. Do not expect anything further and do not ask me again."
"Thank you, Severus."

"If that is all?" He asked with a hint of his usual sneer.

Albus hesitated but he nodded his head.

Severus left the room quickly. There was still a good half a bottle of Scotch left in his room and he intended to drink it all.

Harry surfaced from his dozing at the sound of Sirius's voice greeting Remus. He didn't open his eyes immediately, too warm and fuzzy and tired to think about leaving the cocoon of blankets even for his godfather – Padfoot, he reminded himself – and despite the fact that he wanted to know how things had gone.

He could hear Sirius conjure up another chair and drag it close to the bed, the small knock as Sirius sat down and bumped the bed; Remus's low drawl as he confirmed Harry was sleeping just as he'd been sleeping every other time Sirius had checked. Harry felt Sirius's hand in his hair and revelled at the comforting touch – the knowledge that someone loved him. He was about to open his eyes when…

"Well, don't keep me in suspense! What happened?" Remus demanded in a quiet voice that was obviously meant not to wake Harry.

Harry kept his eyes shut. He didn't think Sirius would say anything he wouldn't tell Harry anyway but there was always the possibility. He'd learned with the Dursleys that they'd often talk more freely when they'd forgotten he was in the room. Not that Sirius and Remus were anything like the Dursleys – and Harry felt a rush of gratitude that he'd gotten so lucky; that Sirius had rescued him with Remus's help. He dragged his attention back to the present and tuned in.

"…you should have seen his face, it was a picture!" Sirius sounded very amused. "Dullard had to ask him if he was alright before he gave me the oath."

"And when Albus realised you'd taken custody of Harry?"

"Things got a bit sticky – he insisted on seeing the will. I think he was going to attempt to say that the proxy and guardianship couldn't pass to me because Frank and Alice couldn't decline in person. Augusta was furious."

"I can imagine."

"Then he kept questioning me about the notices – the adoption which Amelia stood up for and told him where to go, Harry being the heir to the House of Black went down like a lead balloon with him but he got told off by Tiberius Ogden of all people, and he got really snippy over the LeStranges."

"I'm surprised Augusta didn't tear him limb from limb." Remus murmured.

"Oh, I think if she could have done, she would." Sirius said. "Anyway, she was up on her feet yelling at him, then Griselda Marchbanks – who I may have to kiss simply for saying that the tribunals did a piss poor job of justice, then…Bartholomew Wilkes told him off for challenging the use of family magic – and then old Tiberius told Albus he was going to take insult on my behalf if he didn't stop questioning me! It was a beautiful moment."

"Arthur got the Ministry seat?" Remus asked.
"He did." Sirius confirmed. "That was another beautiful moment. The whole place was in an uproar. I think Cornelius almost pee'd his pants with glee."

Harry heard the shift of material as Sirius moved position.

"The best news ever though is that Umbridge is now somewhere in the jungles of Guyana." Sirius said cheerfully.

"Couldn't happen to a nicer toad." Remus replied in the same tone.

Harry was hard pressed not to join in when they snickered like naughty school-children.

"And the budgetary stuff?" Remus prompted as they sobered.

Sirius shifted again and Harry almost started as he picked up Harry's hand. "Better than we expected. Ogden, Nott and Greengrass matched my donation to the DOM and DMLE."

"That's…"

"Astonishing I know. If it's a signal they'll all ally in some way or at the very least stay neutral…it bodes well." Sirius said smugly.

"And the DMLE and the DOM get much needed funding."

"It also means that Lucius must have done some good in briefing his side as much as I hate to admit it." Sirius acknowledged. "Obviously Augusta was brilliant on the opposing side. Harry and I will be having dinner with the entire old Potter alliance on Saturday at the Longbottoms'. Richard Bones all but said 'tell me when we can do the oath' during the break."

"Harry will be pleased to see Neville. He sent him a plant as a get-well present." Remus said. "He signed it 'your godbrother, Neville.'"

Harry wanted to roll his eyes at Remus's amused tone. He personally was secretly really happy that Neville wanted to be his godbrother; had embraced the idea that their mothers were their respective godmothers as much as Harry had. They hadn't had the closest friendship ever at Hogwarts and Harry blamed himself for that. So he fully intended to send a thank you note back to Neville signing it 'your godbrother, Harry.'

"You know Frank used to do the same with James because Dorea was his godmother." Sirius commented and Harry could hear the smile in his voice.

"Minerva was James's, wasn't she?"

"Yep." Sirius yawned.

There was a brief lull and Harry was considering informing the pair of them that he was awake when Remus cleared his throat.

"I assume you spoke with Albus after?"

"Oh, yes." Sirius said dryly. "We talked."

"And?"

"And I was only tempted to use the house magic to incinerate him once." Sirius said in the same dry tone.
"I take it he wanted Harry to go back to the Dursleys?"

"Wouldn't take no for an answer until I pointed out the blood protection is now anchored by Black blood." Sirius said.

Harry was disappointed. He'd expected the Headmaster to bring up the Dursleys but he'd hoped deep down that Sirius and Remus would be proven wrong about him insisting on it.

"He did say steps would be taken, that Harry would have minimal contact with them, and I could even go along too to make sure they treated him right but..." Sirius sighed. "He cares for Harry, I can see that, it's just his focus isn't in the right place."

Well, that was slightly better.

"Maybe some of it is his age." Remus offered.

"You think he's going senile?"

Harry almost snorted a laugh.

"I mean his generation has a very different take on what is acceptable in raising a child." Remus said, taking on the tone that Harry knew meant Padfoot was going to get lectured. "Historically, children, especially in the working classes, were expected to earn their keep, to contribute with difficult chores from a young age, to be grateful and respectful to their parents for food, clothing of any kind, and shelter. If they received praise and love beyond that...they were lucky but it wasn't a big thing. Really it's only this century that mind healers have emphasised that love and reward is an important component in raising a child to be a happy contributing member of society."

"I'm not sure I agree with you, Remus," Sirius said firmly. "I think Albus knows full well to raise a child in an unloving environment is not good for the child. He admitted he'd sacrificed Harry's happiness on the altar of the blood protection, although he didn't know quite how bad it was for Harry there."

It was Remus's turn to sigh. "You know a part of me misses the days when I used to blindly accept Albus as the greatest wizard of our time, all knowing and all powerful."

"Well, there's nothing worse than finding your idol has feet of clay." Sirius commented. "It's only natural even when you realise the truth that they're human to search for reasons and excuses for why they've done certain things that maintain the image of a hero."

"You never did recover from finding out Elton John wasn't a wizard."

"Funny."

"I'm right that Albus wasn't your hero though, aren't I?" Remus asked idly.

Harry listened with interest wondering who Sirius had looked up to as an idol.

"You are," Sirius said, "I was raised a Black, remember? We weren't brought up to worship at the altar of the Great Albus Dumbledore, Defeater of Grindelwald. No, Uncle Alphard was my hero; he thumbed his nose at the whole pureblood thing, looked in on all the unwanted relatives, he was the epitome of cool, and he didn't abandon me after I ran off. Then he went and got himself killed."

"That wasn't exactly his fault." Remus pointed out.
"Of course it was." Sirius said. "Idiot walked straight into an ambush with a pack of Death Eaters."

"I take it they were trying to recruit him."

"Voldemort wanted every Black for his collection." Sirius murmured. "I think my grandfather made some kind of deal that he'd join Voldie if he managed to convince everyone in the family to be Marked."

"But he had to know you would never…” Remus stopped abruptly in realisation. "Oh. Well, if he did that was kind of devious of him, wasn't it?"

It was very clever of Sirius's grandfather, Harry mused silently. Because he'd known Sirius would never be Marked, he'd be safe from having to submit to the deal.

"Yes, the rest of us had to deal with the bloody plonker while he got to stay safe behind the walls of the Black country estate."

"Yes, the defences there are rather lethal."

Sirius coughed. "I did apologise for not warning you."

"You're bloody lucky I wasn't incinerated." Remus said.

"I did give you the password to shut the wards down." Sirius said defensively.

"After I called you on the communication mirror and demanded it," Remus pointed out, "while dodging a barrage of silver javelin curses, I might add."

"I apologised!" Sirius retorted.

Harry wanted badly to smile at their banter but he shifted instead, drawing their attention to him and they both muttered admonishments for the other to lower their voice so they wouldn't wake him.

"So what was the outcome with Albus in the end?" Remus asked.

"We agreed that he'd help; he's going to be part of the War Council and he had some thoughts about the treasure hunt. You should have seen him when I faced him with that." Sirius said. "He wants to apologise to Harry about everything so that's something."

That made Harry feel better about his Headmaster and the whole thing with the Dursleys. He was right; Professor Dumbledore did care about him.

"Are you going to let him?" asked Remus dryly.

"Of course," Sirius replied, "if Harry decides that he wants to receive an apology."

Emotions bombarded Harry. There was a strong wave of affection and love, maybe, for Padfoot for being so willing to do something because he loved Harry. But that was followed by a curious mix of annoyance at his Headmaster that he'd been human and made mistakes at all, and a shameful need to move past the revelations of how Dumbledore had placed him with the Dursleys and hadn't checked on him, and confirm that the Headmaster truly cared about him – that it hadn't been an act.

And the latter was just stupid, a small voice inside Harry's head whispered that sounded remarkably like Healer Fay. Why was it so important that the Headmaster cared for him? He had other people in his life, other adults, who really cared about him; Padfoot and Moony – Aunt Minerva. If he was going to forgive the Headmaster then shouldn't it be because it was the right thing to do if it was a
genuine apology not just because Harry wanted the man to continue liking him?

Confusing, mused Harry, it was all too confusing. He shifted again under the covers as his body responded to his mind's restless thoughts.

Sirius's thumb rubbed over his knuckles as though to calm him and it did surprisingly enough. He let his eyes drift open and found Sirius looking back at him with a warm smile.

"Hello Sleepyhead." Sirius greeted him. "How are you feeling?"

"Groggy." Harry said.

Remus cleared his throat on the other side of the bed. "I'll leave you to catch Harry up, Sirius. There's a book in the library at the Manor I want to get before dinner." He ruffled Harry's bedhead hair with a smile and walked out.

"Want the bathroom?" Sirius asked bluntly.


"Let's see how you do when you get on your feet." Sirius said. He let go of Harry's hand and pulled back the covers.

Harry gingerly swung his legs around and set his feet on the floor. He took Sirius's offered hand and pulled himself up. A slight rush of dizziness pulled at him but he kept his head up and everything steadied. It was much better than the other times he'd tried it that day.

"OK." Harry said.

Sirius walked him over to the en-suite and Harry exchanged Sirius's arm for a wall.

"I'll be fine." Harry said.

"Five minutes." Sirius said. "Don't linger and if you need me, yell, even if you're naked; understand?"

Harry felt his face redden but he managed a brief nod. He used the facilities and had a quick shower mindful of the time limit. He managed to wash his hair, soap and rinse his body haphazardly. He stepped out and wrapped a towel around himself, grateful when he walked out and Sirius was immediately there to help him over to the bed. Sirius had gotten a clean pair of pyjamas ready for him and it looked like the bed had been changed. Sirius ducked momentarily into the bathroom to set it to rights and gave him some privacy to change. Harry pulled on the pyjamas and climbed back under the fresh duvet with a sigh.

Sirius called Dobby and a tray appeared for Harry; chicken broth with dumplings, a glass of milk and a slice of chocolate cake. Another tray appeared for Sirius who glared at the milk.

Harry hid a smile and tucked into his dinner. He had demolished the broth and was just starting the chocolate cake when Sirius cleared his throat.

"So how much did you hear?" Sirius asked.

"All of it pretty much." Harry said, honestly. "Did you really almost incinerate Professor Dumbledore?"

"I got mad and the house magic reacted." Sirius admitted just as honestly. "But we worked it out and
as you heard; he's keen to apologise to you." He held Harry's gaze. "I really do believe he didn't
know how bad it was for you there. He was quite upset when I explained."

Harry nodded slowly and took advantage of eating his cake to avoid responding. He wasn't certain
what he felt about an apology and forgiving the Headmaster anymore.

"You alright?" probed Sirius gently.

"Just…" Harry poked his cake. "I guess I was thinking about whether I wanted to forgive Professor
Dumbledore."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Harry took a deep breath and met Sirius's eyes. "I was thinking I wanted to forgive him because I
wanted him to still like me but that's stupid, isn't it? I should hear his apology and then forgive him if
I think he means it."

"Well, I wouldn't say it was stupid so much as human." Sirius said gently. "Everybody wants to be
liked and nobody really likes confrontations or rejection. But you're right in that if somebody has
wronged you, you should forgive them only if they're genuinely sorry not for any other reason – and
if they're a true friend then they'll be genuinely sorry."

Harry nodded. "Will you arrange something with Professor Dumbledore then?"

Sirius nodded. "For next week."

"And you're OK with me giving him a second chance?" Harry checked, remembering Sirius's words
to Remus.

"I am and I'm very proud that you've thought about your reasons for doing so." Sirius reassured him.
"And second chances are a good thing sometimes."

"Like with the Malfoys?" Harry asked dryly. The Malfoys had been a topic of much discussion
when they'd gone over their strategy for the family meeting. Harry had been all for treating them the
same as the LeStranges.

"Well, that's not so much a second chance as delayed judgement." Sirius grinned. "Old Lucy seems
to have realised it. Some of his prominent supporters were actually quite helpful today."

"I still don't like it. I doubt he's genuinely sorry."

"Possibly not but we need him – at least until old Voldepants is gone for good." Sirius smirked
mischievously. "Then we'll go with the plan of dropping him and your Uncle Vernon naked in
Diagon Alley with 'guilty' tattooed all over them. Maybe we'll even handcuff them together."

Harry couldn't help laughing at the mental image. "Can I just say eww?"

A yawn took him by surprise and a moment later he was divested of his tray and encouraged to
snuggle back down under his duvet.

"Are you staying with me?" Harry asked sleepily as Sirius retook his seat.

"Where else would I go?" Sirius remarked with a smile. "Go to sleep, Pronglet."

Harry smiled back, had a momentary thought that it was nice to have Sirius, someone who cared
about him, because Aunt Petunia would never have stayed, and in the next instant was fast asleep.
Educating Pronglet: 1

Book II: A Marauder's Plan (Intermediate Pranks)

Part 5: Educating Pronglet (The Knowledge is Power Prank)

July 29th 1994

The past month had gone by in a whirlwind, Sirius mused, as he headed to Black Manor for the War Council.

The War Council met every Monday morning at eight sharp and every Friday evening at six; Mondays were generally for planning; Fridays for reporting. It was a simple, elegant system that Penelope had suggested and which everyone had adopted post haste. Sirius was the undisputed Chair despite Albus's inclusion. The first meeting had included an interesting power wrangle with Albus subtly trying to direct the group and their activities, but since Cornelius, Amelia and Bertie had all looked to Sirius for the final say on everything Albus had said, Albus had eventually conceded that Sirius was in charge and there had been no further struggles.

Still, Sirius had been glad Albus had left a week beforehand for the ICW Conference. Merlin knew Albus had apologised, quite fulsomely, to both Sirius and Harry at the meeting Sirius had arranged at Harry's request which had taken place at Black Manor (and there had even been dinner with the Tonks' and Minerva in attendance), but while they had a truce in terms of their working relationship, Sirius refused to let his guard down around the old wizard.

Remus had warmed up slightly to Albus after receiving an apology of his own for Albus keeping Remus away from Harry because he'd remained suspicious that Remus was a spy, but he too was wary and Sirius doubted that Remus would ever view Albus with the same starry-eyed hero worship that he'd had at Hogwarts and the early days of the Order.

Harry had also forgiven Albus although Sirius was relieved that Harry had come to the conclusion that he should forgive him because Albus was sorry, not because Harry didn't want to lose Albus as someone who he thought cared about him. Harry was also more assertive as had been proven at their Dinner of Humble Pie as Sirius had dubbed it…

"Harry, my boy," Albus shifted in his seat across from Harry and smiled at the young wizard, "I understand that you're practicing your magic to gain control of your powers."

"Yes, Professor." Harry nodded. "I tend to accidentally overpower my spells if I'm not careful or thinking when I cast."

"Perhaps I may help you?" offered Albus eagerly. "I wasn't a half-bad Transfiguration teacher before I became Headmaster."

Sirius swallowed the urge to protest and waited to see how Harry would react.

A small frown appeared on Harry's face, reminiscent of the frown Lily used to wear when the Marauder's did something that she didn't approve of particularly. "Thank you, sir, but Professor McGonagall is already helping me with Transfiguration."

"As I informed you, Albus." Minerva said frostily.

"Ah, yes, I just thought I might have something else to contribute." Albus tried another benevolent
smile at his Deputy and was met with a furious glare.

"And what," Minerva's Scottish accent increased with her ire, "do you think you could contribute that I cannot? Are you suggesting my capability as a Transfiguration teacher is inadequate?"

Sirius coughed into a napkin to hide the laugh that bubbled up as Albus scrambled to offer an apology and assurance of his absolute confidence in her skills.

Harry cleared his throat in the awkward silence. "It's nice of you to offer, sir, but as you yourself have just said, Professor McGonagall is more than capable of covering my Transfiguration lessons."

"Well, it's not so much the subject matter as the power issue that I was offering to assist with as I have more experience in that area. I had extra lessons in Transfiguration to learn control when I was young as it lends itself to forcing power moderation, above and beyond what is usually taught." Albus explained hurriedly. "It was these techniques that I thought it may be beneficial to pass along."

"Then why didn't you say so?" asked Minerva irritably.

Albus took a deep breath and seemed to gather his composure once more. "So, may I offer you my assistance, Harry."

Harry shot Sirius a look, clearly asking for guidance, and Sirius gave a small nod; it was OK with him.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, "if you could come along to my lessons with Professor McGonagall I think that would be best so she can continue teaching me once you've shown us the techniques you mention."

And Sirius had to hide his face in his napkin again at Albus's crestfallen expression and Minerva's triumphant smile. That Harry would not agree to lessons alone with the Headmaster had made Sirius very proud.

Minerva had continued to be frosty to Albus in the weeks since and so too had Andy, during the dinner and in every subsequent meeting. Perhaps, Sirius considered wryly, it was a female thing; maternal instincts had been aroused and Merlin help a wizard facing a witch defending her child. He'd also wondered whether it was something to do with the blessing ritual; all the women who had taken part had effectively been acting in the stead of Lily; had witnessed Harry's mother in spirit form confirming the blessing that protected her child – a protection that she had sacrificed her life willingly to give him. Perhaps it had created something of a bond on a magical level above and beyond the blessing itself.

Bertie, Minerva and Remus had formed a small sub-group trying to research and understand Harry's affinity with family magic and looking closer at the blessing ritual. Nothing concrete had been established beyond tentative understanding of the history of family magic. They had managed to track down many origin stories but the only aspect most agreed upon was that it had something to do with Merlin; Merlin had either gifted the magic or it was Merlin's own magic passed down to those he considered his magical heirs...it might at least explain why the spirit of Morgana had named Harry a child of Merlin. It was all very interesting but to Sirius's mind, all very useless.

Albus didn't know a thing about the research as it wasn't part of the Official Plan with the War Council. There were two other things that were also kept out of the War Council; firstly, Harry's knowledge of the prophecy, and secondly, Harry's education.
The latter was going well. Andy's etiquette lessons, which were also attended by Hermione, took place every Saturday and always ended in a large family dinner at Black Manor with the 'Tonks' and the Grangers included alongside Remus, Minerva, Bill and Penelope. The Malfoys had a standing invitation to attend as they were family, but Narcissa had written to Sirius and requested that they be excused until she was convinced Draco could handle meeting Harry with the required neutrality of his Vow; Sirius had agreed and in truth nobody missed them.

Every Wednesday afternoon, Sirius gave a politics lesson to Harry, Hermione and Neville. They'd started having some mock debates and discussions about various laws. Sirius also gave them research to do on the members of the Wizengamot opening the library for their use. Neville was a fountain of knowledge and his confidence grew as he helped Harry and Hermione understand the various different alliances.

Neville's confidence was also improving thanks to the estate management classes he attended with Harry and Remus every Wednesday morning. The two young men had been assigned a property each from their respective estates. They were nominally responsible for the property under Remus's watchful eye. There had been trips to view the properties and to meet the elves and wizarding tenants; lessons on business, financials and book-keeping. But both Neville and Harry embraced the challenge and Remus was very proud of both his students. More importantly, Sirius could see the beginnings of an enduring friendship between Neville and Harry that pleased him no end.

Sirius had also charmed Augusta into buying Neville a new wand after realising he was using Frank's, and she had agreed that Neville should attend Harry's magic lessons to gain control of his new wand before they went back to Hogwarts. Sirius had wrangled the exemption with Madame Hopkirk and every Tuesday Neville attended Harry's lessons on DADA, Charms and Transfiguration. Having realised just how poor their knowledge of Potions was, Sirius had also hired a tutor to teach the boys the basics. Hermione came over on Monday mornings for their Potions tutorials as did Susan Bones who had also joined at her parents' request.

Sirius knew it had been a disappointment to Harry that Ron had expressed very little interest in attending any of the lessons but Molly and Arthur had acquiesced to their children joining in some of the activities that fell under Harry's wizarding culture lessons. The visit to the Welsh Wizarding Reserve of Magical Creatures with everyone in attendance had been the biggest success, closely followed by a visit to a Broom Racing match. Harry had been entranced by the latter having never realised that such a sport existed as it wasn't as popular in Britain as Quidditch. Neville, Susan, Harry and Hermione had enjoyed a trip to a Wizarding theatre and admitted the wizarding effects added something to the tale of Merlin and the Two Dragons.

Other outings weren't quite so well-received.

Hermione had enjoyed a second trip to the theatre to see Magical Dances from Around the World but Harry had hated every minute as had Sirius. Hermione had also enjoyed the British Wizarding Museum more than Harry although he'd admitted it was interesting seeing other history besides Goblin Rebellions; he had however been mortified at the Harry Potter display. But whether Harry had enjoyed or hated the experience, his eyes were opening to the truth that there was more to the wizarding world than simply Hogwarts and Diagon Alley – as Sirius had pointed out to him, there was usually a magical equivalent for many muggle things.

And it wouldn't stop until Harry was back at Hogwarts; Sirius knew Andy wanted to take the kids to a painting exhibition; he himself had bought tickets for the British Duelling Finals; Remus wanted a trip to Stonehenge so he could do a history lesson; Augusta was insisting everyone attend the Charity Tea Dance in aid of Saint Mungo's at the beginning of August…
Between his lessons, the outings and the alliance dinners, Harry was being kept wonderfully busy. He was thriving under the attention. The good health their time in the clinic had bestowed upon Harry had been built upon by Dobby's nutritionally balanced meals, Harry's training, and more importantly, being surrounded by people who loved and cared about him even if one of them was Albus Dumbledore.

It was just as well because hearing the prophecy had been a very big shock to Harry.

They'd heard the full prophecy with a quick and discreet visit to the DOM organised by Bertie, with Remus along for moral support. They had listened to the whole thing and all of them had been white faced by the end of it…

"I think I already knew." Harry said, placing the orb back on the shelf. "He's just too interested in me."

Sirius couldn't help noticing that Harry's hand was trembling; he was feeling fairly shaky himself. As Harry had said; they'd known but knowing and knowing were too different things. He wrapped his arms around Harry and dropped a kiss on the top of his head, ignoring a shocked looking Remus and a grave looking Bertie to focus on Harry. "I know it's scary but I don't care what it says; we're going to do everything we can to make sure you don't have to fight him, Harry. I promise."

"What if I do have to fight him again?" Harry countered, pressing closer. "How can I beat him?"

Sirius couldn't answer because of the fearful lump in his throat and he threw Remus a glance that screamed 'help!'

Remus, who had gone white as a sheet when they'd heard the prophecy, rallied in the face of Harry's and Sirius's distress. "Well, it does say that you'll have a power that Voldemort doesn't know about. We should probably try and research what that is…"

"It could be your family magic." Bertie inserted brightly. "There is definitely an unusual affinity there, and while Slytherin is a Noble House, it isn't an Ancient and Noble House."

"And we'll train you." Sirius added, recovering his composure. "Everything we know including all the dirty tricks." He rubbed Harry's back comfortingly. "If the worst comes to the worst, we'll make sure you're prepared, Harry."

And so they'd increased Harry's DADA training beyond his Tuesday control lessons: if Harry ever ended up facing Voldemort again (which Sirius would try his damned best to make sure didn't happen) he was going to need to be able to survive the experience.

There had been a lot of discussion between Remus, Minerva and himself, over whether to tell Harry about Snape's role in telling the prophecy to Voldemort. Remus and Minerva weren't certain Harry was ready from an emotional point of view to handle such news and then face Snape with equanimity at Hogwarts. Sirius had conceded the point but he hated keeping secrets from Harry and so he had insisted they offered Harry the choice.

He and Remus had sat Harry down one Friday afternoon at Black Manor (where the magic would contain any loss of control on Harry's part if he did decide to know) and told him that they knew the identity of the Death Eater who had informed Voldemort of the prophecy, that it was someone Harry would have to interact with in future, and so did he feel he could handle the information? Harry had shown great maturity and declined, acknowledging that he would never be able to be in the same room as the person who had prompted Voldemort into attacking him and his parents just as he would never be able to stand the sight of Wormtail for the same reason. Sirius understood how he felt – it
was all he could do to stop himself marching down to Hogwarts and hexing Snape himself.

Albus had surprisingly taken aboard much of Sirius's criticism about safety. Moody had moved into Hogwarts early to do a full security review and he'd taken to the job like a duck to water. Sirius knew Harry would be disappointed some of the passageways were now warded but Sirius was pleased that nobody could get through them without it being detected. But it wasn't just security that was changing at Hogwarts.

Binns had finally been convinced to move on and so History of Magic was undergoing something of a major revision. Muggle Studies had a new tutor, Alison Bunting, while Charity Burbage had been quietly transferred to help out with the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department while Arthur handled the new Muggle Affairs Committee.

Three old courses had been revived and added as weekend electives. Duelling, magical military strategy, and healing were all an hour long and open to fourth year students. Harry had expressed interest in all three and Sirius had encouraged him to take them and see what they were like. He could always drop them if he didn't enjoy them. Minerva complained about the extra work the changes were causing but confided that she was very happy to see the school being somewhat reinvigorated.

Sirius rather suspected the new courses were Albus sneakily trying to train Harry for a final battle with Voldemort but he decided to let Albus think he was doing it under Sirius's nose and getting away with it for the time being. Sirius didn't really have an objection to Harry learning something that could help him survive if he had to face Voldemort again, he just objected to Albus assuming the prophecy had to happen and placing the burden of killing a Dark Lord on the shoulders of a teenage boy. Sirius still believed the adults around Harry should do everything in their power to take care of the problem first.

Which led him to that Friday's War Council.

He stepped out of the floo and into Black Manor. He wasn't surprised when Penelope appeared. She looked smart in her blue robes with the crests of the House of Black and the House of Potter adorning them. She was turning into a treasure. She and Bill Weasley were the only other people beside Minerva who had access to Griffin House as Sirius and Remus had occasionally had to request one of them look after Harry – Harry might protest that he didn't need babysitting but Sirius felt better knowing someone else was in the house in case of an emergency than simply Dobby.

"Afternoon, Penelope." Sirius said.

She fell into step as he headed towards the study. "You have five new invitations." She said cheerfully. "Lord Rickett invited you to tea; I've set the meeting up for next Tuesday. Lord Nott invited you to discuss the August session agenda."

"Are you sure he's not planning to murder me?" Sirius joked, wondering why Nott wanted to see him alone. It could be the first parry ahead of an alliance discussion, he mused. Lucius had sent word that most of the Ancient and Noble Houses in his alliance had understood the new political landscape – Nott foremost among them.

Penelope smiled. "I've scheduled the meeting for Monday morning as the session will take place on Thursday." She opened the door to the study. "Mister Crammington had a business proposition to put to you and so I've forwarded that to Remus to deal with. Lord Greengrass issued an invitation for you and Harry to dine; I've put the date in your diary. And finally, Lady Abbott invited you and Harry to Sunday lunch second week in August with her family and the Bones'." She took a breath. "I thought I should check that one with you as I know you usually like to keep Sundays just for you
and Harry."

Sirius nodded. "Thank her for the invite and write back saying that if she can switch lunch to Saturday we would be delighted but we have plans for Sunday." He held up a hand. "As soon as you've done that, you should get going." He smiled at her. "I recall you have a date with Percy."

Peneleope blushed but nodded, her blonde hair almost coming free of its bun. "He's taking me to see that Merlin play."

"It was very good." Sirius agreed. He was glad her relationship was going well as there had been a rocky patch just after the adoption when Percy had said something stupid (from what Sirius could make out something along the lines that her job should have gone to a pureblood) but they had worked it out. "Have a good night."

Peneleope smiled and wished him the same before she headed off to her own desk in the corner of the library.

It wasn't long before Amelia arrived. She was always the most punctual. They had a few minutes to chat about the Abbott's invitation with Amelia suggesting the changed date would be no problem for her and her younger brother (otherwise known as Lord Bones) and his family. Bertie arrived next with Albus and Cornelius arriving together after attending a debriefing of the ICW Conference.

As soon as the refreshments were served and everyone was comfortably seated in the sitting area of the study, Sirius cleared his throat.

"Cornelius, why don't you go first?" Sirius suggested.

Cornelius puffed up proudly as though going first was some signal of importance. "Operation Power Play is going well." He beamed. "As of Tuesday, I believe the old Potter alliance has been confirmed?"

Sirius nodded. "We couldn't have done it without Augusta but the alliance of eight – nine including the House of Black – Ancient Houses and eight minor is re-established and on board with the coming legislative changes specifically the Muggle Affairs Committee and the revision of the budget."

"Oh that's excellent news!" Albus exclaimed.

"I don't believe I've seen Augusta so lively for many a year." Bertie commented dryly.

"The muggleborn Order of Merlin recipients will also be approached for a sounding out session at the August session." Cornelius said. "After a difficult month, Lucius has retained his control of the pureblood alliance which is somewhat good news for us. I've been approached tentatively by Lord Gibbon to see if my support for Lord Black could be swayed."

"The least powerful of the group." Amelia commented. "Panicking perhaps?"

"I think so." Cornelius agreed.

"Well, that would make sense since Nott just invited me to discuss August's session with him." Sirius said, easing back in his chair and steepling his fingers. "He's the first of the old Black alliance to do so – outside of family, of course."

"They're feeling you out." Cornelius grinned and clapped his hands. "And so soon! That's excellent news!"
"Well, I think the reason for that may not be so excellent." Albus said gravely. "The Dark Mark caused twinges of pain for my spy this week."

Why Albus had to keep calling Snape 'my spy' when they all knew who it was…Sirius sighed and let it go.

"My spy has noted the same." Bertie said. "Our tests on the Mark believe it is a sign of proximity; Riddle has returned to our shores."

"There's been no sighting of Pettigrew through magical transportation but since he can sneak onto muggle transportation easily enough in his animagus form…it could be possible. Of course, that's assuming that they're travelling together and that Pettigrew has helped him to regain some strength to return." Amelia said briskly. "Riddle could have decided to travel ahead or on his own somehow."

They all nodded in acknowledgement that she made good points.

"Which just makes our work more imperative." Sirius said. "Cornelius, I believe we have good news on the neutrals?"

"Yes, indeed. Lord Greengrass has met with me twice to discuss the revised budget and each time has made comments to feel out the political agenda around the House of Black. I believe we've been invited to dine?"

Sirius nodded. "As much as they hate to admit it, Greengrass controls that bloc. If we secure it…"

"We'll have a strong Wizengamot." Cornelius ended with a smug smile. "The other main item for us to discuss today is that the nominations are in for the empty seat: the House of Abbott is nominating Diggory, the House of Zeller is nominating the House of Baron, the House of Doge is nominating the House of Weasley, and the House of Wilkes is nominating the House of Yaxley."

"Yaxley is on our DE list?" Sirius questioned.

"He wasn't Marked in 'eighty-one but he was a known supporter according to both spies." Amelia said. "He's tagged."

"Arthur is going to refuse the nomination." Cornelius said. "He's happy with the Ministry seat."

"Elphias is very traditional. Whenever a seat returns to the floor he always nominates one of the Ancient and Noble Houses that lost their seat in the past." Albus motioned with his tea-cup. "Last time it was Crouch but that was just after the war and the business with his son torturing the Longbottoms so obviously failed and…"

"And no doubt he would have nominated old Barty again if it wouldn't be political suicide with the circumstances around Lord Black's illegal incarceration being so well known." Bertie commented.

"Which leaves Diggory and Baron." Cornelius said. "Either would be good for us; Gideon Baron is neutral in his politics — egalitarian but a traditionalist. During his career, he represented the Goldstein and the Davies families. Diggory, of course, works for the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. A good man if a little pompous…"

Sirius tried not to choke on his coffee at Cornelius calling someone else pompous.

"He has quite restrictive views on controlling magical creatures which may not be in line to the policies we want to make further down the line." Cornelius finished.
"I think Amos could be convinced in due time." Albus said.

Which meant Albus wanted Diggory.

"Where does the Potter alliance stand on this if Leonard is making the nomination?" Amelia asked interested.

"Leonard and Amos are old friends, hence the nomination." Sirius replied crisply. "The alliance is agreed that a house seat should be a free vote; we all decide individually after all which houses to ally with."

"I take it that the Potter and Black votes will be going to Baron then?" inquired Albus smoothly.

"The Potter vote will be discussed with Harry," Sirius said firmly, and probably would go to Baron as Harry would not be impressed with Diggory's record on magical creatures, "and since Diggory is on the invite list for the Longbottoms' party tomorrow I wouldn't be surprised if Harry and I receive a pitch."

"More than likely knowing Amos." Amelia said with a laugh.

"It is bad form to bring politics to a children's birthday party." Cornelius tsked.

Sirius refused to look at the man in case he burst out laughing because if Cornelius had the chance to attend, Sirius had no doubt Cornelius would be politicking his way through the guests in a heartbeat. "Moving on," he said firmly, "is there anything else, Cornelius?"

"The new Werewolf Law is being drafted. Arthur seems to have a new lease of life with the Muggle Committee." Cornelius commented almost absently as he rifled through his mind for the latest updates. "But no; nothing else."

"Amelia?" Sirius asked.

"Operation Tag is fully up and running." Amelia said. "The last team member is Cambridge; Hit Wizard, muggleborn, two years of experience and one of Alastor's protégés. That brings the team to five, six including Rufus; so three Hit Wizards, two Aurors and the Head Auror to lead."

"And all were not involved at the time of the last war?" Albus checked. He'd missed the last session and so had missed the information.

Amelia shifted impatiently, restless at having to repeat herself. "Rufus obviously was. The two Aurors, Brooks and Wood, joined in the wake of the war – 'eighty-two and 'eighty-five respectively. Brooks was a muggleborn who lost an older brother who was an Auror; Wood is a pureblood but lost his father in a DE attack on Diagon Alley. They're experienced. Ambrey who is a halfblood joined the Hit Wizards around the same time for similar reasons – she was orphaned by a DE attack and raised by her grandmother. Chambers joined five years ago. He's a muggleborn. All are accomplished Occlumens. All took immediate Vows that they weren't Death Eaters, would never be Death Eaters and would never ally with Voldemort and, or Tom Riddle."

"Sounds like a good team," Sirius said, noting with amusement that Albus had the faint air of a man who knew he'd irritated a woman but couldn't work out how.

"They're very good." Amelia confirmed. "Everyone listed as a DE by our various spies has now been tagged. Under special confidential warrants, we have their mail and floo's monitored. We've placed minor monitoring charms near to their properties – enough that we should pick up if someone apparatus in front of their wards. We've also managed to activate traces on the wands of those who
have visited the Ministry – it won't pick up anything but Unforgiveables but it's better than nothing."

"And how's the cover story going down?" Sirius asked with a smirk. Officially the team had been pulled together to find Peter Pettigrew – thus it was dubbed the Rat Squad by the rest of the DMLE.

"Brilliantly." Amelia replied wryly. "Everybody appreciates the need to capture Pettigrew; the Department is in good spirits that actual law enforcement officers are being used and not Dementors. Rufus has played it up with the rest of the Aurors saying it'll be a thousand galleons to any Auror who beats the Rat Squad to the arrest; Keith Poole has done the same with the Hit Wizards."

"Have they actually made any progress on that score?" Cornelius asked.

"Some," Amelia said, "working with muggle law enforcement we've managed to find a picture of Pettigrew at a major port around the time a muggle cargo ship was due to leave for the Balkans. That was a few days after Peter escaped at Hogwarts. Since Albus has indicated Voldemort's last known hideout before Quirrell was Albania, I think we can assume he was headed there." She picked up her quill. "I'm going to get them to check again for the last week to see if he came back the same way."

"And what about the tip of something planned for the World Cup?" Albus's eyes twinkled.

"Well, we know from three separate sources now that something is planned." Amelia said, making the point that it wasn't just Albus who had brought the information to the table. "We have the names of those involved and the surveillance team is on it. However, while I'm keen not to have muggles tortured and killed at the World Cup, I think we need to let them proceed and make our move when they act."

"But…" said Cornelius, panicking.

"If we act ahead of them committing the crime, we can get them on conspiracy to commit a terrorist attack but frankly, it'll give our surveillance and spies away." Amelia said firmly. "The timing will be the key thing; once they make their move, the Aurors will move in straightaway."

Sirius nodded absently. He had initially agreed to Arthur's invitation but had insisted he'd get tickets for himself and Remus to join them. They would need to discuss arrangements again, he mused. He wasn't keen on staying overnight if there was going to be a Death Eater attack – even one that the Aurors knew about and would stop as soon as it started hopefully.

"If we time it right," Sirius said, "it will look like a triumph of our law enforcement over the pitiful remnants of a vanquished Dark Lord. Publicly we can establish ourselves early on as taking a tough stance against this type of activity, saying we won't stand for a revival of it."

Cornelius snapped his fingers. "We can certainly work that angle with the press." His eyes gleamed with glee and Sirius exchanged a knowing look with Amelia.

"Well, that's me done." Amelia said.

"Last but not least, Bertie." Sirius said.

Bertie cleared his throat. "For Albus's benefit my team is also complete. Lawrence Appleby is a halfblood, a contemporary of mine. He served in MI7 for a time during the last war. He lost his only child to a DE attack in Hogsmeade. He's leading the research side. Caroline Braithwaite is a muggleborn, joined us ten years ago straight out of Manchester Magical Academy. She actually ranked top of her year in NEWT scores and is a likely recipient of the Lily Potter Muggleborn Award. She has a joint Mastery in Charms and Arithmancy. She has been with MI7 to date but is looking to move and sees this as a good transition." He took a sip of his drink. "As you already
know, Albus, Bill Weasley is our final member. He's an excellent curse-breaker. I'm hoping to steal him away from the Goblins for good once he's finished his service to the House of Potter."

The meeting with Gringotts to give Bill a leave of absence had gone better than Sirius had anticipated. They had insisted on a penalty but it was much less than what could have been incurred and Bill was worth every knut.

"A fine team," commented Albus. "I remember Deborah Appleby's death; it was a tragedy."

"What happened to her?" Amelia asked.

"She was torn to pieces by Greyback." Sirius said tersely.

It was a hard reminder of what they were all fighting to prevent reoccur.

"We should put Greyback on our tag team list." Amelia said. "He was never Marked but he was certainly quick to ally with Voldemort. The problem is finding him."

"Good idea." Sirius said. He thought for a moment, debating with himself furiously before sighing. "I can get Remus to feel out his werewolf contacts; see if we can't track him down."

"In terms of progress; we have compiled all available research on these types of objects. Reassured that we wouldn't alert Riddle if we destroyed one, we have gone ahead and destroyed the two obtained by Lord Black, the locket and the cup which was found in the inventory of the LeStrange vault. Lord Black stood witness as did Amelia and Cornelius as they were burned within a high temperature furnace." Bertie said. "As young Mister Potter handled the diary, we are left with two objects we have clues for and one that we do not."

"It's remarkable progress in such a short time." Albus said brightly.

"And only achieved through the knowledge gained from Lord Black's brother about the locket and the cup." Bertie pointed out. "However, we have made good investigative progress in the last week cross-referencing that letter with your timeline of Riddle's history, Albus."

He stood up and unshrunk a board he set out with three sections.

"Item number one: unknown." Bertie began, tapping the first section which began to fill with information. "We believe that this item wasn't created at the time Regulus Black found out about the objects. We're fairly certain Riddle was waiting for the moment of his ultimate triumph to create the sixth and last one. We think Albus's defeat," he motioned with his wand in the vague direction of the other wizard, "or Bagnold's assassination would have been the original targets for the moment of triumph he wanted. But he changed his mind. We know he knew there was a prophecy for well over a year but didn't act on it..."

"Tom really didn't believe in Divination. I was quite surprised when the intelligence came that he intended to act." Albus admitted quietly.

"Lawrence came across an old magical theory involving Halloween and the sacrifice of innocent blood – a babe." Bertie said. "It is said to make the object created in the ritual indestructible."

"Sickening." Cornelius commented, looking faintly green.

"But hence why he moved against Harry that night." Sirius said grimly.

Bertie nodded. "We believe he took something with him to Godric's Hollow. However, his attempt
went badly wrong, so we believe the object wasn't created."

"Excellent logic." Albus complimented Bertie but his blue eyes had lost their twinkle.

Sirius wondered whether Voldemort had accidentally made Harry indestructible by making him a horcrux...if he had the cleansing of the scar would probably not have worked, Sirius assured himself, and after all, Harry hadn't been sacrificed ultimately so the conditions of indestructibility hadn't been met.

"So, we're only looking for two others?" asked Amelia.

"Well, I'd like Bill and Caro to go to Godric's Hollow and check it out to be certain." Bertie said. "But I believe so."

"That can be arranged." Albus said.

Sirius sighed inwardly. Evidently being in charge at the ICW Conference had led to a resurgence of Albus's control issues.

Bertie simply looked to Sirius.

"Yes," Sirius said, "sounds like a good idea." Even if Harry had ended up as the unknown horcrux, they should check to ensure there wasn't another one; both James and Lily had died that night. He darted a glance at Albus. "Are there any special wards around the place that you need to arrange to take down?"

Albus shook his head. "Ah, no. I left an alarm ward specifically for Tom but otherwise the wards were erected by the DOM."

"Excellent." Bertie said. "So working backwards through Albus's timeline, we're onto item two: the Ravenclaw object." He paused and took a drink of his tea. "More research has narrowed it down to two possible things; the missing Ravenclaw diadem and Ravenclaw's eagle pendant that she wore at her wedding. Both were lost but we think the diadem was likely Riddle's target: the wearer was said to be gifted infinite knowledge."

"Tom would certainly have wanted it." Albus agreed. He set his empty tea-cup down and reached into his robes, pulling out a bag of sweets.

"The diadem has many myths and legends surrounding it. However, one that caught Bill's eye was the story of Helena, Ravenclaw's daughter, taking the diadem and running off to Albania." Bertie said with a small smile.

Albus smiled back serenely. "Yes, Tom does seem to like that country, doesn't he?"

"Forgive me, but didn't my brother's letter say the object was in Hogwarts?" Sirius questioned.

"According to Albus, Tom had just returned from Albania when he interviewed for the DADA position." Bertie explained.

"You think he hid something during the time he was interviewed?" Albus's eyes lost their twinkle again as he contemplated that Voldemort had succeeded in secreting a dark object into the school under his nose.

"Don't the wards pick up Dark artefacts?" asked Amelia briskly.
"No," Albus confessed, "the Founders placed no such ward around Hogwarts and…undoubtedly even if I could find three other wizards or witches of equal power to place one myself, there are many historical artefacts within Hogwarts that could be deemed Dark by the Ministry's definition such as the statue that guards the Headmaster's office."

"So we have one of his objects just lying around Hogwarts waiting for some poor unsuspecting child to pick it up?" Cornelius asked, appalled.

"I doubt Tom would have been so foolish as to place it somewhere easily accessed by others." Albus pointed out.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Well, there is one obvious place."

"The Chamber of Secrets?" Albus's eyes twinkled again. "Indeed, but we would need a parselmouth to enter."

"Fawkes can't just take us in?" questioned Sirius.

"Unfortunately, no." Albus said disgruntled. "I tried it with Fawkes as soon as everyone went home for the Summer that year, if for no other reason than to recover the basilisk corpse. Alas, we bounced off some ward. Fawkes was not amused."

Amelia gave Albus a hard look and Sirius figured he knew why.

"Then, how did he get into the Chamber when young Harry was fighting the basilisk?" Cornelius blurted out the question that was bothering Sirius.

"Perhaps Harry's presence within the Chamber?" Albus stroked his beard. "It is quite the puzzle."

"So you need Harry to open the Chamber." Sirius concluded bluntly.

Albus nodded. "I haven't requested it of him myself because of the trauma he faced in fighting the basilisk."

"I'll talk with him." Sirius said. "He wants to help and this might be a good way of involving him in a relatively safe way since the treasure team, Remus and I – and I'm sure you will be accompanying him." He raised an eyebrow. "Unless you think there's another basilisk down there?"

"Perhaps a rooster would be a good thing to take with us." Bertie mused.

"OK, so we have a plan for the Ravenclaw item." Sirius concluded. "Anything on the Head of House ring?"

"From Albus's memories of his time in Hogwarts, Riddle had the ring from his sixth year." Bertie said, tapping the board again so information flowed into a third section. "We think he was released from the muggle orphanage at sixteen and expected to find his own way."

"And he went in search of his origins." Sirius surmised. "I know I would."

"What he found were the Riddles and the only remaining Gaunt in Little Hangleton." Albus explained. "The Riddles were supposedly murdered by Morfin Gaunt, Tom's uncle. He died in Azkaban some years later. I rather think Tom murdered his muggle grandparents and father, and framed his uncle."

Sirius couldn't help a twinge of sympathy for old Morfin but from the research he'd read, Morfin had
been a complete bastard who had deserved Azkaban for a number of things even if he had been ultimately imprisoned for something he hadn't done.

"We have no way of knowing if the ring was anything other than a ring at this point but as he was wearing it, I think it's safe to say it was just a ring." Bertie said. "However, he was not wearing the ring when he returned to Hogwarts for his interview for the DADA position."

"Do we think he left it at Hogwarts too?" Amelia asked.

"No." Albus shook his head. "Too many eggs in one basket."

Bertie nodded and clearly considered his words before speaking. "Caro has found out that Riddle Manor and the land upon which the Gaunts' home resides are now owned by a Thomas Salazar according to muggle records."

Albus looked shocked. "Really?"

"He'd want to own what they denied him." Sirius said unceremoniously. "You think the ring could be there?"

"Maybe – it has personal associations for him." Bertie said.

"I am not certain," Albus said, "I rather think Tom would not choose to go back there. It gives too much away of his origins."

"We should investigate if nothing else." Amelia countered.

"And there are two issues here; one is the ring itself and the second is that this could be a likely bolthole for Riddle if he is back in the country." Bertie said.

"The second falls more under the Rat squad." Amelia nodded briskly. "We'll do passive surveillance. If he does use the Manor we'll know about it."

"Which is an excellent idea but do we search for the ring before or after?" Bertie asked directly. "If we search for the ring and remove it, he'll know we're onto his objects. If we leave it in place, we risk him escaping death again if captured."

There were pros and cons either way, Sirius mused.

"Thoughts?" asked Sirius, waving at Cornelius to go first.

"My vote is to leave it in place." Cornelius said. "We can't risk him knowing about the rest of the treasure hunt."

"Amelia?" Sirius prompted.

"I agree with Cornelius."

Cornelius looked as surprised as Amelia that she had agreed with him.

"As do I." Albus chipped in. "I would suggest that apart from the passive surveillance we leave the ring and Tom alone should he go there until the Ravenclaw object has been found and we've confirmed there is no object at Godric's Hollow. If captured, we would then only have the ring to deal with."

"In which case I would suggest if Riddle isn't already in residence, we locate it first so we can move
on it rapidly when we do the capture." Bertie said.

They all looked at Sirius for a decision.

Sirius considered the options. Merlin but he could do with Remus in the room. "Three plans," he said finally, "plan A; we scout the Manor and Gaunt place this weekend, see if they're occupied, see if the ring is there and what the situation is. If the ring is there, we take it, leave a transfigured copy, rebuild any traps and exit, leaving the passive surveillance in place. A switch is risky, I grant you, but if he sees the traps are in place, I doubt he'll investigate further until he regains full strength."

"Oh," Amelia grinned, "sneaky."

"Quite brilliant, my boy." Albus exclaimed.

"And plan B?" asked Bertie dryly.

"Well, if the ring isn't there and they are; passive surveillance until we get the objects sorted unless it looks like old Volde is going to regain his body." Sirius said. "And plan C assumes neither is there, in which case we set up passive surveillance in case he shows up."

"Neatly done, Sirius." Cornelius said.

Sirius nodded. "We need to move on this quickly if we believe Riddle could be headed there."

"We'll send the teams first thing in the morning." Amelia said after a quick and silent exchange with Bertie.

"Anything else?" Sirius asked.

They all shook their heads.

"Albus, if you could stay a moment? I'll see the rest of you to the floo." Sirius escorted the others out and quickly returned to his study. The old wizard had moved to peer out of the window into the back garden. "More tea, Albus?"

"No, my boy, thank you." Albus turned around. "You're going to berate me about attempting to recover the basilisk."

"By law, the basilisk belongs to Harry as he killed the beast." Sirius said, sitting on the edge of his desk and folding his arms over his chest. "I'm fairly certain that Amelia suspects that you were planning to swindle him out of his rightful reward and it was your intent that kept you out of the Chamber."

"And you?" Albus enquired, placing his hands behind his back.

Sirius cocked an eyebrow at him. "I'm sure you would have given Harry something, possibly commensurate with whatever damages you were planning to give to those petrified. But something is not the same as all which is what he should get under law."

Albus nodded slowly and once again looked his age. "It was not…sporting of me, I know, but I am aware that Harry will inherit a large amount of money. With a diminished student population in these last few years because of the war at the time of their birth…the Hogwarts' budget would have benefited tremendously from an infusion of funds."

Sirius refrained from arguing with him that due to Albus placing Harry with muggles the Potter estate
had been left to rot and, if not for the adoption and change in guardianship, while Harry wouldn't have been destitute when he came of age, he certainly wouldn't have inherited what he should have. Luckily, Remus was turning it around.

"I will talk to Harry about the basilisk," Sirius said firmly, "and I think Albus you'll find that he'll make a fair and equitable decision and Hogwarts will get something."

Albus inclined his head.

"How did the Conference go?" asked Sirius, motioning towards the door.

"The Conference was the same as always, a lot of talking, not much listening or agreeing." Albus said as they walked out. "Unfortunately Rita's articles haven't served to express the opinions I shared with the Conference in a positive light."

"Well, that's Rita for you." Sirius said unsympathetically. He rather agreed with Skeeter that the views Albus had expressed were rather old-fashioned and out of date. But he didn't like the reporter even if Cornelius's insistence on maintaining a good press for Harry and Sirius meant that he had to deal with her. So far she had been supportive in print but Sirius knew the headlines would change in an instant if she believed she had a good story.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the Longbottoms' party?" Sirius checked as they said goodbye at the floo.

"I'm afraid not, my boy. I'll be travelling first thing to France for a final meeting on the Tri-Wizard Tournament and will be gone until the Wizengamot session on Thursday." Albus said a goodbye and disappeared in a flash of green flames.

Sirius took a moment to check in with Kreacher before he headed home.

Home.

It was definitely what the house in Hampshire had become. He, Remus, Harry and Dobby had settled in wonderfully together. Minerva came round most evenings and Remus had jokingly suggested that they should just invite her to move in. She had become a maternal figure to Harry – more of a grandmother than a mother or the 'Aunt Minerva' persona she'd been to James, Sirius mused, but a maternal figure nonetheless. Which was good because Harry did need some feminine influence in his life, and a positive role model to replace Petunia's horrendous example. Andromeda had stepped in as a favourite Aunt; Tonks into a big sister role.

The only wrinkle was Molly Weasley.

On the one hand, Sirius appreciated everything Molly had done for Harry in the three years since she'd helped Harry find the platform for the Hogwarts Express; she had been kind to a lost child, knitted him Christmas presents just because he was her son's friend and Ron had mentioned he didn't think Harry expected many gifts. She'd welcomed Harry into her home and helped feed him up after he had been starved the Summer before his second year, and she and her family had met up with Harry in Diagon Alley just before his third year, breaking days of his being on his own.

But Molly seemed to assume that because of those actions, she had called dibs on providing Harry with any kind of parental influence. They generally had dinner at the Weasleys once a week and each time she was disparaging of Andy's etiquette lessons, uncomplimentary about Tonks' influence, and had even started questioning Minerva's steady presence. She didn't hide the fact that she didn't believe Sirius had made one right parenting decision. Her jealousy was understandable; she'd cast herself into the role of Harry's substitute mother (and Sirius suspected the hand of Dumbledore
although Molly with her undeniably big heart had probably been all too willing to fuss over a neglected child no doubt) and she was now usurped. Sirius had some sympathy and he knew that Harry cared for her enormously; perhaps when Molly realised that, her jealousy would ebb away. However, her other behaviour was driving him nuts.

According to Molly, only Molly knew what was best for Harry. She complained over the lessons suggesting Harry didn't need to know about etiquette, financial management and politics at such a young age and deserved a holiday. She made out Harry still needed feeding up and looking after despite him being healthy and well-fed. She hinted heavily that she should have complete access to Griffin House despite Sirius's concerns over security. She'd asked on every occasion they met that Harry be allowed to stay at the Burrow after the World Cup until the children left for school, despite Harry declining originally with the statement that as much as he appreciated the offer, he wanted to spend as much time as he could with Sirius.

The most aggravating event though had happened mid-July when Molly had summarily announced at dinner that Harry would be at the Burrow for his birthday. It was a major presumption and placed both Sirius and Harry in an awkward position at her dining table. Luckily Arthur had stepped in to turn Molly's announcement into an offer of a venue. Sirius had accepted as the Burrow was a more cheerful environment for a teenager's party than Black Manor, and he had no intention of opening Griffin House up to so many people. But Molly had been displeased when Sirius had informed her that others had already been invited and so there would be more than her own brood.

She meant well and she genuinely cared for Harry but it was all beginning to grate on Sirius. He believed he and Moony were doing a bloody good job with Harry. As Moony had pointed out eventually things were going to come to a head and Sirius would blow up at her unless he did something to derail where the current train of behaviour was heading. And if Sirius didn't blow up at her, Harry was certain to; Remus had pointed out Harry was beginning to take note of Molly's attitude towards Sirius. Maybe a quiet word with Arthur would suffice…

He stepped out of the floo at Griffin House and breathed in deeply. The scent of freshly baked bread and delicious roast chicken filled the sun-lit hallway. Sirius went in search of Harry, said a passing hello to Remus who had his head stuck in a book in the study, and found his son outside curled up underneath a tree reading James's animagus journal.

Remus's July transformation had been hard on them all. Remus had insisted that he go to Grimmauld Place because he didn't want to endanger Harry. Harry had insisted Remus could stay at home but had dropped the subject when he had seen how resolute Remus was about it. Sirius hadn't want to leave either of them alone and felt torn between his desire to be there for Remus like the old days, and his duty to be a parent to Harry. In the end it had been Harry who had suggested Minerva stay overnight with him at Griffin House, freeing Sirius to be with Remus.

Sirius sank down to sit beside Harry and nudged his shoulder. "Hey."

Harry looked up and grinned at him. "Did you really go around Hogwarts with a tail for a week?"

"Yes," Sirius admitted ruefully, "until your Dad gave up his deal with Minnie and she fixed it for me no questions asked."

Harry nodded slowly. "I'm hoping she'll make the same deal for me."

"Are you now?" murmured Sirius. "And what makes you think I'm going to give you permission to train as an animagus?"

Harry's cheeks reddened but he gave a small cheeky smile and raised the book. "Because you know
I could do it in secret and get stuck with a tail for a week."

"You're going to be a monkey." Sirius proclaimed dramatically, reaching out to ruffle Harry's hair, 
"and a cheeky one at that."

"Please, Padfoot?"

Oh Merlin; those pleading emerald eyes! Sirius sighed. It was much more difficult to say no to them every time Harry used them. It would be hypocritical to deny him the opportunity as both James and Sirius had done it when they'd been Harry's age. But it terrified Sirius as a parent to think of Harry in an animagus form running around a dangerous forest with a werewolf – to the point where he couldn't believe he'd been so stupid as a teenager to take the risk.

Sirius took a calming breath; they wouldn't be running around a forest, they'd be in a room with Moony, who with the Wolfsbane potion was fully aware of his faculties. It would also take Harry some time to master his form so the likelihood of cozy scenes of animals snoozing together would be another couple of years away. And...being an animagus would give Harry some form of protection from werewolves in general. It was a useful skill to have and if they kept it unregistered and secret, it could be damned useful if Harry was in a tight spot.

"You have to get Minnie to agree so she can help fix you if you go wrong," he began, "and promise that you won't try anything without supervision."

Harry nodded eagerly.

"We'll start on it as soon as Minnie's approval is gained then." Sirius agreed, wondering how he was going to tell Remus without him going ballistic.

And speak of the Devil…Remus wandered out of the house. Sirius got to his feet and held out his hand to pull Harry to his to meet him. They'd have dinner, chat about the meeting Sirius had attended and settle in for the night with some kind of game or movie…but best of all, they'd be together. It was perfect.
Bill Weasley knocked briskly on the front door to the Burrow before he walked in, calling a cheery hello as he did. His father was already at the head of the breakfast table, the twins on one side of the table whispering furiously; Percy was on the other, a sleepy looking Ginny beside him, and beside her…Charlie grinned and stood up to hug Bill in a brotherly manly fashion as their mother bustled in from the kitchen.

"Bill!" His mother's face lit up with surprise. "I wasn't expecting you until lunch! Here, sit and have some breakfast."

"Don't mind if I do." Bill said, sliding into the chair beside Fred opposite Charlie. He snagged a plate and loaded it with the full Monty; sausages, bacon, eggs, baked beans, fried tomatoes and mushrooms…and two pieces of toast loaded with butter.

"Ginny," Molly nudged her as she set down another platter, "go wake your brother!"

Ginny cast a 'why me' look at Bill who winked at her. She sighed, got to her feet and made her way up the stairs.

"Hungry?" Charlie asked Bill, amused at the amount of food on his plate.

"Starving," Bill said, waving a fork at his brother, "sorry I wasn't here last night; I met up with some of the old Hogwarts' crowd to catch-up. How was your portkey?"

"I hate the international ones." Charlie admitted, helping himself to a second helping of bacon. "Too much spinning."

"I know," Bill said with feeling, "you'd think they'd have worked the kinks out by now."

"Apparently there's European legislation stopping all improvements." Percy chimed in. "The restrictions they're putting on British law are ridiculous."

"Well, if you don't like the travel perhaps you should consider staying here, Charlie." Molly slid into her chair and gestured for the teapot to pour her a mug as the serving spoons began to fill her plate. "I'm sure if you spoke with Amos he would be able to find you a position in his department."

"I'm happy working at the reserve, Mum." Charlie said calmly. He met Bill's amused gaze and rolled his eyes.

"Nonsense, just look at you! You've been injured!" She pointed a knife at the shiny skin on his forearm.

"Burns are part of the job." Charlie said good-naturedly. "I knew that when I signed on."

"Sides," Fred waggled his eyebrows, "everyone knows…"

"…scars are sexy!" George grinned.

Bill tried not to choke as a chuckle bubbled up at his mother's disapproving expression.

"How much longer before you get your Mastery?" Arthur asked, placing the Prophet down beside him.
Charlie shrugged. "Probably next year. I have the practical credits but I need to sit the theory exams."

Molly cleared her throat. "Well, I still say you should consider a job at the Ministry."

Bill kept his gaze on his plate. He had to hand it to his mother; she never gave up.

"Just look at how well Percy's done!" Molly beamed at him. "And your father!"

"I meant to say congrats on the new positions last night, Dad." Charlie admitted with a little chagrin. "It's good to see they're finally recognising you!"

"I think Sirius might have had something to do with it." Arthur said humbly.

Molly harrumphed. "It was the Minister who appointed you to the Wizengamot seat and the Committee, Arthur."

"Well, even if Lord Black recommended you, Dad, it's still a credit to you." Charlie commented diplomatically.

His father dropped the subject rather than argue about it but Bill knew and he knew his father knew that Fudge had been influenced by Sirius.

Bill couldn't understand his mother's antipathy toward Sirius – well, he could but he could see it was all going to end in tears if she wasn't careful. She had a valid complaint that he'd hurt Ron but there were extenuating circumstances and that incident alone shouldn't have led her to the conclusion that Sirius couldn't be trusted to raise Harry, which was clearly what she did believe if anyone paid attention to her comments. But she was becoming increasingly obvious and Bill had seen a small frown on Harry's face the last time she'd made a dig about something Sirius had decided over the regular weekly dinner. If she ended up making Harry choose, Bill didn't think she'd like the result because it was very obvious the kid adored his adoptive father.

And who could blame him, mused Bill as he chewed enthusiastically on a spicy pork sausage. From what he'd gleaned from the twins and Ron, Harry had been neglected and unloved by his previous guardians. Sirius had broken out of jail to protect him, and then had gone to some trouble to secure guardianship of Harry to give him a better life. There was no doubt in Bill's mind that Harry considered Sirius his hero. Maybe his mother had done a few things to fuss over Harry since he became Ron's friend but Bill figured knitting him a Christmas jumper just couldn't compete with Sirius giving him a proper home and a loving parent.

Ginny returned to the table and a moment later a half-bedraggled Ron slumped into the remaining chair beside George; he nodded absently at his brothers.

"It's so nice to have the whole family under one roof again." Molly proclaimed, smiling warmly at them all. "We're going to have such a wonderful day and..."

Bill winced and raised his toast to interrupt his mother. "Sorry, Mum, but the reason I'm here now is because I've been called in."

"Called in where?" She asked, confused.

"Work." Bill said succinctly. "Croaker sent me an owl last night."

"But our day..." Molly protested. "Surely you can floo call Harry and ask him to give you the day off?"
"My immediate boss is Croaker," Bill pointed out patiently, "and I'm not going to run to Harry or Sirius and ask for special favours."

"Hmnpf." Molly said, setting her mug down with a thump. "It's probably Sirius's fault that you have to work today." She sighed. "What work could you possibly be doing on a Saturday?"

"My work's confidential, Mum," Bill reminded her. "And it's not exactly a nine-to-five job." He could feel the sharp edge of his encroaching irritation in his words and took a deep breath. Since Sirius had arranged his leave of absence and he'd taken the oath of service, his mother hadn't stopped pestering him about his work. He deliberately turned to Percy so he could change the subject. "How was the play? You were going last night, right?"

"Penelope enjoyed it," Percy said, "although some people remarked it was quite blasphemous having Merlin talk to the dragons. The illusions were very good though."

"Who wants to go and see a silly old play?" asked Ron grumpily.

"I wouldn't mind." Ginny remarked. "I wish I could have gone with Harry and the others when he went."

"You're not old enough to go to the theatre." Molly stated firmly.

Bill glanced over at Charlie and sent him a sympathetic look; he was going to have to put up with the family shenanigans while Bill was escaping.

"You know if you want to arrange a night with your mates in London, you can always crash at my place." Bill said, offering his brother a respite.

He loved the flat on London Street; two bedrooms, a good sized living room, decent bathroom, and a kitchenette. It was a great little pad. Sirius had confided that he'd bought it with Harry's father when they'd left school. James's portion had been left to Sirius but Sirius had turned the deed of the property over to Harry as an adoption present. Bill was honoured they'd entrusted it to him and he was loving having his own place. In Egypt they'd had to share tents or apartments, it was always close quarters, and the less said about the Burrow the better as much as he loved his childhood home. He had a sneaking suspicion that providing him with the ability to move out of the Burrow was another black mark against Sirius in his mother's eyes.

Charlie's eyes brightened with relief at having an escape route. "Thanks! I'll take you up on that!"

"You will not!" Molly remonstrated. "Bill, Harry didn't give you that apartment for you to take advantage of him and have a succession of unpaying guests!"

"No, he gave me it to look after as part of our service arrangement and it was made very clear that the second bedroom was a guest room for use by my guests. If Charlie wants to stay the night or a week or the entire time he's in England, he's welcome." Bill said brusquely, fed up.

"Well, I might spend the occasional night, but Mum's cooking is better than yours." Charlie winked at him as he tried to ease the tension again.

Their mother softened immediately with the compliment. "Oh, Charlie!"

"If he's not going to take you up on it, I might." Percy said. He cast a look at the twins. "It's very hard to get peace and quiet here to focus on my work."

"Do you think…" Fred began.
"…he might be blaming us, brother?" George completed.

Bill bit his lip and tried not to laugh at Percy's put upon pout. "Percy, you're more than welcome to come and stay a couple of nights if you need to get some work done. But if you want to move in full time though, Mum's right; I probably will have to arrange for you to pay some kind of rent to Harry."

"A couple of nights when I have reports to do would be perfect especially now Mister Crouch is off sick." Percy said immediately.

"Barty's sick?" Arthur looked up, concerned.

Percy nodded. "Since Tuesday with wizard's flu. He sent me work assignments by owl."

Arthur grimaced. "I'm not surprised he caught something with all the stress he's been under from the press and the World Cup and the…" he caught himself and blushed. "He's probably just a bit run down. He was looking peaky when I saw him last."

"Maybe I should pop over with a casserole." Molly suggested, compassionately.

"I would leave it, Molly," Arthur said firmly, "that elf of Barty's is very protective and probably won't let you anywhere near him."

"OK then, Percy," Bill said, dragging the conversation back on track, "you know the floo address so make yourself at home when you need to use the flat." He figured Percy was saving up for his own place.

"Does that apply to us too?" asked Fred mischievously.

"No, it does not." Molly said before Bill could reply. "Anyone underage will be staying here at all times."

He supposed that was fair enough and tried not to resent the implication that his mother didn't trust him to look after his siblings.

"If you're working will you make it to the Longbottoms' party?" His father asked, changing the subject.

"I don't know." Bill said. "It depends on how it goes."

Ron snorted. "I wish I didn't have to go."

"What's the problem?" asked Charlie. "Good food, a bit of dancing, cute girls…" He winked at Bill as he said the last.

"Charlie!" exclaimed their mother on cue.

Bill dropped his gaze from his brother so he wouldn't laugh out loud.

"Your brother's far too young to be thinking of girls and dating." Molly said firmly.

The older brothers all exchanged a wry look. Bill had been caught in a broom closet in his fourth year; Charlie had started dating in his third – as had Percy although he'd kept it quiet. Fred and George simply shared a grin and said nothing but Bill assumed they'd also discovered girls by Ron's age.

"We have to dress up!" Ron said hotly around a mouthful of food.
Bill could understand that complaint. He hated dress robes.

"There is nothing wrong with dressing up occasionally." Molly remonstrated. "It will be lovely."

"Have you seen my dress robes?" asked Ron pointedly. "I'm not wearing them!"

"What's wrong with Ron's dress robes?" Bill asked Fred in a side whisper as their mother informed Ron he would go naked if he didn't put them on.

"Imagine we played a prank on them already and you'll have a good idea of what Ron's robes look like right now." Fred whispered back.

Ah.

"I don't understand why you had to get me second hand robes!" complained Ron furiously. "Sirius gave me some money!"

Charlie's eyes widened at that and Bill grimaced; his mother was not going to appreciate Sirius's name being thrown in her face.

"That money is for your education, young man!" Molly shot back at Ron. "It's not for frivolities."

"Your mother's right, Ron." Arthur chimed in. "We can't use the educational fund for dress robes."

"I'm going to look stupid." Ron mumbled miserably.

Bill exchanged a look with Charlie who gave a small nod. Charlie would have to go out and buy some dress robes so he could get some for Ron at the same time. Both of them were earning; they could cover the cost as a combined early birthday-Christmas present.

He mopped up the last of his egg and drank down his juice. He should get going, Bill thought, glancing at his watch. "Dad, can I have a quick word? House business." He saw Charlie's eyebrows go up at that and realised he was going to have to bring his brother up to date with events.

Arthur motioned to the back of the house. "Why don't we take this to my shed?"

Bill got up and dropped a kiss on the top of his mother's head. He did love her despite her overprotectiveness. "Thanks for breakfast, Mum."

He followed his father out and Bill waited until he'd closed the door of the shed before putting up a privacy bubble.

"You need to speak with Mum." Bill said bluntly.

His father sighed and took his glasses off to pinch the brow of his nose. "It's not that easy with your Mum, Bill, you know that."

"What I know is that she's risking our alliance of friendship with the House of Potter because she dislikes Harry's adoptive father." Bill replied briskly. "Harry loves Sirius. He's starting to notice Mum's attitude and he won't stand for it if he thinks she's insulting Sirius. There'll be a huge row, Harry will choose Sirius, and you'll be forced to discipline Mum for being in breach of oath and bringing discord between the two Houses. While I doubt either Harry or Sirius would embarrass us publicly or politically with an alliance dissolution, we can't allow it to happen."

"I know." Arthur admitted quietly. "It's just…I think she's just feeling displaced with Harry. We both decided to treat him as one of our own because it was obvious he wasn't cared for, and in your
Mum's eyes, Sirius has taken her child away from her.

Bill sighed heavily. "Dad, he was never hers, and if you two had truly wanted to treat him as one of your own, why didn't you make more of an effort to get him away from his previous situation?"

"We tried," Arthur retorted, a flash of anger creeping into his voice, "after the Chamber, I tried when I spoke with Professor Dumbledore about the life debt but he was insistent that the muggle place was safest for Harry and I let his judgement overrule my own. Your Mum talked with him too with the same result." He slumped against the workbench and folded his arms. "To be truthful, I think part of your Mum's problem with Sirius is that he managed to do what we couldn't."

That was unfortunate and there was a thick layer of guilt in his father's voice. Bill repressed the urge to sigh again. "At least you tried and Harry obviously appreciates what you and Mum did do. But speaking as your Heir who is also in the service of the House of Potter, Mum needs to back off Sirius and you need to tell her that before this party tonight and definitely before tomorrow and Harry's birthday bash."

Arthur nodded wearily. "What about your service, Bill? Are you enjoying it?"

"I am," Bill said, "I mean, it's mainly been research so far, but we put a theory to Croaker yesterday and hopefully getting called in means we got permission to go ahead and check it out."

"Be careful." Arthur said.

Bill embraced his father tightly. "Good luck with Mum." Somehow Bill thought his father had the more dangerous job of the two of them. He hurried out of the shed and beyond the wards before apparating straight to the Ministry.

He just made it to the conference room in the DOM on time, sneaking in and taking a seat by Caro only a moment before Croaker, Bones and Scrimgeour arrived.

Caro shot him a look and Bill gave her a wink in response. They'd bonded over their shared love of curse-breaking and while Caro hadn't been able to say much about her MI7 experience, she and Bill had managed to trade a few stories. She was fascinated by his tales of Egypt and he had found her stories of adventures in undisclosed places equally as interesting.

A briefing folder appeared before Bill and he opened it to check that most of it was the information he and Lawrence had put together. He glanced around the rest of the room and realised that the five sat on the other side of the conference table were probably the Rat Squad.

Bones cleared her throat. "OK, listen up. These plans were proposed by Lord Black and agreed by the War Council last night."

"In one hour, Wood, Chambers and Ambrey are to go scout the Manor; Brooks and Cambridge the
"Gaunt cottage." Bones said. "If Riddle and Pettigrew are there, set up passive monitoring and retreat."

"If they're not there, then Caro and Bill will go in to look for the object we think Riddle has secreted there." Croaker added. "Lawrence, you'll remain here at base for any information they need on the fly."

Lawrence nodded, his long grey hair covering his face.

"While the Treasure Team work to find their target, the Rat Squad will keep look-out." Bones said. "If Riddle and Pettigrew turn up, set up the monitoring and retreat."

"Ma'am, why are we retreating?" Ambrey asked bluntly, her Mediterranean looks of dark hair and eyes with olive complexion looked exotic in the sterile conference room. "Shouldn't we capture them both?"

"We need the treasure before we can tackle Riddle. If they make their way to Little Hangleton, we'll know where they are and can move on them at a moment's notice." Bones explained briskly. "If the Treasure Team find the target, they'll retrieve it and put in a duplicate, re-establish the traps and depart. Rat Squad will set up monitoring in case Riddle finds his way there. Any other questions?"

There was silence.

"Well, one final thing from me then," Croaker said with a smile, "it's come to the attention of Lord Black that incentives have been offered outside of these teams for finding the rat. Lord Black sent me a note this morning saying he wants to make the playing field fair so…if you find the rat, the Rat Squad gets a thousand galleons each. Treasure Team – you'll be getting a thousand galleons each for every item you bring in."

"Let's get to it." Bones ordered.

They separated outside the room with Caro taking Bill down to the Unspeakables' locker room. He changed into a more generic muggle outfit of denim jeans, checked shirt and a windbreaker anorak. He exchanged his dragon-hide boots for hiking boots. He settled for tying his long hair back with a strip of leather and replacing his fang ear-ring with a silver stud that couldn't get caught on anything. His curse-breaking tools went into a small back-pack.

Caro had changed into a similar outfit; jeans, shirt and jacket with sensible boots and a back-pack. Her blonde hair was tied back into a plait. They looked like a couple on a hiking trip and that was going to be their cover if they ran into muggles.

They met up with Lawrence in the research room they had been using.

Lawrence smiled at them. "Communication mirrors; one is tuned to me, the other to Brooks, the other to Wood. If you run into problems, call." He picked up two silver rings. "Your emergency portkeys; you'll end up in the DOM employee reception. You'd best be going. Good hunting."

Bill nodded. He and Caro headed across to the DMLE and met up with the Rat Squad. They'd all changed into non-distinct muggle clothing too although he could see badges on the waistband of their jeans that designated them law enforcement and probably acted as their portkeys.

"Ready?" asked Bones crisply. "Then, good luck."

Brooks held up a walking stick and they all grasped it. "Tally-ho." He said with a grin, his dark eyes flashing.
The world spun away from them and Bill focused on the whirlwind of portkey travel so he could bend his legs at the right moment and land on his feet. When the world righted, they were in a deserted piece of forestry, and Cambridge was on the ground.

Chambers, a cheerful dark-haired Hufflepuff if Bill remembered rightly, reached down and helped him to his feet. "Up you come, Darren."

"Bugger." Cambridge grimaced and brushed off his clothes. "I hate portkeys." He adjusted his glasses and peered out with pale blue eyes at the countryside. "We're just outside the Manor?"

"Yep," Wood said, the faint hint of a Scots accent tinging the word, "according to our co-ordinates, Manor is about a mile up ahead to the left at the top of the hill and the Gaunt cottage is a good mile away to the right."

"How do you Treasure guys want to do this?" Brooks asked bluntly. "One of you comes with each Rat team or are you sticking together?"

Caro and Bill exchanged a look.

"Sticking together." Caro said crisply.

"We'll do the cottage first." Bill said. "It'll be quickest to search and if it's not there then we'll tackle the Manor."

"Fair enough." Brooks said. "Ambrey, Chambers; with me. Malcolm…stay in touch."

"Likewise, Keith." Wood replied.

Each group went their separate way. The walk provided them with an opportunity to get to know each other better. Wood was mostly very proud of his cousin Oliver who had ended up in the Puddlemere team and admitted he'd thought of Quidditch himself as a career before he'd applied for the Aurors. Cambridge reminded Bill of Charlie; easy-going – he'd told everyone to call him Darren within minutes –but very sharp. He hadn't gone to Hogwarts but the school in Birmingham which led them into an interesting discussion of the differences between the Ministry sponsored schools and Hogwarts.

Wood's communication mirror buzzed and they stopped to take the call. Bill cast a notice-me-not charm around them while Caro took care of the muggle repellent.

"Brooks, here." The Auror's pale face filled the screen. "We're at the Manor and have performed a passive perimeter charm. We've got one muggle on the premises. Any ideas?"

"It's probably the gardener-caretaker, Frances Archibald Bryce." Caro informed them. "His name was mentioned in the muggle records we managed to get hold of."

"He was employed by the Riddles originally, accused of their murder by the muggle authorities but let go for lack of evidence. The new owner kept him on." Bill added.

"We'll keep watch here for the rat and the snake," Brooks said. "Brooks, out."

They set off again and through the trees a small ramshackle building finally appeared.

"Merlin, it's a hovel." Darren said disgusted.

Bill was already casting and placed a hand on Darren's arm when he went to move forward. "Easy.
There's a ward here.

Wood also had his wand out and he frowned as he performed the perimeter scan. "There's a nest of snakes near to the house; common adders. But, no rat and no Riddle." He nodded at Bill and Caro. "Darren and I will keep watch. You do your thing." He took out his communication mirror and briefly updated Brooks.

"The ward is a standard proximity trigger." Bill said crisply. "We walk through it, we'll trigger something – probably none lethal but scary enough to keep the muggles out."

"Makes sense," Caro said, "anyone stupid enough to want to look at the place gets scared away." She frowned. "Probably the snakes will attack."

Bill nodded. Snakes were a good choice; muggles tended to fear the hell out of them and they had bad connotations in the wizarding world.

"Options?" Bill asked, already sorting through his back-pack for a tool that would neutralize the ward.

"Well, we don't want to dismantle it or Riddle will know we've been. Under or through with the temporary neutralizer?" Caro muttered. "Through would be quicker."

"I agree." He tossed the cone-shaped device toward the house; there was a flash of green as the ward was momentarily neutralized and both Bill and Caro took an immediate step forward.

They waited.

"Snakes are remaining where they are." Bill confirmed with a quick spell.

"I'll take point," Caro said briskly, "you watch my back."

"And a lovely rear it is too, Caro." Bill said with a grin as he picked up the neutralizer. It had another two charges left.

"Oy! Watch it, Weasley!" Caro said with a smirk. "I can do things with this wand that you wouldn't believe."

"Promises, promises." Bill responded absently, even as he ran a series of spells that would warn him if anything magical triggered, if any dark creatures came into the vicinity, and if the outer ward was triggered.

They made it up to the house.

An adder slithered from where it had been sleeping in the shade by the steps and into the nearby undergrowth.

They stared at the tarnished silver knocker in the shape of a snake on the front door.

"Delightful," remarked Caro dryly, casting a series of scanning spells, "we've got another proximity ward all around this house; it's...well-hidden but there. There's a specific one in full view on the front door, but as you can see the magic gives a wonky reading." She smiled though. "All these wards...someone might think he was hiding something."

Bill nodded with a satisfied smile of his own; they'd definitely found something Riddle wanted hidden. "You know anyone who has managed to get by the snakes would leap for the steps. People
usually attempt the front door first to gain entry."

"I'm thinking that's a bad idea." Caro pointed at the snake knocker. "Want to bet it comes alive?"

"Nope." Bill said. "I was trained by Gringotts; I value my gold." He waved his wand at the house walls. "So, anyone sensible would go through a window."

"And get another nasty surprise probably inside the house by whatever's triggered by the wall ward." Caro murmured. "We could throw a neutralizer through a window, it'd shatter the glass but we can repair it afterwards; dive inside."

"This would be simpler if we didn't have to leave everything in place." Bill sighed. Without the restriction they could have overpowered the house ward and gone in.

"Where's your sense of fun, Weasley?" Caro teased.

Bill hefted the neutralizer and pointed at the window on the left. "Ready?" He threw it with good aim and it smashed through the dirty glass, a green ripple flowing over the walls. He banished the rest of the glass as he and Caro ran full tilt and threw themselves through the open hole.

The landing was hard.

The breath got knocked out of him as he landed on the hard wooden floor. He sat up and rotated his shoulder gingerly. He was pretty sure it was going to bruise.

"Bloody hell!" Caro swore roundly. She scrambled into a sitting position and cradled her right wrist.

Bill ignored her in favour of checking out their situation, casting a spell to alert him to any dark magic in the area. "You OK?"

"Wrist is broken. I should have used my animagus form and flown in." Caro said succinctly.

A low hiss came from the shadows.

Bill sent out a perimeter charm. "OK, so we have another snake, a big one, and it's enchanted against spells. We'd need a bloody powerful vanishing spell to get rid of it." He took hold of Caro's arm and pulled her to her feet. "It's on the move; we need to get out of here. Accio neutralizer!"

He tossed it back through the window but there was no ripple as he pushed Caro towards the open window. Caro hastily and awkwardly clambered back out and Bill followed her not a moment too soon as not one but three snakes appeared in the shaft of sunlight, their bodies moving with speed over the wooden floor, their upper bodies rising, mouths open and hissing.

Bill fell out onto the grass with another huff of breath. He could see movement coming out of the bushes and heard Caro repairing the window as he scrambled to his feet.

"Run, you idiot!" Caro snapped as she made for the outer ward.

"Accio neutralizer!" Bill yelled and grabbed it mid-air as he swerved to avoid the snapping jaws of one snake and jumped over another. Bill tossed the neutralizer to Darren who fumbled and dropped it and Bill had a second to realise there was no green ripple. As he cleared the ward, he heard Wood shout to keep running.

Five minutes of breathless stampeding through the forest later and Wood shouted again.

"OK! OK!" Wood brought them to a stumbling halt. "We lost them."
"Bloody snakes!" Darren gasped, bending over and trying to catch his breath.

"What did the pair of you do?" Wood demanded.

"Nothing!" snapped Caro furiously, her cheeks pink with temper along with the flush of exertion. "We followed the protocols! The snakes shouldn't have attacked."

Bill caught his breath. "Something is definitely hidden there." He motioned back towards the Gaunt place. "I got a reading on a box under the floorboards just before the snakes came out of the woodwork."

"The proximity trigger wasn't linked with the snakes inside the house." Caro said, wincing in pain. "Something else set them off."

"We need to review in a pensieve and come back for a second go." Bill said. "You need treatment."

Wood pointed at them. "You two portkey back to base. I'll update Brooks and let Lawrence know you're on way back."

Bill nodded briskly. There was no reason for the Treasure Team to stay. Wood and Cambridge would have to go back and set up the passive monitoring if they hadn't already done it. He looked over at Caro and on her signal tapped his ring and gave the activation code.

They reappeared in the DOM's reception area for its employees.

"I'm going to head to the infirmary." Caro said crisply. "You go ahead and debrief Croaker."

He made for the research room and found Croaker, Bones and Lawrence waiting for him with a pensieve. Bill immediately withdrew his memory and they all dived in.

It didn't take long to watch and when they emerged, Caro was in the room waiting for them.

"Nasty." Bones said shuddering.

Croaker nodded. "What are your thoughts, Bill, having rewatched it?"

"The neutralizer was useless when we exited which means it took another hit after going through the outer ward on the house walls." Bill replied, leaning against the central workbench and folding his arms.

"The inner wall and the floor must also have been warded." Caro agreed.

Bill rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. "The floor one probably triggered the snake - there was definitely only one but reviewing it, there was some kind of increased fear sensation and there must have been an illusion to multiple it."

"What do you think, Bertie?" Bones asked.

"Ingenious and deadly." Croaker agreed. "What I would expect from Riddle. Outside is obviously aimed to keep the muggles away primarily. We didn't have neutralizers in the days when Riddle set the wards up and I would guess the wall wards trigger anti-apparition and anti-portkey travel inside, making the window the only exit. The snake inside along with a fear compulsion and an illusion spell probably triggered by a ward on the floor…wizards go back through the window triggering the snakes outside…"

"They were definitely triggered by our exit." Caro agreed tersely.
"The door…I would bet anything that door has a parseltongue ward on it. He would want to go through it after all." Lawrence said.

"So there's probably a parseltongue password that lets you in and deactivates the house triggers." Bill mused out loud.

"You need to be as powerful as Albus Dumbledore to bring all wards down and deal with the snakes to get to the ring without that password." Croaker said.

"Albus is out of the country until Thursday." Bones said.

Bill gestured. "With our plan, we can deal with the outer ward and the house wall wards with neutralizers but we have no way of dealing with the snake. Even if we levitated someone over the floor, they have to touch the floorboard to get to the ring."

"And, isn't it kind of moot to leave everything in place?" Caro argued. "All Riddle has to do is walk on over and have a chat with the snakes about any recent activity."

"We can obliviate the snakes; they're not the problem." Bill concluded. "We just need someone who can talk to snakes and hopefully get us through the front door."

They all looked at each other.

"He's never going to allow it." Bones said crisply.

Croaker frowned and motioned at Bill. "We'll go talk with him."

Bill grimaced. He really wasn't looking forward to telling Sirius that they needed Harry to get the ring.
"Sirius, what's your gut reaction?" Remus sat forward, almost falling off the sofa in the living room of Griffin House where they'd congregated to listen to why Bertie and Bill had requested an urgent meeting with Sirius that lunch-time.

They had thought it might be to confirm that they'd been successful in tracking down another item like the diary but Sirius had arrived back with a very grim expression and shot that theory down. Well, shot it down in part because they had found an item; they just couldn't get to it without a parselmouth – without Harry. They wanted Harry to go along with the Treasure Team and help out.

Harry looked eagerly at Sirius hoping he'd say yes. He understood Sirius wanting him to stay safe but he wanted to help as much as he could. The prophecy worried him. When he'd listened to it, he'd realised he'd known the gist of it already since Voldemort was so fixated on him. But it was scary to think it might come down to him against a very powerful wizard even if his own power and skills had improved tenfold.

He knew Sirius was doing everything he could with the DMLE and the DOM to ensure Harry didn't have to face Voldemort but Harry hated being kept out of it, especially having to rely on others. He hadn't really had anyone to rely on before Ron and Hermione. Even then, with the basilisk and the stone, it had ultimately come down to him against Voldemort. Certainly Harry hadn't had adults to rely on in his life. He knew he had Sirius, Remus and others now but it was hard to simply sit back and let them take care of it; to trust that they would.

He hated feeling so...constrained, unable to help, frustrated at not being allowed to help. But this...this was something he could do – and it was pretty much the same as helping with the Chamber of Secrets which Sirius had already said he could do.

Sirius sent Harry a faint look of apology and defiance from his standing position by the mantelpiece. "To say no."

"But why? I'm helping with the Chamber!" Harry protested immediately.

"Because this isn't the Chamber, Harry." Sirius retorted. "This is a house set up with a series of traps that have already managed to get the better of two very good curse-breakers."

"Because they don't speak parseltongue." Harry shot back.

"Why the urgency?" asked Remus, stepping in before the exchange of words became too heated.

Sirius sighed and motioned vaguely. "Like I said last night, we think Voldemort is back in the country and this might be a bolthole for him. We have no idea when he could turn up; the quicker we deal with the ring, the better."

"Otherwise if we capture him, we lose time while we get the ring." Remus nodded. "And the only person with the power who could get the ring without running into problems is Albus?"

"Croaker believes Dumbledore could probably overpower the wards and deal with the snakes without too much trouble but even then it would probably still take him at least a couple of hours. But he's not sure Albus could do it without leaving a trace behind." Sirius said. "Bill estimates they could bring down the wards in a day between him and Caro but they're still left with the problem of the enchanted snake. One could keep it busy while the other went for the ring. But either way whether the Treasure Team or Albus as Bill says they have no idea if there are any other surprises
under the floorboard."

"So we don't know if waiting for Albus will mean we can go ahead with getting the ring as per the original plan, and if we wait until we've captured Voldemort, we take the risk of him escaping while we spend hours dealing with the ring." Remus sighed and folded his arms as he considered the problem.

"It's a big risk." Sirius said. "Because rather than just dealing with him, we have to capture, hold him and hope he doesn't get a clue about why we haven't immediately beheaded him. That's why I agreed for them to move today on the ring and to leave it as though it was never touched so he doesn't suspect while we get the other item we're missing…"

"Yes, yes, the whole leaving everything in place so Voldemort doesn't suspect a thing if he does turn up is ingenious, Padfoot." Remus murmured.

He pursed his lips and when Harry went to say something Remus held up a hand.

"We have three options: one, we defer dealing with the ring until after we have Voldemort captured. We would hopefully have the other remaining item in hand, hopefully he wouldn't suspect, hopefully he wouldn't get free." Remus expanded. "It's a big risk and if the worst case scenario is he escapes while we're dealing with the ring and realises we're aware of the horcruxes leading him to explore other types of immortality and us back at the beginning."

Sirius grimaced. "Exactly why I authorised this mission in the first place."

"Right," Remus stressed, "so we go to our second option; we wait for Albus to return and wait to see if he can get to the ring and leave things in place so Voldemort doesn't suspect. Risks, Harry?"

Harry jumped a little at the question but quickly thought through them. "Well, Voldemort might get to Little Hangleton before the Headmaster comes back."

"And?" prompted Remus.

"And the Headmaster may not be able to do it without disturbing things especially the snakes." Harry said after a second.

"So, we end up either being forced into option one anyway," Remus said, turning back to Sirius, "or returning to option three – Harry helps."

"And the risk is that Harry gets injured or worse!" Sirius retorted and glanced across at Harry, an apology in his eyes that Harry ignored.

"Bill could get injured! Or you!" Harry argued. "What's the difference?"

"You're…"

"Underage, I know," Harry rejoined, "but who in the room has fought Voldemort and survived?" He stuck is hand up. "Who has fought a basilisk and survived?" He kept his hand up and glared at Sirius. "It should be me who does this according to the prophecy!"

"I admit that you've had to face a lot at a very young age, Harry," Sirius replied fiercely, "but you're not on your own anymore and the entire reason why we came up with the plan in the first place was so you don't have to go through these kind of things again – prophecy or no prophecy!"

"The plan wasn't my idea and I can protect myself!" exclaimed Harry hotly. He felt his magic stirring
and took a shaky breath, trying to hold onto it and his temper.

"Not…"

"Sirius!" Remus interrupted before Sirius could finish his sentence. "Yelling at each other won't help resolve this." He pointed at Harry. "Why don't you head upstairs and start getting ready for Neville's party?"

In other words they wanted to talk without Harry in the room. He scowled but he scrambled off the sofa and left the room, giving into the urge to bang the door closed on his way out. He stood still for a moment in the hallway, arrested by the deep sense of hurt that filled him. Why did Sirius think he couldn't handle it? He'd handled everything just fine before Sirius adopted him. Did Sirius think he was stupid? Didn't he trust him?

Harry felt the sting of tears and blinked them back rapidly. It was then he realised he could hear voices and that neither Sirius nor Remus had thought to put up a privacy charm…

"…and yes, thank you, Remus, I know yelling at him wasn't going to help!" Sirius snapped.

"Sirius, what is going on in your head?" Remus demanded, speaking more angrily than Harry could remember him speaking before.

"What is so wrong with wanting to protect my son?!" Sirius retorted heatedly. "I don't care that he wants to do this – and Merlin's balls, I don't think he does want to, I think he thinks we all think he should want to because of the bloody prophecy! He shouldn't feel that way, Remus! He's a day shy of fourteen and we're talking about sending him into a dangerous situation where he could be hurt or killed and…" there was a sharp gasp.

Harry took a step toward the door in concern, his fingers lightly grazing the wood.

"Sirius, sit down! Here, take a breath!" Remus encouraged, his tone soothing with a hint of worry. "And another."

There was a long silence and Harry worried if Sirius was OK, guilt worming into his belly at having yelled at him.

"Sorry." Sirius muttered so quietly Harry had to strain to hear it.

"You're the one who had the panic attack." Remus said. "I can understand involving Harry scares the pants off of you, Sirius; it scares me too."

"It's not just that." Sirius protested weakly.

Remus sighed loud enough for the sound to travel through the door. Harry leaned against it, miserable at making his brand new father have a panic attack about him and trying to ignore the taunting voice in his head that warned him Sirius wouldn't love him anymore, would send him back to the Dursleys because Harry was too much trouble to keep around.

"Neither you nor Harry have been sleeping well since we found out about the prophecy." Remus commented.

Harry frowned. He'd had a few nightmares and Sirius had always been there when he'd woken up to soothe him and reassure him. Had Sirius been having nightmares too?

"I don't know how James and Lily coped with knowing the prophecy." Sirius admitted.
"Intellectually, I knew what it would say before we went to hear it but knowing and knowing…how am I supposed to protect him?"

"Do you believe it?"

"I believe it doesn't matter because Voldemort wants to kill him either way." Sirius said. "I believe if others heard it they'd put even more pressure on Harry to deal with Voldemort in addition to the ridiculous Boy Who Lived stuff because it's comforting for them to think that they don't have the responsibility – Dumbledore is a case in point. It's not fair on Harry."

Harry's breath hitched a little at Padfoot's words.

"No, it's not." Remus agreed.

"And I don't ever want him to think that I see him that way, Moony, or put pressure on him to conform to some hero image. I want him to know that he's…he's Harry to me and that I would love him if he never faced Voldemort, if he never vanquished him. It doesn't matter to me."

Harry swiped at the tear that trickled down his cheek. Merlin, he felt like a prat. All Sirius was trying to do was protect him and he was acting like Dudley when he didn't get his own way. He eased away from the door.

"So are you going to let him go to Little Hangleton?"

"I don't know." Sirius said. "What kind of parent am I if I let him go?"

"I know the risks," Remus countered, "but ultimately you have to ask what protects him better: letting him help with getting the ring and being in danger momentarily under adult supervision or leaving the ring, trying to deal with it when Voldemort's captured and taking the risk Voldemort escapes to continue hurting Harry?"

"Well I know where your vote is going." Sirius replied sarcastically.

Remus sighed again. "I love him too, Padfoot."

"I know, Moony. It's just…" Sirius sighed. "It's not that easy when you're the one who has to live with the consequences of it. I took him to a healing clinic and he almost died during the cleansing and…the blessing ritual caused him to be magically exhausted and…Merlin knows I wish I hadn't taken him to listen to the prophecy! Some days I'm not so certain Molly Weasley isn't right and I'm a terrible parent."

Harry grimaced. He'd noticed Molly's pointed comments the last time they'd gone for dinner and had realised with hindsight that she'd been making the same kind of comments for a while. He didn't want to hurt her feelings but he didn't like her making Sirius feel bad; Sirius was a great parent.

"Molly Weasley doesn't think you're a terrible parent…" Remus cut himself off – probably because Sirius had thrown him some kind of look, "OK, she thinks you're a terrible parent but frankly, Molly isn't Harry's parent; you are. And for what it's worth, Padfoot, I think you're doing a good job."

"Thank you, Moony." Sirius said.

And he was doing a good job, Harry thought fervently; and he'd tell Mrs Weasley so the next time he saw her. Well, maybe not the next time but when they were alone because Andy had drilled it into him that Lords did not make scenes in public and the next time he'd see Ron's mother was at Neville's birthday party – which he really did need to get ready for.
Harry made his way quietly up the stairs not wanting to give away to Remus and Sirius that he had been listening at the door. For a while, the rush of showering and changing held his attention but as he tried to do something with his hair, the thoughts of Sirius and their argument crowded back in.

"Balls!" Harry swore as his hair refused to lie flat.

"James had the same problem." Sirius said from the open doorway. He was washed and looking very smart in tailored dress robes. "Here." He made his way into the room and waved his wand over Harry's hair which obediently settled into a professional tousled look rather than the nest it had been before.

"Thank you." Harry managed to get out, feeling awkward after their argument and the discussion he'd eavesdropped on.

Sirius nodded and made to leave.

"Padfoot." Harry called out to stop him leaving. "I'm sorry." He gestured. "About before." He fidgeted with his hair brush. "If you don't want me to go to Little Hangleton then I won't go."

Sirius paused in the doorway and turned back to him. He seemed to struggle internally for a long moment before gesturing toward the bed indicating that they should both sit. Harry sat down and waited as Sirius joined him.

"We're going to argue sometimes, Harry." Sirius said quietly, holding Harry's gaze. "People do even when they love each other very much. When your Granddad Potter found out about your Dad and I drinking Firewhiskey when we were sixteen he went through the roof, yelled at us for a good hour and then your Dad yelled back at him and I might have yelled a bit too but I was mainly worried he was going to throw me out and…"

Harry forgot sometimes that Sirius had gone through similar worries as a teenager. He dropped his gaze and felt heat flare along his cheeks.

"Oh…" Sirius stopped abruptly. "I had hoped the adoption would have meant that you realised that you were stuck with me." He said finally, the light teasing note not helping to soothe Harry's guilt that he had thought it even in passing.

"I'm sorry," Harry began again.

"Hey. Come here." Sirius tugged him over to him and Harry hugged Sirius back fiercely. "I never…I never want you to doubt that I love you, Harry. You're my son. You yelling at me or me yelling at you, doesn't change that, OK?"

Harry nodded, feeling just awful about the whole thing. He didn't want Sirius thinking it was his fault. "I didn't think…I know and I don't know why I even thought that you wouldn't want me anymore, it's just…"

"It's OK that you did think it, you know, I mean not OK but understandable?" Sirius rubbed his back and reassured him. "You're allowed to be insecure since we're still both new at this."

"You're a great Dad." Harry blurted out into Sirius's shoulder.

Sirius froze for an instant and seemed to hear the 'and I'm a terrible son' that Harry had managed to keep behind his teeth anyway as his grip tightened. "Well, I have a wonderful son, Harry. That's half the battle."
"Even when I argue?" Harry tried to joke about it.

"Especially when you argue." Sirius said firmly. "I always want you to have a mind of your own, Harry, even if I don't agree with you at times."

Harry eased back and rubbed a hand over his face, covering his embarrassment at their previous argument.

"Why is it so important for you to help out with the ring?" Sirius asked.

He remembered Sirius's concerns that he thought Harry was doing it because it was expected, because he felt a sense of duty because of the prophecy and Harry knew Sirius was right. In truth, the reasons why he'd wanted to go along were mostly about that.

"Some of it's the prophecy." Harry admitted and hurried out the rest at Sirius's look of triumph. "It's just…it doesn't seem fair to ask other people to risk their lives and me not to when it's me who's in the prophecy. But also because I can help. I'm a parselmouth; they need a parselmouth. And if I don't do it…I don't want Voldemort to win."

Sirius searched his gaze for what seemed like an eternity. "Alright. You can help on one condition – well, several, really."

Harry hid his smile at Sirius's capitulation and nodded enthusiastically. "Anything."

"Firstly…" Sirius sighed and shifted position, "you and I are going to see a mind healer about the prophecy. Remus has pointed out that we're both struggling to come to terms with it a bit. I'll write to Noshi about finding someone trustworthy here in the UK."

He wasn't mad about the idea but he guessed talking to someone like Healer Fay wouldn't hurt.

"Secondly, I know what the prophecy says but prophecies are very woolly things. I don't want you to think it has to be you that does everything just because some prophecy claims you're the one who'll vanquish old Voldepants in the end. Understood?"

He nodded. "It's hard though, Sirius."

"I know and it doesn't help that the wizarding world has already heaped a whole stack of expectations on you with the whole Boy Who Lived thing," Sirius said, "but it doesn't always have to be you who slays the basilisk."

He nudged Harry's shoulder and Harry nodded.

"Thirdly, I want you to remember that you have people who care about whether you're in danger and what it might mean if you put your life at risk when you consider whether to volunteer to do something." Sirius said gravely. "I hate agreeing to put you at risk, Harry, because I love you and don't want to lose you or see you hurt in any way."

Harry was certain his face was Weasley red but he nodded his agreement again.

"Fourthly, this trip tomorrow is not the same as you taking us into the Chamber. There's a good risk that Voldemort will show up mid-mission; there's a risk that there's something else in that house that will put your life in danger; there's a risk that the snakes won't respond to you." Sirius took a breath. "So, you will follow orders tomorrow. If Bill or Remus or I give you an instruction, you will follow it or explain very quickly why you won't. Agreed?"
"Yes." Harry said immediately.

"Fifthly, we keep this between us, the Treasure Team and probably Bertie and Amelia. I don't want anyone else knowing you were involved."

Harry nodded. "I won't tell anyone."

"And finally, I want you to know..." Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder. "If it does come down to you and Voldemort, I have every confidence that you're going to win not because you're the Boy Who Lived or the Prophesised One or anything like that but because you're you."

Harry couldn't reply so he hugged him.

"Come on," Sirius said, squeezing him before letting go, "we have a party to get to and Augusta will kill us if we're late."

Harry let Sirius walk him out and they flooed to the Longbottom Manor for the party along with Remus who had looked strangely smug at the sight of them walking down the stairs together.

The next morning, it seemed to Harry that the party had passed in a haze.

Neville loved the variety of muggle plants that Harry had bought for him to experiment with cross-breeding (and Harry was never letting Padfoot loose in a muggle garden centre again ever). He'd seemed a little overwhelmed with the attention as his Gran had never thrown such a public birthday party for him before – usually it was restricted to the Longbottom family. Harry promised to stick close to him so Neville could unashamedly use him as a diversion (of the "Very nice to meet you and oh, have you been introduced to Lord Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived" kind of diversion which meant nine out of ten times Neville was dropped in favour of Harry – personally Harry was making note of who didn't drop Neville because it seemed to him that those people were the ones to get to know). Ron had been mildly upset that Harry wouldn't leave Neville's side but in the end had stuck with the two of them rather than go about the room with Hermione, Susan, and Hannah Abbott.

Unfortunately, Ginny had also stuck with the boys – not exactly saying anything and blushing every time Harry said something. Harry had no idea what he was supposed to do about Ginny. He appreciated that she might want to get to know him but surely that suggested that she actually talk to him. He'd tried to talk to her but a conversation needed two people. The other problem he'd noted was that he was certain Neville liked Ginny and Ginny had no problems talking with Neville which bizarrely had seemed to bother Ron more than her blushing and acting awkwardly around Harry. Luckily, Hermione had remembered her promise after an hour and rescued Harry by insisting on showing Ginny something, but speaking of bizarre; Hermione had reported quite smugly at the end of the night that her efforts of making friends with Susan and Hannah had gone very well as though it was a competition.

Girls, Harry thought morosely as he followed Sirius through the DOM, who could fathom them? He pushed it all to the back of his mind as Sirius ushered him into the Treasure Team's research room.

He hid a yawn as he looked around. The narrow room was wall to wall books and he couldn't help but think that Hermione would give her wand arm to read them all. The central bench was filled with stacks of parchment and more books. The smell of old parchment and ink was strong and underscored to Harry how much he didn't fit in there.

A pensieve had been placed at the end of the bench and Harry watched as Bill extracted his memory and placed it inside the bowl. The blonde woman next to him had been introduced as Caro and the
shy old wizard next to her as Lawrence. Bertie and Amelia stood at the back of the room along with an Auror called Wood who was Oliver's cousin and who would be helping to keep watch on the mission. Sirius stood beside Harry with a grim expression and Remus was behind him, calm but no less serious. Everybody was in muggle clothes ready for the mission except Lawrence and Amelia who would once again be staying behind in the DOM.

"OK," Caro said briskly, "we're going to go into the memory and review it so everyone has a good idea what happened the last time. Then we'll plan what we're going to today."

Harry nodded, a little intimidated by Caro who was very beautiful, smart and who had been a spy. But planning sounded good. He'd never really had a plan before. Most of the time, he had just winged it. It had worked out but a plan couldn't hurt.

Bill gave him an encouraging smile and a moment later Harry was in the pensieve watching the memory. It was not so much terrifying (although the end bit in the house with the big black snakes had been terrifying) but creepy; very creepy. Harry shivered as he exited the pensieve and he felt Sirius's hand land warmly on his shoulder in response.

"So, we have been talking about a plan of attack for today." Lawrence said, whipping a cover off a blackboard and levitating it so everyone could see it.

The outside area was depicted on one side and the floor plan of the Gaunt house on the other; dotted lines in different colour chalks represented the wards and small wriggly lines in green were obviously meant to represent the snakes; an X was placed where Bill had found the box under the floorboard.

"First off, we will portkey to a spot about two hundred yards from the outer ward, here." Caro tapped the area with her wand.

"We can get through this outer ward with the neutralizer." Bill said. "We know that and we're confident that we can make it to the front door without setting off a snake attack."

"It's getting through the door that's the problem." Caro said dryly.

"We think it's a parseltongue password that will work." Lawrence said brightly.

"So what do you think?" asked Bill.

Harry glanced at Sirius who gave him an encouraging nod. "Well, I think we should talk to the snakes outside the house."

"Talk to the snakes!" Bertie exclaimed, clapping his hands. "Of course!"

Harry glanced over to the Head of the DOM who was dressed in a Barbour jacket, flat cap and sturdy brown brogues. He reminded him of a picture he'd once seen of the Royal family out hunting in Scotland.

"But the snakes outside the house are common adders!" Caro pointed out. "They're probably not the same ones that Riddle originally bound there."

"Maybe, maybe not." Bertie replied before Harry could. "But unless Harry talks to them we don't know that they don't know anything. If they have information we can use so much the better."

"What if they don't know anything?" asked Bill.

"I think Tom would probably pick something similar to the Chamber as a password." Harry said in a
rush of Gryffindor courage.

"Of course," Lawrence nodded his head, his stringy grey hair flying everywhere, "the deeds use Salazar as a name and this is the abode of his direct ancestors."

"Makes sense." Bertie agreed.

"Plan C if we can't go through the front door?" Remus asked.

Bill sighed. "I guess we go through the window same as last time. We should direct one fully charged neutralizer in with wands so it doesn't hit the floor…"

"One of us needs to catch the broken window before it hits the floor too." Caro added.

"…and then Caro can fly in through the window in her animagus form to make an assessment." Bill added.

"After that we regroup and replan based on the findings." Caro said. "We'll take along the pensieve."

"We'll need to the assessment even if we get through the front door." Lawrence pointed out. "We can't just expect to walk in, remove the floorboard and get the box."

"He's right." Bill said. "So assessment either way and then we plan again?"

They all nodded.

Bertie clapped his hands. "Then I suggest we meet in the reception room in ten minutes to disembark? Excellent."

Harry let himself be ushered to the gents for a final toilet break. He was issued an emergency portkey by Lawrence but Sirius took it back and told him to use his Heir ring; it would take him straight to Black Manor.

Sirius caught his arm before they entered the reception room. "You still up for this, Harry?" He said softly. "It's OK if you're not."

"I want to try." Harry said. Nerves were crowding in on him but he had told Sirius the absolute truth: he wanted to try.

Sirius gave him a long considering look and nodded. "OK, then."

The portkey travel was uncomfortable and Harry was only prevented from landing on the ground by Sirius's firm grip on him. Remus shot him a sympathetic look. They made their way slowly to the Gaunt house.

Harry's first impression echoed Darren's in the memory; it really was a hovel. A small squat place that looked grimy and downtrodden. Slytherin must have rolled over in his grave at how low his descendants had fallen.

Bill extracted two neutralizers from his pack handing one to Caro. Sirius, Remus and Bertie all had their wands out as did Wood.

"I have the watch." Wood said briskly. "Good luck."

Bertie nodded to Bill who tossed the neutralizer through the first ward. As the ripple of green faded they all took a quick step forward. Just as in the memory they all stopped and waited in case
something happened. Nothing did.

Harry made straight for the steps where just as in the memory a small adder was slithering away.

"Wait!" He called out.

The snake stopped and turned, rising up and sending its tongue out to sense Harry properly. "A speaker! A speaker here at last!" It swayed back and forth in excitement. "I have to get Mother!"

And slid away before Harry could stop it.

"Incredible!" Bertie looked beside himself with glee. "What did you say? What did it say?"

"I asked for it to wait, it got very excited about me being a speaker," Harry grimaced as he pointed at the undergrowth, "and it went to get its Mother."

Sirius chuckled and Harry managed a small smile acknowledging the ludicrousness of the situation.

"Let's hope she's not like my Mum!" Bill said with a wink.

The bush rustled and they all had their wands out and pointed as a large adder appeared. It stopped at the sight of the many wizards and witch before it.

"It's very old," Bertie said quietly, casting surreptitiously, "a magically enhanced life; I read strong binding spells for the snake and its offspring with an inbred compulsion to attack when their bodies receive a magical shock from the wards. Nasty."

"Who is the speaker?" She said.

"I am." Harry replied, lowering his wand. He crouched down. "Hi there."

"You are not the one who bound me." The snake said, regarding him with a beady stare.

"No," Harry agreed, "I just wanted to talk with you."

The snake considered him for a long moment. "I do not believe it wise. I spoke with the Other and he promised many things and I knew no more. I woke up one day to find my hatchlings and I are prisoners in this place. Almost no prey comes near now and my hatchlings all die."

"Wait, please!" Harry said as the snake made to leave. "I can help you!"

"How can you help me? You are nothing but a hatchling!" Her upper body rose off the ground.

"Harry?" Sirius murmured worriedly.

"It's OK. Tom lied to her so she's not keen on talking." Harry adjusted his weight, placing a knee on the ground to steady himself. "I am fated to kill the Other you speak of. When I do, you and your hatchlings will be free. But I need your help."

The snake inched forward. "Speak then."

"The Other created objects to help him escape death. When I was a baby, he tried to kill me and the magic of my mother and father helped me destroy his body but thanks to these objects his spirit lives." Harry gestured towards the house. "We believe he left one of them here. We need to destroy it so he becomes mortal and can be killed."

"You speak truly. I sense the protection in your blood," the snake replied.
"Will you help me?" Harry asked bluntly, unsure what else he could say.

"I will help you, hatchling." The snake lowered her body back to the ground and settled into a coil. Her hatchlings gathered behind her, all of them viewing the wizards and witch that watched them with wary curiosity.

"She's agreed to help." Harry explained to everyone quickly.

"Good work, Harry." Bertie said.

Harry blushed at the praise especially when Sirius beamed proudly. He sat fully on the ground, crossed his legs and turned back to the snake. "So what can you tell me?"

"I was young and on a hunt. I came across this place and a young man spoke to me. Speakers are so rare! I was honoured. He offered to let me nest by the undergrowth and asked me to guard his ancestral home. He said he would bring prey to me and prey came. My hatchlings and I were safe."

The snake recalled. "One day he returned with a gold box. It smelled of dark and evil. He took the box into the house and placed it within. He made everything glow too bright especially the door and then he left again. I tried to leave to get away from the foul stench of darkness that pervaded the house, but could not. He returned four cycles of light and dark with another snake – one who does not belong. She claimed she was his familiar. He took her into the house but he did not bring her out again. He pointed his stick at me and...I knew no more for a long time."

"Harry?" Remus prompted gently.

Harry quickly relayed her explanation.

Bertie flicked his wand in a complicated manner and frowned. "There is a faint signature of a prey luring charm used in hunting but it has faded. I can re-establish it as a show of good faith to your friend."

Harry relayed the news to the snake who thanked him – the snakes around her whispered happily of food.

"Can you ask her for the password to the house?" Bill suggested.

Harry nodded. "What did the Other say to gain entrance when he returned with his familiar?"

"Give entrance to the Greatest of Slytherins!" The snake said in a disparaging tone that made Harry want to laugh as he relayed it to the others.

"Thank you. Is there anything else you can tell me about inside?" Harry asked.

"She inside is awake again."

"She inside is awake again," The snake said. "I heard her cries last night. He has forsaken her for another. Their bond is broken."

"You have been very helpful." Harry praised her. He turned around and repeated what she'd told him.

"Is there anything else you want me to ask her?"

His companions exchanged silent looks of query but shook their heads finally.

"No," Bertie said, "but she has been magnificent. Please tell her we owe her a great debt and that food will come back now. Ask if we may obliviate her."

Harry did and the snake hissed unhappily.
"Hatchling, if you take away our memories I may not be able to stop my kin from attacking you."
The snake said. "Do not erase my memories; I will not betray you. I will help you with the one within."

Harry thanked her again. She turned around and told the others to return to the dark of the bushes and scrub while Harry informed Bertie of her answer.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" Bertie said.

Bill cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you've thought about curse-breaking as a profession, Harry?"

Harry grinned at him.

"Please don't give him any ideas," Sirius begged but he winked at Harry to show he was teasing, "I'm hoping he takes after your brother."

"You want him to look after dragons?" joked Bill.

Caro snorted and Harry chuckled at Sirius's mock outrage.

"I meant a nice job at the Ministry looking after cauldron bottoms." Sirius rejoined, smirking.

Harry took Remus's hand so he could haul him to his feet. "Are we ready for the door?"

"Is your lady friend ready for the door?" Sirius asked, motioning towards the mother adder who remained still lest she scare the humans.

Harry asked her to join him and she requested that he pick her up. He told everyone before they reacted badly to his stooping down so she could wind her way up one arm, her head peeking over his shoulder.

"Right," said Sirius, trying to pretend everything was fine and Harry wasn't carrying a poisonous snake, "shall we?"

"Your sire fears for you."

"He's a worrywart." Harry replied affectionately.

"You are his hatchling. He would give his life for you." The snake admonished him.

"Yes, Mother." Harry said seriously, the name slipping out. "I know. I love him too."

"But have you told him yet, hatchling?" Mother said.

Harry flushed and shook his head.

"Then you should." Mother made something like a tsking sound. "Males. Always so very slow."

Harry noticed everyone was looking at him again. He blushed bright red and was very happy nobody else knew what the snake had said. "We're ready." He covered briskly.

"Are you sure that's all she said?" Remus teased.

Harry decided silence was his best defence and walked up to the door.

"Wands out." Caro said firmly.
Sirius stood beside Harry, his hand on Harry's free shoulder. "When you're ready, Harry."

He focused on the snake door knocker and gathered his courage. "Give entrance to the Greatest of Slytherins!" He hissed.

The door knocker moved of its own accord and knocked on the door three times. The door suddenly opened up with a loud creak, drifting inwards.

Sirius tugged Harry to the side so Bill could run the scanning charms.

"All the wards are down. There's a snake curled up in a corner of the room to the left." Bill said briskly. "Uh-oh. She's on the move. You're up again, Harry."

Sirius tensed beside him as a dark shape slithered into view.

"Master! You came back for me! You..." The snake stopped suddenly in the sunlight the open door had let in and rose up, her hood flaring. "You are not my Master!"

"The Other has left us!" Mother replied before Harry could. She snaked down Harry's arm and pooled onto the floor of the house. "The Other lied and mistreated us!"

"No! Master will return for Lamia!"

"Your bond is broken!" Mother countered, her own body rising to sway at the same height as the cobra's. "He has chosen another! You wept all night about it!"

"It does not matter! My allegiance is to him!" And without further warning the cobra moved fast as a whip to strike at Mother.

"NO!" Harry yelled even as Mother avoided the attack, smacking the back of the cobra's head with her tail as she darted to the side. He couldn't let Lamia hurt Mother...

His magic rushed through him like a flooded river...

Harry put his hand out toward Lamia as though to push her away from Mother and the Black family magic responded to his call, the silver snake totem shot out from his hand to land between the adder and the cobra...

"Bind the cobra! Protect Mother!" Harry ordered without thinking.

The silver snake rose up and the cobra realised her mistake – she tried to get away but the silver snake bound her tightly within its coils.

Harry stood shaking within the doorway.

Sirius's hand squeezed his shoulder tightly. "Harry?"

"The cobra is Lamia. She wants to stay faithful to her master. She was going to hurt Mother so...I just reacted and the Black snake came!" Harry explained quickly.

"You see the power of the One you have refused?" Mother hissed at the cobra. "His magic binds you."

Lamia deflated but remained defiant. "I will not betray my Master! Not even for one whose blood smells like an Old One!"
Harry wondered if that had something to do with the basilisk.

"Then you are a fool." Mother said. "Your Master left you here! Deserted you! Has chosen another more worthy!"

"No!" Lamia snapped futilely in Mother's direction. "He gave me a great honour! He brought me here to protect his treasure! He will come back for me!"

"He has left you many cycles!" Mother argued.

"No! Just one! He put me to sleep last cycle and I woke when someone tried to steal his treasure!"

"He put you to sleep many cycles ago and left you!" Mother said harshly. "If he returns, he will only kill you and retrieve the dark, evil thing he placed here!"

Lamia snapped her jaws shut and didn't say anything more.

Harry cleared his throat. "Lamia refuses to believe she's been deserted. She's faithful to Tom. Mother can't convince her. It sounds as if she was put in an enchanted sleep and just woke up yesterday when Bill and Caro made it into the house."

Mother made her way back to Harry and he stooped so she could return to her previous position, wound around her arm and looking over his shoulder.

"You should kill her." Mother said. "She does not belong and she will tell the Other."

"Mother says Lamia will tell Tom everything so we should, uh…" Harry gestured weakly.

"Can you continue to keep Lamia bound while we make a decision, Harry?" Bertie asked.

Harry nodded. "I think so."

"Sirius? Remus?" Bertie asked immediately. "What do you think?"

Remus cleared his throat at the bottom of the steps. "She's too dangerous to keep around so keeping everything in its place is now out as a plan."

"We could make it look like she died from natural causes." Sirius suggested. "The enchanted sleep was obviously broken by the floor trigger being activated. What if we lobbed a rock through the window – made it look like kids fooling around had vandalised the place?"

"That could work. But we'd have to put the prey enchantment back to its former broken state to make it clear the magic was breaking down." Caro argued. She looked at Harry strangely and he flushed under her regard as he realised she mustn't have known about his ability to call the family magic forth so easily.

Harry yanked his thoughts back to the problem and bit his lip. "We promised Mother that she would have prey for the hatchlings. I'm sure it's why she helped us so much."

"We can have Kreacher and Dobby bring prey every week until Voldemort is toast." Sirius assured him. "I think this is our best bet. Make him think that the magic weakened if he turns up. If we do it right he'll assume there was an accident and his snake ended up dead."

"It will take a lot to kill Lamia and make it look like a natural death from starvation." Bertie said quietly.
"The Black magic can do it." Sirius turned to Harry. "You'll need to hand control back to me by offering me your ring hand." He smiled. "We don't want you exhausted for your birthday party later."

Harry frowned and was about to argue that he could do it but he met Sirius's worried grey eyes and the words died unspoken. Sirius wanted to spare him the death of the snake and it didn't matter to Sirius that Harry had killed a basilisk, he wanted to protect him.

And maybe that wasn't so bad.

Harry didn't really want to kill the snake and he did want to be OK for his party…maybe it was OK to let Sirius slay the snake. Hadn't Sirius made Harry promise to try and believe that he didn't have to do it all himself?

"I just offer you my ring hand?" checked Harry.

"And mentally let go of the magic." Sirius added. The tension in his face eased and Harry knew Sirius was pleased that Harry hadn't argued with him.

Harry nodded.

"OK, so we have a plan." Remus said.

They all moved back into position. Harry explained what was going to happen to Mother who agreed with him that Lamia needed to be put out of her misery if they wanted to defeat 'the Other.'

Sirius stood in the doorway to the house and Harry stood off to the side. He offered his hand to Sirius who clasped it firmly. Harry willed the Black magic return to Sirius's control.

The snake totem raised its head in mute query all the while keeping Lamia bound.

"Please." Harry instructed it. "Padfoot will instruct you from here."

The totem hissed its agreement.

Sirius grimaced and a line appeared between his brows as he concentrated. The totem flared a brilliant silver, covering Lamia entirely, before disappearing into mist that drifted away and leaving the carcass of Lamia behind.

Sirius staggered a little and Harry steadied him with a hand on his elbow as they were less than politely shoved aside by Caro so she could perform a scanning charm.

"Perfect. It looks like the snake died of starvation." Caro said crisply. "You two should return to the outside while Bill and I retrieve the box."

Harry hovered beside Sirius as they made their way down the steps, Bill jogged up the steps with a wide grin.

"I think I'm just going to sit down." Sirius said, lowering himself to the grass.

Remus surreptitiously performed a healing diagnostic. "You need to rest a bit, Padfoot."

Harry sat down beside his adoptive father and Mother slithered down his arm, curling up beside him in the sunshine.

"Well," Bertie walked over with a smile, "I've reset the prey enchantment as Caro suggested so it is
broken again."

"We've got it!" Bill called out. He held a small gold box in his hands. "Caro and I think it would be better to open the box in a controlled environment in the DOM."

"Agreed." Bertie said. He waited until Caro was clear before he flicked his wand at the door and closed it with a magical pull.

Caro immediately whipped out her wand to check the wards. "Everything's back to how it was."

"Well, that's our cue to leave." Remus helped Sirius to his feet.

"You should get clear, Harry." Bill agreed. "We don't know what will happen when we throw the rock through the window."

Harry turned to Mother. "I have to leave now. The others will throw a rock through the window to help explain Lamia's death."

"If the Other comes back, I will tell him that hatchlings were responsible." Mother said.

"We'll send a house elf with your food, I promise." Harry said.

"Come back when it is over, hatchling, and tell me of the Other's death." Mother slithered away before Harry could say anything further.

Remus nudged Harry and Harry stood. Sirius looked really pale and worn. "Are you OK?"

"Just tired." Sirius reassured him. He slung an arm around Harry's shoulder. "Come on. Let's leave them to it."

Bertie took a neutralizer from Caro and tossed it to Wood as they all left Caro and Bill to finish up. Remus suggested they walk back to the original portkey landing site and Bertie agreed. A few minutes later, the others arrived. Bill had thrown the rock from just inside the outer ward but the adders hadn't attacked.

Their arrival back in the DOM was anticlimactic. They all made their way to the research room and Bill placed the gold box down on the central bench and talked Harry through the diagnostic scans they were performing while Bertie sent for a strengthening potion for Sirius and Sirius swallowed it without complaint.

Lawrence stepped back eventually and pushed a hand through his long straggly hair. "The box doesn't seem to have any charms, curses or hexes. It's clean."

"I concur." Caro said.

"As do I." Bill said.

Bertie nodded. "We should open it and check the contents are what we believe them to be!"

He unlocked the box with a simple unlocking charm and the lid flew off to land on the desk, the ring rising up to levitate just above the box. A strange rush of need suffused Harry.

He needed to get to the ring.

He needed to put it on.
He needed…

Why?

Why did he need to get to the ring and put it on? It was like the diary. It contained a version of Voldemort – surely that was bad?

Harry stalled mid-step and suddenly became aware of a panicked Sirius calling his name just as Sirius's arms wrapped around him.

Harry leaned into Sirius shakily. "It's OK. I'm OK."

Which was more than could be said for everyone else in the room.

Lawrence was wrestling with Bertie, Amelia with Caro, and Remus was dragging Bill towards the door.

"It's the ring!" Harry said.

Sirius reached around Harry, waved his wand and sent the lid sailing back to the box; a second wave of the wand later and the ring was pushed back into the box and the lid was back on.

Everyone stopped.

Amelia and Caro disengaged, smoothing their clothing and looking abashed. Lawrence and Bertie righted themselves briskly. Remus immediately let go of Bill who thanked him for the assist.

"So a compulsion charm on the ring." Bertie said, straightening his jacket as they all gathered back around the bench, keeping a wary watch on the box.

"And probably a very nasty curse if you put it on." Lawrence agreed.

Bertie looked over at Remus. "You weren't affected?"

Remus shook his head. "For a second but the wolf in me knew it was a trap immediately."

"And you?" Bertie turned to Sirius who still had an arm around Harry's shoulders.

Sirius glanced at Harry. "As soon as Harry started toward the ring, my concern was for him."

"Your protective instincts as a parent overrode the ring's compulsion. Impressive." Lawrence commented.

Bill pointed at Harry. "Did you break the compulsion?"

Harry nodded slowly. "It didn't make any sense to me. I mean why would I want to put the ring on when it's his?"

"Well, that bodes well for you being able to break the Imperius curse." Amelia said briskly.

"There was something odd about the stone." Lawrence began.

Sirius cleared his throat. "May I suggest we table this for the day? Remus can help you out over the course of next week as he's not affected by the compulsion."

"Sounds like an excellent idea." Bertie grinned at Harry. "I believe somebody has a birthday today?"
Harry flushed and nodded. They left on a flurry of birthday wishes for Harry and made their way to Griffin House where Sirius excused himself for a nap. Harry watched him head upstairs with concern. This was why he preferred doing things himself, Harry thought worriedly; he didn't want anyone getting hurt because of him.

"Don't worry," Remus said, "Padfoot will be fine." He patted Harry on the shoulder. "Why don't you go up and have a rest too? I'm sure you're going to need your energy later."

He sighed but knew Remus was right. He made for the stairs.

"Harry…"

Harry looked back at Remus who smiled at him proudly.

"You were brilliant today. We're very proud of you."

Harry smiled, warmed at the praise and the sense of delight that Remus's words evoked deep inside him. They had another of Voldemort's horcruxes and Harry had helped. It was an excellent birthday present.
Sirius watched Harry flying and tried to be sang-froid about the tricks and speed his son was capable of doing. Harry was fine; he was a good flyer like James. He wasn't going to fall off his broom or crash or…

Sirius leaned against the tree, folded his arms and looked over as Bill approached with some pumpkin juice.

"Thank you." Sirius said, accepting the glass of chilled liquid with a pleased smile. He still felt tired from the magic he'd performed but he didn't want to ruin Harry's first birthday with him and so had gone ahead with their plans as though nothing was wrong.

"Harry's giving Charlie a run for his galleon." Bill commented, looking up and shading his eyes as the players weaved in and out of each other. "I haven't seen anyone fly as good as him before but Harry is definitely in his league."

"I'm hoping Quidditch player is on his career list." Sirius admitted. "James wanted to play professionally but, well, with the war he thought he ought to sign-up as a Hit Wizard."

"I meant what I said earlier today; Harry would make a good curse-breaker." Bill commented and laughed at the dirty look Sirius gave him. "I was impressed with him." He fiddled with his drink. "I mean, learning the kid faced a basilisk to save my sister is one thing but actually seeing him deal with a situation that would send a lot of people twice his age running for the hills…"

"He's a very special kid." Sirius said gruffly, looking around to make sure Molly wasn't in earshot. She had been surprisingly courteous to him since they'd arrived, and had been polite the few times their path had crossed during the Longbottoms' party. Sirius was going with the assumption that someone had told her to be on her best behaviour. He wasn't going to risk endangering that by her finding out he'd allowed Harry to go into a dangerous situation.

"Well, I guess he's not so much a kid, but a young man at fourteen." Bill said, shielding his eyes to follow the flight of his brother. "I remember thinking I was an adult at that age no matter what my Mum said."

Sirius glanced at Bill speculatively. "How are you finding your service?"

Bill's head snapped to him in surprise. "To be truthful it doesn't feel like service." He admitted after thinking about it. "I'm doing a job I love for a cause that I fully support. My long term career isn't affected and while the Unspeakables and I aren't exactly sharing knowledge openly, it's not hard to pick up their tricks in the field. And I get a great place to stay into the bargain."

"Ah, London Street." Sirius said nostalgically. "That place has a lot of memories for me. James and I moved in after school; young, free and single – well, me; James was already engaged to Lily."

"I'll look after it." Bill promised.

"Don't forget to live in it too, Bill." Sirius advised. "The place was filled with a lot of fun and laughter. You'd be honouring the place if you made sure it was again."

Bill nodded.

"HE'S GOT THE SNITCH! HARRY'S GOT THE SNITCH!"
Ron's booming voice sounded out across the field.

Bill winced. "Got a pair of lungs on him, my youngest brother."

Sirius tucked his glass under his arm as he clapped while the players flew down. Neville who had been coerced into playing as a Beater was beaming happily; Ron was grinning ear to ear as was Harry. Susan looked chuffed to bits. The opposing team of the twins, Tonks and Charlie all looked chagrined.

Charlie gave a rueful grin as he landed. "Just as well I left before Potter here turned up at Hogwarts or I'd have lost my place on the team for sure."

Harry smiled back at him, dismounting. "I got lucky. I have the faster broom."

"It was skill." Charlie said.

Sirius smiled proudly and reached out to pat Harry's shoulder. "Well done, kiddo." He tried to hide the lingering tiredness he felt and figured he was only half-successful when Harry's eyes narrowed on him.

"I think we should probably have tea now." Harry declared.

"You're the boss." Bill said.

"And it's your birthday!" Fred and George said in unison.

Everyone chuckled but Sirius could see something flash across Ron's face – jealousy, maybe at the fact that Harry was Bill's boss in theory. But then Ron pulled Harry toward the Burrow and Sirius let it go; obviously whatever Ron felt had been fleeting. They made their way to the large trestle table just outside the Burrow's back door; it was adorned with goodies that Molly had laid out.

"Oh, lovely!" Molly beamed. "I was just about to call you all! Go wash up!"

The kids all exchanged knowing looks and headed inside. Hermione set a platter of sandwiches down. "Is there anything else you need doing, Mrs Weasley?"

"No, you and Ginny can sit down now dear." Molly said, directing them to seats on either side of the table.

"This looks marvellous, Molly." Andromeda said warmly. "You've outdone yourself."

Molly smiled proudly as everyone gathered to eat, the kids trickling back from a hasty wash of their hands. "Thank you, Andy. Ron, why don't you sit beside Hermione here along with Andy and Ted? Ah, there you are Tonks. You take this seat here beside Charlie and Bill…Susan, why don't you take the one between the twins along with Neville. Percy and Penny…ah, Harry, you're here next to Ginny, and Minerva if you'd like to sit at the end of the table here by Remus…"

Sirius caught Andy's eye and they both turned away again quickly rather than start laughing out loud at Molly's obvious match-making.

"Sirius, you're here next to Harry on his other side." Molly pointed to the empty seat and Sirius gave her a grateful smile seeing the gesture as the olive branch it clearly was. She sat beside Sirius as Arthur took his place at the head of the table. "Well, tuck in everybody!"

The meal was excellent. Sirius could admit that Molly was a fine cook. The high tea was a myriad of
pies, sandwiches and salads. A bench laden with desserts awaited them finishing their main course. The good food put them all in high spirits and the conversation was lively as the twins cajoled Remus into telling tales about the Marauders.

"Pranks!" Molly chided Remus. "Whatever were you thinking?"

"Good revision and practical application of spells." Remus promptly responded. "It certainly helped me ace my OWLs and NEWTs. The Prophet was right you know; Sirius was the top of our class overall, but I was top of Arithmancy, Sirius was top in DADA and Runes, James in Transfiguration. None of us could beat Lily for Charms or Severus for Potions but we came close. There's a lot of research and invention that goes into pranking. It was invaluable."

Fred and George exchanged a look that Sirius read all too well. They hadn't aced their OWLs – or probably had with the ones they wanted but had not paid attention to the rest – and were now worried about their mother's impending reaction because the results would be arriving any day. He'd overheard them whispering in the corner of the room about a joke shop and products. He wanted to help them since he thought it was an excellent idea but he figured Molly would kill him.

Remus pointed at the twins. "I'm pretty certain these two will ace their Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration OWLs. Don't you agree, Minerva?"

"I do." Minerva said, patting her mouth delicately with a napkin. "Your twins are very bright when they apply themselves, Molly."

Molly puffed up proudly.

"If they stay on and do well in their NEWTs, as the steward to two Ancient and Noble Houses who have produced members with a penchant for pranking, I might be predisposed to look over any business plans they might have for say, a joke shop?" Remus said casually.

Sirius almost choked on his juice. Only Moony could get away with that completely innocent look while being devious and conniving.

Fred and George were gazing with adoration at Remus while Molly looked torn since Remus, an ex-Professor no less, had made their planned career which she objected to in principle contingent on getting qualifications which she wanted more than anything. Minerva was hiding her smile in her napkin.

Harry leaned into Sirius. "Moony has to teach me how he does that whole innocence thing."

"Over my dead body," Sirius whispered back, "then you'd both be able to place the blame on me!" He winked at Harry who laughed quietly beside him.

An owl suddenly dove down to the table and landed beside Harry. The table quieted at the intrusion. Sirius didn't recognise it and placed his hand on Harry's arm to stop him taking the letter. "Do you recognise the owl?"

"No." Harry fed the owl a piece of ham in lieu of bacon. "I don't think it's a Hogwarts' owl and the letter doesn't have a seal."

"It's not from the Ministry either." Percy said officiously.

Sirius frowned. Harry's owl ward had been reset but he still shouldn't have received any owls from people he didn't know. "I should check this first."
Harry frowned unhappily and Sirius knew he was thinking of how tired Sirius was after the previous day's escapades.

Bill reached over to check the letter. "Here, let me. It is part of my job, after all." He waved his wand over the owl and the parchment. "No curses, hexes or jinxes."

"Well, that rules out the twins." Charlie said joking and trying to lighten the atmosphere.

"Looks clean. Shall I open and read it?" Bill asked.

Sirius hoped it was just some fan that had managed to find a way to send Harry a note but he didn't like the uneasy feeling in his gut and he didn't want Harry reading it first. "Go ahead."

Harry's frown deepened at the intrusion into his privacy and he sent a glare at Sirius but thankfully didn't argue after a sharp look from Andromeda.

Bill unrolled the parchment. His face paled under his freckles. "Remus, Sirius; you should see this." He threw an apologetic look at Harry when he made to object. "Let me show them first, Harry."

Sirius got out of his seat and walked around to Bill as did Remus. Sirius and Remus read the parchment over Bill's shoulder.

"Enjoy your birthday, Harry. It will be your last."

His blood ran cold and his wand was out immediately as was Remus's. He motioned for Bill to turn it over and they checked the back of the parchment.

"The Boy Who Lived, The Burrow."

Sirius froze; they hadn't included Harry's unofficial and unwanted title in the mail ward reset but evidently magic recognised it if a letter had gotten through.

"Bugger." Bill swore.

Sirius looked at Remus and knew their decision was made in complete agreement.

"I'm sorry but this is a threat and we're moving everyone to Black Manor, now!" Sirius said, scanning the far treeline and the sky. "Anyone underage grab onto Harry; Penelope, Minerva, you go with them. Harry, use your ring to portkey and get everyone to safety now! We'll be right behind you!"

Harry's eyes were wide with fear and apprehension but he did as Sirius asked as his friends crowded around him.

"But…" Molly protested as the kids and Minerva disappeared.

Arthur glanced at the note Bill continued to hold and blanched. "I'll raise the rest of the wards." He hurried inside.

Remus had already sent a patronus message off to the Aurors by the time Tonks asked to see the note.

Andy cleared her throat. "Molly, why don't we box everything up so we can take it to the Manor?"

Sirius was grateful to his cousin as she managed Molly through the work and into the house to deal with the rest of the food and Harry's presents. Ted followed along with his wife after Tonks refused
to leave on the basis that she was an Auror in training.

Remus nudged Sirius. "Take the others to the Manor and reassure Harry. We've got this. Bill and I can deal with the Aurors."

Sirius grabbed a plate and turned it into a portkey. He stepped into the Burrow and headed for Molly who had just finished packing.

"This is just terrible!" Molly wailed. "Who would do such a thing? And on his birthday?"

"I don't know but when I find out they're not going to be fully attached to their limbs for very long."

Sirius growled.

Molly's eyes met his and for once it seemed that they agreed fully with each other.

Sirius offered her the plate. "It's a portkey to the Manor. Andy, Ted?"

They hurried over carrying a box each. A second later, the whirl of the portkey deposited them in the reception room of Black Manor.

Penelope hurried in. "The kids are in the Summer room with Minerva."

Sirius nodded. "Thanks. Get Kreacher to set up the remains of the meal in the dining room, please. Molly, if you could come with me, Andy and Ted; we may have to calm the kids down."

Molly nodded. "What are you intending to tell the children?"

"The truth." Sirius said bluntly.

"It's too much for them!" Molly immediately argued.

"Molly, they already know." Ted said firmly. "Sirius telling them a pack of lies to try and cover up what happened will not help matters."

"You can't tell me that it's right that a thirteen year old boy finds out that someone wants him dead!"

Molly said furiously.

"He's fourteen," Sirius corrected tersely, "and Harry is already very aware that there are people in this world who are out there and ready to do him harm – he knows Peter's still at large for one thing!"

Molly bristled.

Andy moved forward and placed a comforting hand on her arm. "Molly, Sirius is right. Harry's situation isn't the same as another boy his age. Harry is too famous in our world and the Boy Who Lived is a target. His last three years at Hogwarts have already shown him that. To deny that there's a problem will only make him chafe against the protective restrictions I'm sure Sirius is about to place on Harry for the rest of the summer. If he understands the issue, he is likely to take better care not to sneak out or leave his guards behind."

For a long moment, Molly seemed to struggle with Andy's point of view but she suddenly subsided, nodding unhappily.

Sirius bit back words of anger and sarcasm that she was finally allowing him to do what he wanted with his son. He whirled away and headed for the Summer room.
Minerva had them all sitting down on the floor in a circle but they got up hurriedly as Sirius entered, Molly, Andy and Ted trailing in his wake.

"Where's Dad?" Ron demanded. "And my brothers?"

Fred and George nodded anxiously.

"They stayed behind to help guard the Burrow until the Aurors turned up." Sirius informed him briskly. He held up a hand. "Before you ask any more questions, let me explain."

They all gathered in front of him quietly, Minerva bringing up the rear.

"The letter that was sent made a rather nasty if implicit threat towards Harry – and no, Hermione, you don't need to know exactly what it said." Sirius said gravely, motioning for Hermione to put her arm down. "Obviously we have to take it seriously especially as it was obliquely addressed to Harry but specified the Burrow."

"So it was from somebody who knew Harry would be there today." Hermione surmised.

"Exactly." Sirius said. "Now, while it is more than likely today's note was a warning spell across a shield rather than notice of an imminent attack, better to be safe than sorry which is why we've moved venues. This place, while not being as cheery or as welcoming as the Burrow, is a veritable fortress and nobody need worry about being safe here."

"Have the Aurors been called?"

"Yes, and the rest of our missing party stayed behind to speak with them." Sirius said. "In the meantime, I think we should get on and celebrate Harry's birthday and show whoever it was who sent that note that they can't spoil our fun! What do you all say?"

A round of cheers, even if some of them were a little muted, agreed with him.

Molly attempted a smile. "The food is out in the dining room so why don't you all go finish up your meal?"

Ron led the way and the others followed at a more subdued rate, Molly, Ted and Andy chivvying them along.

Harry lagged behind. "What did it say?" He demanded when the rest of the party were out of the room.

Sirius sighed, debating inwardly about whether Harry needed to know the exact message. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes!" said Harry. "I should know! It was addressed to me! Bill shouldn't have read it first!"

"I acknowledge that someone else reading your mail is an invasion but it was warranted in this case," Sirius shot back, "and what use is knowing the exact words of the threat going to be to you, hmmm?"

Harry glared at him but eventually his shoulders slumped as he forced himself to think past his immediate want to know. "I just…was it bad?"

"Bad enough that I need a hug." Sirius opened his arms and Harry moved into the hug quickly. The feel of Harry alive eased his own worry greatly. "It's not as though we weren't aware before that
you're a target so it makes no real difference, but it is a bit scary and we're going to have to talk about security later. OK?"

Harry hugged him back.

"It's going to be OK, Harry." Sirius promised gruffly. He pressed a kiss to the top of Harry's head. "Come on. Let's go and celebrate your birthday."

Harry eased away from him without letting go and nodded. Sirius kept his arm around him and they both turned to the door and froze at the sight of Molly.

She had the grace to look embarrassed and pointed behind her. "We missed you and…well, I see you're on your way so…” she hurried away.

Sirius exchanged an amused look with Harry. They followed her into the dining room and Harry let Molly usher him into another seat by Ginny. Sirius rolled his eyes at him as he took the seat on the other side of Harry rather than his usual place at the top of the table.

By the time, the cake was on the table, everyone else from the Burrow had arrived along with Amelia who briefly confirmed everything was fine and the Burrow was secure. Eventually, the party wound down and the guests dispersed. A group remained behind and gathered in Sirius's study.

Sirius sat beside Harry on one sofa, Minerva sat in a chair, Bill perched on the desk while Remus and Amelia sat on the sofa opposite. Kreacher had popped in with drinks but they'd all eschewed food, stuffed from the spread Molly had cooked.

"What did the investigation turn up?" asked Sirius, sipping at his pumpkin juice.

"Well, firstly, the Aurors did a full sweep of the Burrow and the land beyond. No sign that anyone was poised to attack." Amelia assured them. "It looks like it was a warning but not a direct one."

"Dad's got all the wards up anyway and we're talking about putting it under Fidelius." Bill added. "But as the target is Harry…” he shrugged.

"Which leads us onto how someone knew Harry was going to be at the Burrow." Amelia set her tea aside. "Unfortunately, it only takes one slip of the tongue or one overheard conversation from a parent or a guest for someone to have known. I'm not certain it's worth tracking down who might have let it slip to others and what those others might have let slip to more people…"

"The fact is that we might never know who was overheard or who told the wrong person." Remus said. "Just a brief conversation with Arthur and Percy had them admitting that they'd both told their direct colleagues – Percy had informed Barty Crouch in an update to him and Arthur had mentioned they were having a party for Harry to his assistant Perkins." He motioned at Sirius. "And we can't throw stones either; we mentioned the party in front of Lawrence, Caro and Bertie earlier, and such information probably isn't covered by the confidentiality vow they took for their Treasure Team duties."

Sirius's anger mutated to chagrin. Remus was right; they had all been sloppy.

"Add to that the fact that the Burrow isn't under Fidelius which may have prevented the location being known even if someone spoke of the party…” Amelia shrugged. "Most of Arthur's colleagues have visited the Burrow at one time or another. Most of the Wizengamot knows where the Burrow is since many families live in the area. It's not a secure location."

"My Mum didn't really give Sirius and Harry a choice." Bill commented before Sirius could retort.
"I've stayed there before and nobody's sent me a threat." Harry pointed out with impeccable logic.

"True," Amelia allowed, "but unfortunately, the political atmosphere is tense and with the Dark Mark strengthening…"

"Someone decided to make a move." Minerva surmised with a frown.

"Possibly," Amelia sighed. "My best guess is that the note was sent by a Death Eater as a way to curry favour with his Master. Maybe as a response to the Mark darkening and twinging recently. Upset the birthday of the Boy Who Lived, create a bit of fear."

"But?" prompted Sirius.

"We checked in with the Rat Squad and none of the tagged Death Eaters sent the owl." Remus reported.

"We do know of one Death Eater who isn't tagged," Sirius said. "Dumbledore's spy." Dumbledore had flat out refused to have Severus tagged even to give him cover.

Remus's eyebrows shot up. "Severus may not like Harry but I don't see him sending a threatening note; it's not his style."

"I agree with Remus." Minerva said. "I can't see him doing something so petty."

"He takes points off me for breathing," Harry replied dryly, "I think he could be petty enough to want to spoil my birthday – especially the first one I'm spending with Sirius."

Bill cleared his throat. "Maybe it's his way of warning us that his Death Eater chums are getting frisky without being overt."

"He would have sent word through Albus." Remus argued. "I just don't see Severus as a viable suspect."

Sirius sniffed. He definitely saw Snivellus as a viable suspect.

"We should get Albus to check though." Amelia said. "We did do some checks on the parchment but all we found was a faint trace of house elf magic. Snape would have access to one at Hogwarts."

"The house elf thing would also seemingly rule out Pettigrew and Riddle," Bill said.

"Not necessarily." Sirius said. "They could be staying with someone with a house elf."

"Our surveillance hasn't uncovered any sign of any Death Eater actually being in contact with either." Amelia argued.

"So either they're staying with someone we don't know and haven't got tagged or they've bought a house elf or it wasn't them." Sirius went through the various options.

"Peter wouldn't have sent something like this." Remus commented.

"I'm not sure we know Wormtail all that well enough to make a judgement," Sirius replied snappishly, "he did pull the wool over our eyes for years."

"It is like Tom to send something like that." Harry said, silencing the room very effectively.

Sirius swallowed his pumpkin juice and wished it was Firewhiskey.
"Couldn't someone have used their house elf to send the letter even if you did tag them?" Harry asked, breaking the quiet.

"That's true too." Amelia said. "We can't tag the house elves. The magic won't stick to them."

"So we really don't have any idea who sent it." Sirius concluded.

"No." Amelia admitted with embarrassment. "All we can do officially is advise you to be on your guard and take sensible precautions."

"Well, thanks for trying to find out anyway." Harry sighed and turned to Sirius. "Can we go home?"

Sirius nodded. "Like Harry said, thank you, Amelia." He stood up with Harry.

"I'll see you at home." Remus said.

"Happy Birthday, Harry." Bill said as a goodbye and Minerva echoed it with a small smile.

"Thanks, everyone." Harry smiled tiredly and Sirius ushered him out and to the floo.

They had just stepped out of the floo when Harry hugged him unexpectedly.

"Thank you, Padfoot. This was still my best birthday ever." Harry said.

Sirius tightened his hold, too choked up to speak. Finally, Harry broke away and made for the stairs.

Sirius watched him go and swiped at his damp eyes, furious at the Dursleys and Dumbledore all over again that a birthday that included a hunt for a horcrux and a death threat could possibly be seen to be Harry's best ever.

o-O-o

"Did you really receive a death threat on your birthday?"

Harry was glad he hadn't taken a sip of his drink or he might have choked.

"Really, Jeremy?" Susan snapped. "That's what you're leading with?"

The fifth year Ravenclaw and Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Branstone sighed. "Our parents and or guardians have stuffed us into this room to get to know Potter better because of the new alliance. I assumed that meant we were allowed to ask questions, Bones."

Harry sneaked a look around the rest of the room – sixteen Heirs of varying ages from twelve to twenty and five related siblings of a similar age. The large conservatory of Longbottom Manor just about held the space for them all and the tea table set out with drinks and cookies. He tried to bear up under the collective weight of so many eyes. He was Lord Potter, Heir to the House of Black, he reminded himself. He had a duty to get to know everyone and at least he knew Neville, Susan and Hannah who had all grouped around him protectively. He glanced at Bill, another Heir in attendance that he knew; but Bill was there in service to the House of Potter as a guard for Harry and the House of Weasley wasn't formally part of the old Potter alliance.

"It's OK, Susan," Harry smiled at her gratefully though, "I don't mind answering."

Neville shifted beside him. "So long as people remember that you don't have to answer anything you don't want to – none of us do."

Jeremy nodded. "Fair enough."
Robert Ogden, a Hufflepuff who'd be entering his final year at Hogwarts that September and Tiberius's grandson, motioned at him. "So? Death threat? Yes or no?"

"Yes, there was an implied death threat on my birthday as the Prophet reported." Harry said. "No, I don't know what it said exactly. Sirius wouldn't tell me."

"You don't seem that freaked out." Alicia Doge said quietly. She was the oldest, a grand-niece of Elphias and his only living relative.

"I'm a target." Harry said bluntly. "Thanks to this." He lifted his fringe and revealed his scar.

"Are the rumours true about you killing Quirrell?" asked Terry Stebbins, eighteen, newly graduated and a Chaser for the Brighton Broomflyers. Harry had been hoping to talk to him about Quidditch.

Twelve year old Connor Sapworthy dropped his glass.

"Terry!" Albert Marchbanks, nineteen, and related to Griselda in a fourth cousin twice removed kind of way that made Harry's head hurt, dealt with the mess while Marcus Belby poured Connor another drink.

Michael Corner cleared his throat. "It's a valid question. I mean, we are supposed to be following the House of Potter and we need to know if, well, uh…"

"I killed someone?" asked Harry dryly.

"Yes." Michael said.

"Well, we already know he killed someone! He killed You-Know-Who," pointed out Lydia Inglebee, smiling at Harry sweetly while her twin brother, the Heir, made a gagging gesture behind her; they were both a year behind Harry at Hogwarts, "and he's a hero. If he killed Quirrell it's because he was a Dark Wizard."

"Quirrell?" Robert snorted. "He couldn't find his own arse without stuttering!"

Connor dropped his glass again.

Bill walked over and spelled the glass impermeable. He cast a look at Harry that asked if he needed help but Harry shook his head a touch to decline. As much as he wanted to tell Michael and Terry to shove it, they had a point. And he had to get used to dealing with these types of questions; he'd already had variants of them at the dinners with the Heads of their Houses although Sirius usually ran interference.

"Quirrell was possessed. That's what killed him according to the Headmaster." Harry said simply. "My friends and I just stopped possessed-him being able to steal something from the school."

"It was still very brave of you to go after him." Lydia said – and was she actually fluttering her eyelashes at him?

"Actually my friends and I thought it was Snape." Harry admitted sheepishly.

Terry grinned and raised his glass to him. "Balls of steel then! Not many of us would have faced him down!"

"I'm sure after You-Know-Who Snape is nothing." Lydia said.

Harry shot Neville a 'save me' look but it was Susan who stepped in.
"I'm sure Harry doesn't want to dwell." Susan said sharply enough that Harry was reminded of her aunt.

"Do you remember that night when you offed You-Know-Who?" asked Michael.

Harry felt the horror and revulsion of having to even think about that night arrow through him again but before he could respond…

"Corner!" Bill's hard voice resounded across the room. "That's enough!"

"Exactly," Neville glared at Michael, "you wouldn't ask me if I remember the night my parents were tortured so why would you ask Harry that?"

Michael went bright red and he muttered an apology.

But Robert scowled at Bill. "We are supposed to be getting to know him, Weasley."

"Getting to know him, yes, Ogden." Bill said with the same hardness to his tone that warned the boy not to push him. "Satisfying your prurient curiosity about certain events in his life, no." He pointed his wand at Harry. "For instance, nobody's asked him about what he fancies doing as a career. Or what his favourite subject is. Or what his views on the Quidditch league are."

The group turned in a mostly chastised mass back to Harry who shot Bill a look of thanks.

"And there was I thinking we'd gotten rid of the Harry guards." Terry said in a loud whisper.

"Guards?" asked Harry confused.

"Ron and Hermione." Neville supplied.

Susan nodded. "They're very protective over you."

"Although," Neville said, glaring at Michael again, "if that's the type of crap questions you have to put up, who can blame them."

"I said sorry!" Michael retorted huffily.

"I guess they are quite protective of me." Harry acknowledged, thinking of his two friends. "The first few months at Hogwarts everybody kept staring at me, and in second year, there was the whole thing about me being a parselmouth."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Susan exchanged an embarrassed look with Hannah.

"I think parseltongue sounds sexy." Lydia said, inching closer.

Harry tried to shake the feeling of being trapped. "It all sounds like English to me."

"Really?" Michael asked. "That's fascinating. I read a book that theorised that parseltongue couldn't be taught because it was a magical interpretative charm that Salazar keyed to his blood that automatically changed the hissing into speech. It sounds like the book might be right."

"But wouldn't that make Harry the Heir of Slytherin?" Hannah argued. "And didn't we establish he wasn't?"

"Tom Riddle is the Heir of Slytherin." Harry said firmly. "Otherwise known as Voldemort."
Many in the room flinched.

"We think when he attacked me there was a magical transference because of this." Harry explained, once again lifting his fringe and revealing the faint scar.

"I wish I could talk to snakes." Connor piped up. "We have a garden snake that lives under the apple tree."

"The first snake I talked to was a boa constrictor at a zoo." Harry told him, grateful for Connor's intervention. "He was very bored at just being stared at all day."

"Did he say anything else?" asked Connor, his brown eyes shining with curiosity.

"Well, he thanked me for freeing him although I didn't really mean to." Harry said with a small laugh. "My cousin pushed me and I accidentally magicked the glass away from the snake's enclosure."

There were quite a few chuckles in the room.

"How was it growing up with muggles?" Robert asked, toying with his empty glass.

Harry tensed again at the question but forced himself into giving a shrug. "OK. I prefer living with Sirius."

"I guess it gives you a unique insight, doesn't it?" Alicia said, thinking out loud. "You're the Head of a powerful Ancient and Noble House who effectively knows what it's like to be a muggleborn in the wizarding world."

"I guess." Harry said doubtfully.

"OK," Albert said, "now it's getting interesting. What are your thoughts on being muggleborn in wizarding society?"

Harry glanced at Neville who gave him an encouraging look, one that said he'd back Harry up. This was the kind of the thing they'd debated in Sirius's politics lessons. He took a deep breath.

"I think it's harder than it needs to be." He waved a hand to stop anyone interrupting. "My relatives were afraid of magic so they didn't tell me what my accidents were and I thought, well, I thought I was a freak." He blushed hard but ignored the heat on his cheeks to continue. "Now, my relatives knew it was magic but didn't tell me because they were scared. The parents of normal muggleborns probably don't know though so there's no way of reassuring their kids."

"You think we should get involved earlier then? As soon as accidental magic is detected?" Albert questioned.

"Won't that endanger the Statute of Secrecy more?" argued Robert.

"I would say it would protect it more," Neville chipped in confidently, "if we provide early assistance, we provide reassurance and can help the parents ensure other instances are kept to a minimum."

"And we can help prepare them for entering the wizarding world better." Harry warmed up to his argument. "I was really overwhelmed when I was told so I didn't know what to ask and everything was very confusing."
"Muggleborns get the introduction booklet don't they?" Robert said dismissively. "That should be enough."

"The booklet isn't very good." Hannah spoke up. "I'm a halfblood because Mum's muggleborn and she showed me her copy. It's an outline of the government set-up, the directions to Diagon Alley and Saint Mungo's, and then mostly about Hogwarts but then it's just the classes and a brief history."

"Is that all? That's appalling!" Michael said. "There should be a proper book…"

"We and Hermione were thinking primary schools for wizarding children." Harry said, pointing at himself and Neville. It had been the idea they'd come up with during their last politics session.

Albert smirked. "I see it didn't take long for the Houses of Potter and Longbottom to regain their former closeness."

"We stand together as always," Neville said simply.

"And besides Neville and I godbrothers." Harry added, defensively. "We're practically family."

"I like the idea of a wizarding primary school." Hannah said. "My Mum made me go to a muggle one and it was great. If we had a wizarding one, I think that would be marvellous."

"Maybe one day Abbott, Granger, Longbottom and Potter will be to primary education what Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Slytherin are to secondary." Alicia teased.

Harry smiled back at her. "I can think of worst things to do with my life."

"What do you fancy doing as a career?" Terry asked, butting into the conversation.

Harry darted a look at Terry. "I haven't really decided but I was thinking Quidditch player or broom racer."

"Oh, you'd be brilliant!" Terry said immediately.

"I don't know if I'm that good." Harry said modestly.

"You're the youngest seeker in a century." Jeremy pointed out. "And you're undefeated – well, apart from that match against Diggory but that wasn't your fault. You're likely to get try-outs by seventh year if you continue."

"I think that would be a marvellous career! You look smashing in your Quidditch gear." Lydia exclaimed, flicking her long blonde hair over her shoulder.

Susan sent her a dirty look. "Harry could do a lot more good staying in politics or becoming an Auror."

"Is that what you want to do Susan?" Harry asked quickly, taking the opportunity presented to throw off attention from himself.

"I was thinking law." Susan replied.

Harry's questioning gaze went to Hannah who blushed. "Healer, probably."

Robert shifted as Harry looked at him. "I'll be taking over Ogden's. Firewhiskey doesn't make itself."

"I was thinking of the Ministry. I'd like to get into the DOM as a researcher." Jeremy said.
"I'm a mediwitch at Saint Mungo's." Alicia supplied.

Everyone else chimed in and the range of careers and ambitions was impressive and gave Harry food for thought about his own future.

Lydia had waited until last. "I'm going to be a wife and mother."

Her brother dropped his head into his hands.

"Well, that's a valid choice." Alicia said kindly. "Motherhood is a wonderful thing." She glanced at Harry and winked at him. "Are you going to be arranged, Harry?"

Harry avoided Lydia's stare and shook his head at Alicia. "Sirius said my Mum would come back and hex him. He's giving everyone the freedom to choose for themselves."

"So that's why Parkinson's arrangement with Malfoy was dissolved?" Michael asked. "You know she's furious."

"She probably sent the death threat!" joked Jeremy.

Harry smiled. He wished it had been Pansy but he suspected it was Tom.

"So you're not arranged to the Granger girl then?" asked Lydia bluntly. "Because you've been seen everywhere with her this summer."

Harry frowned at the slight to Hermione. "She's with me because she's my best friend and she's under the sponsorship of the House of Black."

"My Dad said Lord Black announced it at the July Session." Terry said. "Said it was a repayment of a life debt."

There was a hint of a question and Harry nodded. "She helped me save Sirius from the Dementors at Hogwarts."

"So she got sponsorship?" sniffed Lydia.

"That's our plan B." Neville said. "If we don't get a wizarding primary school system, then more families sponsoring muggleborns would be the way to go."

Harry smiled his thanks at Neville for turning the conversation back to the muggleborn discussion.

"Does it really make that much of a difference?" Michael asked, genuine interest colouring his words.

Harry nodded. "Hermione's parents said that they didn't know what to ask when Professor McGonagall turned up. They're very happy since Andy has been sponsoring Hermione because they have someone they can talk to and who will help them understand things."

"My Gran is thinking of sponsoring a muggleborn now. If all the houses did it…" Neville said.

"Yes, but sponsorship is a serious business." Albert remarked. "There is a commitment involved. Not every House is as well-placed to offer sanctuary and protection as the Houses of Black, Potter and Longbottom."

"Maybe not." Neville countered. "But we could time limit the sponsorship to the school years or even simply their introductory year."
"I think it's a good idea." Hannah said. "I might ask Dad to look into it. Mum would go for it for sure."

"I agree," Jeremy said, "I think it's a splendid idea."

"Count me in." Alicia said enthusiastically.

"Speaking of life debts," Michael threw a look towards Bill, "is there another one to be announced?"

Harry looked at Bill seeking his permission.

Bill cleared his throat. "You're right, Corner. I'm sworn to serve the House of Potter to repay the life debt between Harry and my sister."

"So that story of you saving Ginny Weasley in the Chamber of Secrets is true?" Jeremy whistled.

"She's my best mate's sister!" Harry said quickly. "I'm sure any of you would have done the same."

"I think it was terribly heroic!" Lydia said on cue.

Harry smiled tightly.

"When you think about it we all owe you a life debt." Michael said idly, waving his cookie in the air. "You know for offing You-Know-Who."

Connor fumbled his glass but kept hold of it. Harry offered him a smile and Connor grinned back at him triumphantly.

"He's right." Jeremy said.

"I don't think life debts work that way," Harry said diplomatically, "and we think both my Mum and my Dad helped me."

"It doesn't change the main principle though, does it?" Albert questioned thoughtfully. "We all owe the House of Potter. It sacrificed its Head, its Lady and almost its entire line to keep us safe." He frowned.

Harry squirmed uncomfortably.

"But isn't that why we're in the alliance?" asked Robert.

"We're in the alliance because they think He's coming back according to my Mum." Connor said with honest naivety.

Harry's heart just about sank and he examined the shocked expressions on most of the Heirs' faces. Neville looked determined – he knew most of it straight from Harry – and Albert, Susan, Hannah and Alicia weren't wearing looks of surprise.

"Is that true?" demanded Robert.

Susan shook her head. "No, we would all be in the alliance anyway according to my father. I overheard him telling Hannah's Dad that they're all a bit bemused by how they let the alliance slip just because the House of Potter was, uh…"

"Out of action?" Alicia suggested quietly.
"So You-Know-Who isn't dead?" asked Jeremy, leaning forward intently.

All eyes turned to Harry. Harry glanced at Bill again for direction; the eldest Weasley gave another encouraging nod.

"The night he attacked my parents and I," Harry said haltingly, deciding that if he and the group around him were going to work together he needed to be honest but he knew Sirius wouldn't be pleased if he told them everything, "he did die kind-of. He lost his body anyway. But he's done some magic to keep his spirit around like a wraith. We think Pettigrew is helping him get a new body."

"So the death threat was from him?" Jeremy asked shocked.

Connor looked terrified.

Harry sighed. "Maybe or maybe from one of his followers. It doesn't matter."

"That's very brave of you!" cooed Lydia.

"It's not brave..." Harry said immediately, "it's just...I've faced him a few times now and..."

"How?"

"When?"

The voices all merged until Neville yelled for people to be quiet.

Harry looked at his friend in shock. Who knew Neville could be that assertive? "Uh, thanks, Neville."

Neville nodded briskly.

"Look," Harry said, turning his attention back to the crowd, "Voldemort was a halfblood called Tom Marvolo Riddle, the son of a witch and a muggle. He was an orphan and he was picked on by others in the muggle orphanage where he lived so he started to use his magic to protect himself. He went to Hogwarts back when Dippet was Headmaster and Tom became the Head Boy. All Tom wanted was power."

Harry couldn't see himself so he couldn't see how his green eyes gleamed with determination, his face shining with passion, a natural charisma to lead unfurling as the others listened to him spill the secrets of the most feared Dark Lord of the wizarding world.

"He knew the power was held by the pureblood families so he gathered followers who espoused a pureblood agenda and his hatred of muggles helped him say the right things and talk the same language so they believed him. And soon he had a group of very powerful friends. But Tom wanted more power so he took himself off and when he came back he'd reinvented himself as Lord Voldemort, the Heir of Slytherin, and hardly anyone remembered Tom Riddle and those that did were sworn to secrecy." Harry continued.

"Why doesn't everyone know this?" asked Jeremy.

"I don't know." Harry answered honestly. "Anyway, my point is that Tom isn't any different to any of us. He was a student once; he had friends. He just got power hungry."

"And turned into a very powerful Dark Lord." Robert pointed out. "It was said that even Dumbledore wasn't able to beat him."
"I've beaten him." Harry pointed out. "I beat him when I was a baby – and yes, my Mum and Dad helped but he was still driven out of his body. I beat him when he possessed Quirrell," Harry continued, ignoring the sudden looks of understanding, "and he tried killing me three times that year – four if you count the troll he let into the school. I beat him when he reopened the Chamber, took Ginny and turned his basilisk on me. And all that time part of my power was bound!" He gestured. "I've been lucky," he admitted, "but I don't want you to think he's unbeatable because that's not true. I mean, if Voldemort turned up right now and we all stuck together, we could beat him or at least drive him off!"

"Even me?" asked Connor wide-eyed.

"All of us." Harry said again firmly.

"Well, that's the point of the alliance, isn't it?" Jeremy said suddenly. "We all stick together and don't let him win!"

"But that's politics!" Robert argued.

"Which is half the battle." Albert pointed out. "If we hold the power in the Ministry and the Wizengamot, he loses ground."

"If he turns up with a body, we're still going to have to fight him though, aren't we?" Robert pointed out.

"Maybe we will," Susan allowed, "but Harry's right; if everyone stuck together, we could drive him off."

"And we have Harry." Lydia added.

Harry blushed.

"Are you that powerful?" asked Robert bluntly. "I mean joking about basilisks and Quirrell and rumours aside?"

Harry debated for a moment and sighed. "If I show you something, you can't tell anyone, OK?"

Everyone nodded.

Harry took out his wand and pointed it at the empty space beside him. "Expecto Patronum!"

Prongs clattered out of his wand and onto the tiles of the conservatory. He was solid again although Harry had tried dialling back his power. There were exclamations of wonder and awe. Connor snuck up to the stag and patted him gently.

"Merlin! He's solid." Alicia said as she reached over and touched Prongs. "This is incredible."

Prongs snorted.

"Why do you need us if you're this powerful?" asked Robert, his eyes glued to the stag which turned to give him a dirty look – he wasn't the only one.

Neville glared at him. "You'd leave an ally alone on the battlefield with an enemy? If Harry has to fight You-Know – Voldemort! – I will stand beside him."

"As will I," declared Susan.
A round of agreements filled the air as Harry gave the command for Prongs to depart.

"Hopefuly none of us will have to fight Tom." Harry said loudly. "Sirius and your parents and guardians are doing everything they can so we don't have to, so it doesn't end up in all-out war like last time." He worried his lip a little before he charged on with his words. "But thank you for your support – all of you. It means a lot." It was a tad overwhelming and he didn't really want them to fight alongside him in truth; he'd rather they stayed safe.

There was a semi-awkward silence.

Harry cleared his throat as he realised it was probably up to him to smooth things over. "So, who's going to the Quidditch World Cup final?"

Terry shot him a grateful look and raised his hand. "Me!"

The conversation turned to other things and by the time Sirius came to collect Harry, they were fiercely debating witches' rights to inherit Wizengamot seats and Alicia was half a phrase away from hexing Robert much to Harry's amusement.
Sirius yawned but his day wasn't over. If he had thought things were hectic before his first Wizengamot session, it had snowballed with the advent of the second. Who knew politics could be so tiring? He was beginning to get a whole new appreciation for his grandfather's swan-like competence now he understood just how much paddling went on under the surface. Their politics were completely at odds but in hindsight Sirius had to admire the man's work ethic. It also begged the question of why his grandfather had ever gone into exile after the defeat of Voldemort and removed himself from politics.

He shook his head and focused on writing up his notes on the afternoon tea they'd attended with the Potter alliance that afternoon including the comments Harry had made about his meeting with the Heirs. He glanced out of the window of his study in Griffin House and watched as Bill threw golf balls putting Harry through his paces on his broom.

Coming up with the idea of putting Bill into the service of the House of Potter had been one of his better ones, Sirius mused with satisfaction. Not only was Bill good at what he did but he was turning into a big brother for Harry in much the same way Frank Longbottom had been for James although the age difference was much greater. Bill was a good role model; smart but fun. Sirius checked his watch and called for Dobby, asking him to bring Harry in to shower and change before dinner and to request Bill come to the study.

He watched amused as the excitable elf popped into the garden and issued orders to his Great and Wonderful Harry Potter. The debate on house elves in the politics lesson had been hilarious with Hermione claiming it was slavery until Harry and Neville convinced her to talk with Kreacher and Dobby where she discovered a house elf's magic was dependent and tied to the magic of its Master. A powerful Master equalled a magically powerful elf. Dobby had admitted that while he considered himself a free elf, magic considered him Harry's and as soon as Harry had rescued him from Nasty Former Master Malfoy, Dobby had received an enormous boost to his own magic. Hermione had been left to contemplate how she could untie the magic so elves could be free. Her finishing comment had reminded Sirius of Lily when she had had the same argument with James.

A knock on the door startled him out of his memories and he called for Bill to enter.

"Pronglet on his way up the stairs?" checked Sirius.

"Yeah, looking forward to telling Hermione everything about today by the sound of it." Bill said with a grin.

Sirius waved him into a chair and turned to face him. "I know you were present when Harry and I debriefed earlier but you didn't say much and I would like to get your thoughts about this afternoon."

Bill nodded slowly in understanding. "His recap of where everybody stood on various issues was spot on. He has a sharp ear – he hears what they don't say and what they do."

Sirius nodded in reply; he'd been proud of Harry's report.

"He's...he's a natural leader but he doesn't know it yet." Bill said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "He has a charisma when he starts talking." He paused, his blue eyes meeting Sirius's with a gravity Sirius hadn't seen before. "He talked to them about Voldemort, told them about Tom Riddle, and they were captivated. He...he handled their fears and reassured them that the unbeatable monster they'd all heard about wasn't unbeatable but was human. He told them outright that if they all stuck..."
together they could drive him away and they believed him." He paused again. "I believed him. I swear if Riddle had walked in at that moment, Harry would have had an army of Heirs beside him, standing shoulder to shoulder with him."

"That's...good." Sirius murmured, stunned. He'd known Harry had the potential to be a fantastic leader – it showed in how he helped Neville, corralled Hermione and even subtly influenced Ron. But to hear such a resounding report of just how much Harry had risen to the occasion at his first real leadership challenge...

"Neville's a good second," Bill continued, "he supported Harry very well."

"They've become good friends." Sirius commented, pleased.

"They make a good team." Bill confirmed. "More than that, when they shared their ideas, you could see the others sit up and take notice. I don't know if they worked it out beforehand or it was natural but Neville led some of that too...which is good for Neville's confidence."

"Did they ask anything..." Sirius floundered on how to phrase the question of whether the alliance kids had hurt Harry.

"They asked but Neville and Susan stepped in pretty sharpish when it was too personal and I may have directed them to be polite." Bill reassured him.

"Thank you." Sirius said.

"I got the feeling that he'd started some good friendships today more than anything." Bill added, shrugging a little. He grinned suddenly. "You may get a dinner invitation for an introduction from the Inglebees; young Lydia is quite taken with him."

"Really?" Sirius's lips twitched. "How bad was it?"

"About as bad as Ginny although entirely opposite in manifestation," Bill said promptly with a smirk, "Gin still can't speak around him but Lydia can and is actively flirting with him."

"And Harry?" Sirius asked amused and noted with concern how Bill's humour faded.

Bill changed position slightly and he was obviously debating how best to phrase his response. "Harry was deeply uncomfortable and I'm not sure all of it was because he hates people crushing on the Boy Who Lived." He said finally. "Has...has anyone spoken to him about...girls, boys...?" he waved a hand in a vague gesture that Sirius understood all too well.

Had anyone spoken to Harry about sex, dating, about generally interacting in a romantic fashion with someone else?

Bugger, thought Sirius and then half-hysterically thought the swear word was probably the least appropriate one he could have used.

"I take it that's a no?" asked Bill, his voice rich again with amusement.

"I've teased him a couple of times about girls so has Remus." Sirius admitted with a sigh. "But I know I haven't sat down and given him the usual Wizard's Talk and Remus would have told me if it had come up...arisen as a subject in his conversations with Harry."

Bill smirked at the innuendo that Sirius had unwittingly said and watched as Sirius dropped his head into his hands.
"I'm going to have to give him the Talk, aren't I?" Sirius sighed. Even if Vernon Dursley had talked to Harry – which was very unlikely – it had probably had been limited to 'don't get anyone pregnant.'

"I know my Dad gave it to each of my brothers when they turned thirteen." Bill said, briskly. "I was supposed to be sixteen but I was caught in a broom cupboard when I was fourteen so…Dad came up one Hogsmeade weekend and did it then. After that I think my Dad thought it best to be safe and told the others early."

Sirius wondered whether he could prevail upon Arthur to give Harry the Talk and discarded the thought. It was Sirius's duty; he would have to do it.

"Bugger." He repeated quietly.

Bill snorted. "To be honest, I don't think you're too late with Harry. He's like a stunned hippogriff when he has a girl paying him attention and while he sometimes looks at girls he's quick to look away again so I doubt he's had any practical experience."

"And boys?" asked Sirius delicately, not wanting to jump to conclusions about Harry's sexuality.

"I haven't spotted him looking but he does have boys interested in him. Connor hero-worships him which I doubt is serious given his age but Jeremy was very interested if much less obvious than Lydia probably because he's older."

Which was a different kind of problem, Sirius considered worriedly. It was bad enough that kids his own age and below crushed on Harry, but older girls and boys who might take advantage especially if Harry was as innocent as Bill made out…very worrying.

Sirius sighed heavily. "Thank you for bringing it to my attention."

"I'm not sure that your thank you is sincere." Bill teased.

"You'd be right." Sirius replied, smiling for the first time since Bill had raised the topic. "Anything else you noticed which isn't likely to send me to an early grave?"

"Nope," Bill replied, "just…they seem like a good bunch. When they started debating various things you could see that they were passionate about helping others and changing the world for the better." He blushed which surprised Sirius. "It was…inspiring. I was, uh…” he fidgeted a little before raising his gaze, "I was kind of disappointed to be a guard rather than part of it."

Sirius settled back in his chair. He had suspected Bill might feel that way; Bill was an Heir in a House which was in alliance itself with the House of Potter. Under different circumstances, the House of Weasley would have been part of the formal Wizengamot alliance.

"It's weird," Bill continued when Sirius remained silent, "because I've never considered that being an Heir could mean making a difference before now. I mean, you know it was Great-Granddad who lost the seat?"

Sirius nodded.

"Well, our Gramps was very anti-establishment because of that – hated any mention of us being an Ancient and Noble House. Dad only did the rituals and knows the traditions and etiquette because Grandma insisted. Same with me. But until this year, it hasn't mattered much." Bill confided.

"Neither Dad nor I have ever put any emphasis on House stuff because apart from the main premise of living honourably, it didn't seem important."
"Because nobody acknowledged your status as an Ancient and Noble House," Sirius stated.

Bill nodded. "And here comes Harry with an alliance of friendship and the life debt and…" he sighed and rubbed his chin again, "and I guess both Dad and I have had our eyes opened to the possibility of what could be if we worked properly to re-establish the House of Weasley."

"Your Dad still insistent on not standing for the open seat?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"Yes, and I agree with him." Bill said firmly. "We need to have proven ourselves worthy of more than simply being an Ancient and Noble House to take a formal seat again."

"You want to earn your place." Sirius surmised.

Bill nodded again. "Although today I wished we'd already earned it. Which is bizarre because it's always been Percy who has wanted politics and the career in the Ministry, and all I've ever wanted to be is a curse-breaker…"

"Part of it is the magic you know." Sirius offered as some comfort. "The family magic of your House accepted you and it is probably encouraging you to take a wider view now you've started to use it again." He hesitated for a moment and forged on. "My Grandfather did the Heir ritual with me when I was eight."

Bill's eyebrows shot up.

"He didn't want my Father to have access to the family magic any longer." Sirius explained with a dismissive hand gesture. "Why I don't know or can't remember but I remember the ritual was done in secret and then announced at dinner and my parents were furious and it was probably only because my Grandfather forbade my getting punished for it that I wasn't whipped or hexed half to death." He looked out of the window not wanting to see Bill's reaction to what he had revealed about his childhood. "After that, I could always feel the Black magic pushing me…sometimes I think I rebelled so badly against my parents because instinctively the magic knew their direction wasn't good for the House and pushed me in the opposite one – although I probably took it to an extreme all on my own by sorting into Gryffindor."

"I think I'm disturbed by the idea that something could be influencing me like that." Bill said, sitting back and crossing his arms.

"It's your family magic; it's a part of you." Sirius pointed out. "It's very unlikely that it would encourage you down a path if you truly didn't want it."

Bill frowned.

"A lot of the origin stories about family magic indicate that it was given as a gift so that the Ancient and Noble Houses could protect the wizarding world. It's likely all our magic responds encouragingly when we take steps explicitly to that end." Sirius said. "But if you truly wanted to devote your life to curse-breaking, which in its own way helps to protect others, I don't think it would up and abandon you." He took a breath. "But if today gave you a taste of what you could be a part of when your House is ready to fully take its place again and you were attracted to that…I guess the question is what do you want to do?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" Bill mused out loud.

"Think on it." Sirius said. "I'd be happy to help you in any way I can."

"Thanks." Bill murmured.
Sirius searched his expression. "You're worried about something else?"

"Seeing Harry with his political peers..." Bill sighed heavily. "I'm concerned about where Ron fits into the picture in the future."

Ah, a big brother's concern and a well-warranted one in Sirius's opinion as Ron hadn't shown any interest in Harry's new political skills and experiences, and had shown flashes of jealousy instead.

"I think much of that will depend on Ron." Sirius answered truthfully. "Harry's very attached to him and he won't abandon Ron. I get the impression that he'll always consider Ron his best friend so long as Ron considers Harry his. Whether your brother is mature and secure enough to accept that truth in amongst recognising that a great deal else in Harry's life has changed though..."

Bill nodded. "Ron is...Ron is a good kid. But I just worry that he's going to feel left out."

"Harry's invited him to all his lessons and excursions. I believe he asked him to change to Runes." Sirius pointed out a little defensive at Bill's words. "I'm not sure what else Harry would have to do to make Ron feel included."

"Neither do I," Bill admitted, "but maybe I should talk to Ron."

"If you think it's a good idea." Sirius agreed. "His friendship is very important to Harry."

A sharp rap on the door stopped Bill from replying openly and Sirius accepted Bill's mouthed thanks as Remus entered, looking tired and worn.

Sirius's eyebrows went up in concern since his friend had spent the day at the DOM helping with the cursed ring. "Are you OK?"

"Peachy." Remus muttered, waving a hello at Bill and slumping into the chair beside his own desk.

Dobby popped in with some tea for him and Remus drank it gratefully.

"It didn't go well then?" asked Sirius impatiently.

Remus shook his head, the faint hint of silver strands catching the last of the afternoon sun streaming through the window. "We've managed to establish that we think the compulsion and the curse are parseltongue in origin and therefore..."

"Will need parseltongue to break them." Bill grimaced. "Bollocks."

"Yes, that sums it up well." Remus caught the worry on Sirius's face and shook his head. "Harry would need to learn how to break the original Latin curses before he could attempt to break these."

"So, we throw the thing in the furnace and be done with it." Sirius said.

Remus sighed. "Lawrence thinks the stone that's set into the ring is important somehow although he wouldn't say how and we think the stone is clean of the horcrux. Bertie's going to give him some time to work on it and see if he can't unseat the stone from the ring without giving into the curses."

"If Lawrence thinks it's important, it probably is. He's incredibly knowledgeable." Bill said. "Caro and I can work on Godric's Hollow in the meantime."

Sirius pulled a face but nodded. "Fair enough."

Bill stood up. "If you don't need me for anything else?"
"Have a good night, Bill." Sirius said, confirming it was OK for Bill to leave.

Remus called out his own farewell and they watched Bill leave the room, closing the door silently behind him.

"How did your day go?" Remus asked, taking a sip of his tea.

"Good." Sirius said succinctly. "At least until Bill pointed out that Harry probably needs the Little Wizard's Talk."

Remus choked.

"That would have been my reaction if I'd been drinking a liquid at the time." Sirius said, wagging a finger at him as Remus coughed and spluttered to regain his breath.

"Buggle." Remus said and then coloured as though realising as Sirius had how inappropriate the word was in connection with the topic they were discussing.

"That was my reaction." Sirius said lightly.

"I think Harry knows?" Remus said questioningly. "At least the basics?"

"The strict biology of men, women and babies, maybe," Sirius allowed with a wave, "but beyond that?"

"Well," Remus said, gathering his composure, "what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Sirius said, glaring at him since Remus had lobbed the whole thing at him with his use of the 'you' rather than 'we,' "I'm not an expert."

"How did your father tell you?" asked Remus.

Sirius shifted in his chair not wanting to discuss it. "Let's just say I won't be doing the same thing with Harry."

His father had taken him to a brothel in Paris the Christmas after his fourteenth birthday, handed him over to the Madame for the weekend with the instruction that Sirius be taught everything he needed to know. He would die before Harry would experience the horror and terror Sirius had felt during the first awful minutes before the Madame – Evie – had realised he wasn't there by choice to get practical experience and bundled him into her private quarters and fed him a calming draught.

Remus stared at him as though gathering some of what Sirius wouldn't say out loud. "My Dad was crap at it." He said, thankfully letting go of Sirius's past. "I was seventeen and hardly a virgin when he sat me down to explain everything and then it was the most pathetically short explanation ever. I learned more from you and James…"

Their eyes snapped to each other.

"James!" Sirius said with glee. "The Summer before our fifth year! Do you remember?"

"Charlus had given him the Talk as soon as he gotten home." Remus nodded. "When we went to visit…"

"James sat us all down and repeated what his Dad had told him!" Sirius crowed. "This is perfect! I can put the memory in a pensieve for Harry. OK, the rat will be there but he didn't say very much. And it'll be like James giving Harry the Talk."
"Well, you probably should check it for veracity and accuracy first, and you'll probably have to deal with any secondary questions." Remus pointed out before he broke into a grin. "But, yes; it's a splendid idea, Sirius."

Sirius was about to agree when he glanced at the clock. "Crap! We're going to be late! We both need to get changed into muggle clothes and get to the Grangers! Harry's probably at the floo wondering where we are!"

Remus followed him sedately as Sirius leaped from his chair and hurried towards the door. "Do you think we should ask Augusta about Neville?"

"What about Neville?" asked Sirius distractedly.

"Well, what are the odds Augusta's given Neville the Talk?" asked Remus slyly.

Sirius came to a sudden halt and Remus bumped into him. Sirius looked over his shoulder with wide horrified eyes. "Bugger."

o-O-o

**August 4th 1994**

If the Ministry had buzzed with anticipation ahead of the July Wizengamot session, the run-up to the August session was twice as bad.

Rumours abounded that the Potter alliance was back; that the House of Black had started to sway the neutrals; that the pureblood alliance was on the verge of crumbling…

Augusta Longbottom was aware of the rumours and made sure to stoke the fire at every opportunity. A long dormant part of her had awakened with Sirius Black's ascent to his Lordship; a political animal she had half-forgotten in the wake of her grief and pain.

Nobody fully understood how devastated Augusta had been left after the attack on her son and daughter-in-law. She had been a relatively new widow; Gerald had died just after Frank's marriage. It had been a blow to Augusta who had loved him all her life. They'd tried for another child after Frank but their beautiful daughter had been stillborn and Augusta had never had the courage to try again. She had thrown herself into the role of the Lady Longbottom. Gerald had appreciated her political acumen and understanding; her sharp wit and intelligence. She hadn't been a Ravenclaw for no reason. Many of the policies and agendas Gerald had presented to the Wizengamot had been drafted by her hand.

And she had also thrown herself into motherhood; showering Frank with her attention and love. She had in all honesty probably spoiled him but he had been everything she could ever wish for in a son; handsome, charming, smart as a whip with an athletic build that had the girls swooning as soon as he had started dating. Nobody was ever going to be good enough for Frank but Alice's quiet charm and easy manner had convinced her of the girl's sincerity and Merlin knew Frank had loved her. Augusta wanted to say she hadn't been a dragon of a mother-in-law but it would be a lie; at least Alice had never held it against her.

Neville's birth had been a joy. Augusta had fallen in love with him as soon as Alice had placed him within her arms. He had been such a happy baby; so loved by Frank who adored his firstborn with the wide-eyed wonder of a new father. She could remember Frank playing with Neville, holding him to feed him when Alice went back to work (much to Augusta's disapproval), and singing him a lullaby just as Augusta had done for him. There was no doubt in her mind that Frank would have
spoiled Neville as much as she had spoiled him if not for Alice's common sense.

And there had been a dream back then of lots of grandchildren…Frank had wanted to name Neville after his father but Augusta had asked him not to – Gerald had hated his name – but Alice had suggested for a second son that they might name him Charles Gerald after both his grandfathers. Augusta had dreamed again of a pretty baby girl to spoil silly.

Her dreams had been crushed by the LeStranges and Bartemius Crouch Junior in one horrific night.

Learning about the prophecy had been hard enough. Not that she had believed in that twaddle but Alice had taken it quite seriously and Frank had supported her when they'd gone into hiding. Augusta had been left alone with an empty mansion, not even knowing where they'd gone.

The night the Potters had died had been wonderful and terrible for Augusta. Wonderful in that it meant that the prophecy was about the Potter boy and not about Neville; that her family could come out of hiding and she would have her dreams still. Terrible that she had thought such a thing when two wonderful people had lost their lives.

James and Lily had been a lovely couple. Frank had always been close to James, the joke about being James's godbrother taken quite seriously because of the alliance between the Houses. His and Alice's decision to fight for custody of Harry Potter in the wake of their deaths hadn't surprised Augusta one bit and she had fully supported their decision. Maybe some of it had been to assuage her guilt (not Neville, thank Merlin, not Neville) but the idea that the heir to the Potter House would be brought up by muggles…

They should never have come out of hiding.

She could still remember the awful night. Apparating home from a dinner with friends to find the mansion filled with Aurors…Frank and Alice surrounded by healers…and Neville screaming terribly…fear in her belly that she would lose her family…that Frank and Alice would die like James and Lily (and the guilty remorse that maybe she had brought it upon them by being thankful it had been James who Voldemort had gone after and not her Frank)…

And then there had been the awful reality of brain damage, of a traumatised baby that had gone from that terrible screaming to simply not crying at all…and days and weeks of trips to healers and in the background always Neville slowly growing up but so different to Frank, and therefore such a disappointment that he should be Frank's legacy.

But now…

It was as though the events of the Summer had lifted the fog of grief from her mind and her heart. She could think clearly again. She could see clearly again. And what she saw first was Neville.

Her beautiful sweet grandson.

Augusta was so ashamed of herself. Had she really been such a harridan as to berate the boy for his lack of magical skill and prowess? To tell him constantly that he should be more like his father? Oh, she had hexed Gerald's Uncle Algie up one side and down the other when he dropped Neville out of a window but she had been secretly pleased to see the boy do accidental magic. What must Neville think of her?

She had resolved to turn over a new leaf. She had immediately offered him the opportunity to assume his Heir ring. She complimented Neville for small things; praised his gardening skill; admired him on his letter writing and behaviour during the various dinners and events they attended; encouraged him...
in building a friendship with Harry Potter.

When Sirius had approached her about the wand... Augusta had blushed in shame. How could she have forgotten that a wand chose the wizard? Neville's improvement came in leaps and bounds. He arrived back from his lessons with Harry full of tales of his accomplishments. He was gaining confidence every day and she was so proud of him.

There was a way to go, of course. She had seen how Neville had used Harry as a way of diverting attention from himself at his birthday (although she had been very happy to see how Harry who hated his fame had sacrificed himself so Neville could enjoy his birthday – it spoke well of the young Lord Potter). But overall she was thrilled with the strong minded and quietly observant young wizard that was emerging from the cowed child she had raised.

She knew she had Sirius and Remus, his steward, to thank for a lot of it too. Remus had quietly advised her to change her Financial Manager after she had let him look at the books to choose a suitable learning example for Neville's estate management lesson. Since then Remus had taken to dropping by weekly to discuss Neville's progress and talk over the business opportunities between the House of Potter and the House of Longbottom. Between his advice, their discussions and the restitution Sirius had given her, Augusta was beginning to see a change in their fortunes. She quietly acknowledged to herself that she had let things slip in her grief but it was no excuse.

It had all led Augusta into fervently working hard on Sirius's and Harry's behalf to rebuild the old alliance – and to wonder why she hadn't done so before. The other families had expressed similar rueful comments; why had they needed the return of the House of Potter to have re-established their old ties?

Sirius himself was a boon. As much as he might not have wanted to acknowledge it, he had all of his grandfather's political finesse and ruthlessness. He knew just what carrot and what stick to use. And he was teaching Harry; she could see how Harry was changing under Sirius's tutelage in his dealings with other Houses. He would never have Sirius's deft touch – he was too impatient and blunt in his own manner for that – but Harry would make a formidable Lord Potter in time.

If he lived long enough to fully take on the mantle.

Voldemort's imminent return was the other driving force behind Augusta's revival. She would be damned if she let the bastard destroy her family again. She had all but lost Frank and Alice; she would not lose Neville.

Or Harry. The news of the death threat on his birthday had made her blood boil.

She directed Neville to the seat next to Remus on the family tier of the Wizengamot, pleased to see that many of the other Heirs in the Potter alliance were already seated. The Heirs would take part in the pledge the Houses were undertaking with each other. The afternoon tea Augusta had hosted the day before had begun the process of the Heirs getting to know each other, the adults leaving them alone to become better acquainted with Harry as they would be supporting each other for a long time. She had been pleasantly surprised that all the Heirs had stayed behind to socialise when Harry himself had departed with Sirius.

She hid her smile as she took her seat.

The session time was almost upon them when Sirius walked in with Harry, properly dressed in formal robes with the crests of Potter and Black on his breast. Harry's hair had been tamed as much as possible; Andromeda's training told in his carriage and his bearing although Augusta could see he was pale and a bit nervous. And Sirius stood beside him, a hand on his shoulder, looking more
dangerous than ever in his black duelling robes (though they were embossed with the House crests) and leather trousers. He'd dressed not for the Wizengamot but for guard duty and it told in every graceful movement he made.

Augusta was pleased as she took in everybody else's reaction, the Wizengamot falling silent.

Dumbledore hurried forward and Augusta settled herself to get a better view. This was going to be amusing, she thought delighted.

"Sirius!" Dumbledore's eyes darted to Harry and back. "Do you think it wise after recent events for Harry to attend?"

"Thank you for your concern, Chief Warlock, but this is an important day for the House of Potter and we won't be scared away by a cowardly note from someone hiding behind a house elf." Sirius said loudly. "If you'll excuse us."

She smiled at the manner in which Sirius dismissed Dumbledore's concerns and Dumbledore so completely while also slyly insulting the sender of the note. Her eyes caught on Lady Cavendish fanning herself and Augusta rolled her eyes. Sirius was a handsome devil and his devotion to Harry seemed to have increased his sex appeal among the witches of their society. She wondered how he and Harry were going to respond to the matchmaking that was bound to happen.

Sirius walked Harry up the stairs and directed him towards the Potter seat.

"Sirius…" Dumbledore called. "I'm afraid Harry can't sit there yet."

"Actually, he can, Chief Warlock." Tiberius Ogden said before Augusta could leap to her feet. "Article 15 of the Inheritance Law passed in 1754 allows that any Lord not of age can sit in on the Wizengamot in his seat with the permission of his Regent."

"He's right, Chief Warlock." Dullard agreed.

"Very well." Dumbledore conceded with a fleeting look around the watching Wizengamot.

Harry sat down in the Potter seat with an expression of awed solemnity.

Sirius smiled at him warmly. "Comfy?"

Harry grinned back at him, relaxing somewhat with Sirius's irreverence.

Sirius straightened, his wand in his hand before anyone could blink and he tapped his Lordship ring. "Familius magicus." Gold and silver family magic swirled into being either side of Harry and there was a murmur that swept the chamber.

Most people in the public gallery and in half of the Wizengamot houses had probably never seen family magic at work, Augusta thought amused; that Sirius had called two family magics simultaneously had shocked even those who had.

Sirius waited until the gold griffin and the silver snake formed and stood as sentries either side of the Potter seat. He raised his voice. "Guard. Kill anyone who attacks him."

The totems looked suitably menacing.

The snake turned and hissed at Harry who hissed back and a shiver ran down Augusta's back. Merlin, she would never get used to that.
"What did he say this time?" asked Sirius, ignoring someone's shriek at the sight of the Boy Who Lived speaking parseltongue.

"He was checking whether you just meant physical attacks." Harry replied.

There was an innocent expression on Harry's face but Augusta coughed to hide her laugh as she realised immediately it was a set up to point out to the entire Wizengamot that Sirius hadn't limited the order.

Sirius smiled but he didn't correct the order and Augusta realised that they'd just put everyone on notice – the death threat hadn't been a physical attack. Clearly any attack against Harry wouldn't be tolerated.

"Don't gossip too much with the snake." Sirius instructed.

Harry nodded as the snake totem slithered up the chair and curled up in his lap. The griffin lay down and placed his head on Harry's feet.

It was an impressive show of magical strength for both of them, Augusta considered as Sirius walked back down the stairs to cross the floor to his own seat. That Sirius had called the ancient family magic of two Houses to protect Harry proved Lord Black's power and the fact that the totems were so comfortable with Harry proved his. She looked around and saw grim realisation on the faces of Selwyn and Wilkes; consideration on Greengrass's. Nora Zabini just looked as though she wanted to eat Sirius up with a spoon.

"Sirius," Dumbledore tried to way-lay him on the floor, "I don't think it's appropriate…"

"Chief Warlock," Nott stood, "the use of family magic to protect an underage Lord is perfectly acceptable."

"I simply object to the kill order." Dumbledore protested.

Griselda Marchbanks leaped up. "If the family magic kills to protect the lad from an attack, then the assailant bloody well deserves it! Lord Black has made it amply clear to everyone in this chamber what the consequences will be!"

"Lady Marchbanks…" Dullard began.

"Yes, my language is appalling I know but you cannot instruct the Chief Warlock to call people by their titles for the life of you!" Griselda growled.

Sirius paused on the steps. "The magic is under my control, Chief Warlock. I assure you it won't kill without reason."

Cornelius stood up. "Frankly, I don't see the problem, Chief Warlock. We should move on."

The Ancient and Noble Houses rose as Sirius completed his journey including Harry who quickly picked up the snake as though it was a living creature and whispered an apology at disturbing the griffin; the minor Houses of the Potter alliance followed along with the House of Malfoy – Lucius wasn't an idiot, Augusta thought derisively. They all sat together as one again when Sirius took his seat. Augusta could see Harry's pride beam out in a wide smile at the respect given to Sirius. She could also see Sirius's realisation that unlike the 'welcome to the club' acknowledgement of the previous session, this one acknowledged Sirius as the leader of the Ancient and Noble Houses regardless of alliances – and that the Houses in the pureblood side had followed the Light and the neutrals…
Augusta smiled. Oh it was going to be an interesting session. She settled in as Dumbledore called for the doors to be sealed and the session to open.

Dullard announced the first order of business: the open seat. He listed the nominees and asked them to the floor for their election speeches.

Arthur Weasley went first as he had a Ministry seat already and was thus more highly ranked. "I thank Lord Doge for the nomination but I'm afraid I have to withdraw. It has only been through Lord Black's encouragement that I have in recent times once again picked up the mantle of being the Head of an Ancient and Noble House. It was he who pointed out to me that there was more to being an Ancient and Noble House than the trappings. There is honour and oath; loyalty and friendship. I do not believe that the time is right for the House of Weasley to formally resume its place here. We have much to prove and rebuild as a House if we are to return as an equal and I feel I must give my all to the Ministry seat to which I have been appointed. I thank those who have expressed support for me but encourage them to look to another candidate. Thank you."

It was a shame, Augusta thought dryly, because that speech just showed how honourable Arthur was and out of all the candidates she would have preferred him. But he was right; the House of Weasley needed to rebuild properly if it was going to retake its place. It wasn't a question of money so much as influence. Arthur's new role would help with that; his adult sons had good careers and the family had good links with the House of Potter. It was a start but it was unlikely that the House of Weasley would come back to the Wizengamot while Arthur was its Head.

Dullard cleared his throat. "Mister Amos Diggory."

Diggory stood up. He had once been a handsome fellow although his age had rubbed away the strong jawline and the muscular physique; had thinned the thatch of brown hair on his head. Amos rubbed his scrubby brown beard and gazed around the Wizengamot authoritatively. "Lords, Ladies, Members and Citizens, I thank Lord Abbott for his nomination and come to you as a willing candidate, one that has worked tirelessly for the betterment of our society and one that wishes to do more still. I believe that our wizarding traditions are important; that we must always ensure our safety and security above all other considerations. Many of you know myself and my family. We are honest, honourable people. My record speaks for itself. Thank you."

Augusta frowned. She liked Amos but she found him a terrible braggart and he was a bit too fond of his Firewhiskey for Augusta's liking. He also had no imagination in dealing with magical races – as Sirius had once said sometimes wizards confused magical races and creatures and Augusta believed Amos was one of those wizards. His record on werewolves was appalling.

"Mister Marcus Yaxley."

Yaxley stood up, an intimidating figure in his formal robes with his blond hair neatly tied back. "Members of the Wizengamot, I begin by thanking Lord Wilkes for my nomination. My agenda is simple: I want to make our society strong within and without. With every year that passes wizards bend to the will of others. How many of our noble traditions are lost? How much of what are has been eroded with the viral ideas of the muggles? We need to remember our heritage and regain our strength and remove all elements that would challenge us on this."

Well, there was a perfect example of a pureblood agenda wrapped up in political speak, Augusta mused unhappily. She knew that Yaxley was an intelligent man; capable and sharp-witted. But she would never agree with his politics, not when it could so easily have been he who had attacked her son rather than the LeStranges.

"Finally, Mister Gideon Baron."
As the only non-Ministry nominee, Baron was last. The old solicitor made a small bow to the chamber and cleared his throat.

"Members of the Wizengamot, I give my thanks to Lord Zeller for his kind nomination of myself and my family. I believe that more now than ever we are standing on a precipice. We all want a strong wizarding society, safe from harm by any who would threaten us. We all want our children to thrive and become all that they can be. We all want a life free from darkness. What we don't all agree on is how we achieve these things. I believe that the choices we make now, how we take our society forward from this point are key to our future. Tradition is important. Respecting our ways is important. Fear of the new is a good thing if it makes us assess the risks properly, but for too long we have hidden behind tradition to halt progress; we have eschewed the new in favour of the old because we hold our fear too close; we no longer stride with bold courage but hide in shadows. It is time for us to act like the leader this world needs it to be. I offer my services in this goal."

Gideon had always been an impressive orator and she could see that he was passionate and sincere. He would make a good addition. His judicial knowledge would be invaluable in the trials they watched over; his political acumen was second to none; and he would not be swayed by the likes of Lucius Malfoy and his cronies.

There was a round of questioning for the three candidates who wanted to go forward. Augusta listened rather than ask a question of her own. And then a round of character references from those who had nominated. It was tedious but it was protocol.

They finally came to the vote. Nobody was surprised that the vote was close but as Sirius was called third as Lord Black and voted for Baron, the other candidates didn't stand a chance especially when Harry voted for the solicitor, a vote duly ratified of course by his regent. Baron was sworn in and took his place as a new seat appeared.

Dullard rose to declare the House notices, turned pale and conceded the floor to the House of Black. Augusta's lips twitched because she knew what was coming.

Sirius rose in a graceful move, his gaze automatically going to Harry across the floor before sliding to meet Augusta's gaze warmly. "I have only a few notices today. Firstly, I am pleased to announce a new alliance of mutual aid and support between the House of Black and the House of Longbottom. We now stand together."

Augusta got to her feet as the Chamber reacted with shocked whispers. "As Longbottom Regent, I confirm the new alliance between the Houses and echo that we now stand together."

"The alliance is so recognised," said Dumbledore, looking very surprised.

It was, Augusta thought with relish, as she retook her seat, a historic moment. While Sirius's friendship with the House of Potter had ensured that alliance, she knew everyone else believed no other House on the Light side would willingly ally with the House of Black. She was proud to have taken the first step.

"My second announcement is to record the death of Bellatrix Black, a former daughter of the House of Black, on July twentieth." Sirius announced gravely.

Augusta's heart beat in fierce gladness again at the bitch's death and she was barely aware of Dumbledore's sad face as he made the recognition. The insane witch might have hung on longer than expected but her body, unprotected by its magic, had given in eventually to the harshness of Azkaban. Sirius had approached Augusta for permission to allow Andromeda and Narcissa to bury their sister properly despite the disownment that had formed part of the restitution; Augusta had
agreed, knowing that the request was more about enabling the sisters to grieve than showing any respect for Bellatrix as a Black. According to Sirius, the sisters had interred the ashes in the Malfoy mausoleum with a simple plain marker.

"My final notice for the House of Black today is to announce a détente agreement between the House of Black and the House of Nott." Sirius bowed his head slightly to the House in question. "We will not take up wands."

Nott rose from his chair. "As Head of the House of Nott, I confirm the détente and echo that we will not take up wands."

A murmur of confusion bubbled up. Augusta wasn't surprised; the détente agreement was a very old one and rarely used between the Houses.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Forgive me, Sirius, Benjamin. I believe many of us here haven't heard of such an agreement between the Houses before. Could you explain?"

"We've agreed not to kill each other." Sirius said baldly.

The uproar was immediate. The House of Nott had just declared neutrality in any conflict involving the House of Black! If Voldemort came back, Nott would not follow him. Augusta hid her grin.

Sirius had forewarned her but to see it for herself…

Only Malfoy looked as unsurprised as she and she knew Sirius had sent him notice as a politeness because of the family connection, although she wouldn't be altogether surprised if Lucius and Benjamin had cooked it up between them to test the waters to see if Sirius would be willing to allow neutrality.

"Well," Dumbledore said once he'd regained control of the Chamber, "the détente agreement is so recognised."

Augusta listened idly as the notices moved onto the House of Flint who announced its Heir.

Dullard rose again and looked weary. "The floor is ceded to Lord Potter and Lord Black as proxy for the House of Potter."

Both Harry and Sirius stood. Augusta smiled encouragingly at Harry who looked suddenly very nervous; pale in his blue formal wear and a little fidgety like most fourteen year old boys.

Sirius cleared his throat. "We have two notices today. The first is that the House of Potter has agreed that the House of Weasley owes it a life debt for Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, saving the life of Ginevra Molly Weasley, daughter of the House of Weasley, by killing a basilisk in the Slytherin Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts and destroying that which kept her captive."

A startled hush fell over the Wizengamot. Augusta watched everyone's reactions keenly.

"We are pleased to announce that William Arthur Weasley, Heir to the House of Weasley, is sworn to the service of the House of Potter to undertake a task on its behalf as repayment of this life debt." Sirius concluded.

Dumbledore searched the tiers until he found Bill Weasley. "William Arthur Weasley, please stand."

Bill stood in an outfit not dissimilar to Sirius's; he looked equally as dangerous and very handsome. Augusta watched amused as many of the young ladies smiled at the young man.
"Do you confirm that you have sworn such service to the House of Potter?" asked Dumbledore.

"I do confirm." Bill answered formally. "I am honoured to be in the service of the House of Potter."

"Then the notice of service is recognised." Dumbledore smiled, eyes twinkling madly.

Bill sat down again.

Sirius gave a nod to Harry.

Harry looked nervously out at the Wizengamot before his frantic eyes sought and stayed with his adoptive father. He calmed down and took a breath. "The House of Potter is pleased to announce the reformation of its former political alliance with the Ancient and Noble Houses of Abbott, Bones, Branstone, Doge, Longbottom…"

Augusta rose from her seat just as those called before her had done and those called after would do. From the public tier, the Heirs made their way down to the floor.

"…Marchbanks, Ogden, Sapworthy, and with the Houses of Ackerley, Cornfoot, Belby, Corner, Eastchurch, Inglebee, Munslow and Stebbins, and newly including the Ancient and Noble House of Black."

Sirius looked around and Augusta gave him a sharp nod of assurance to begin.

"Who speaks for the Houses?" Sirius asked, his tone compelling silence in the Chamber as everyone realised the import of the announcement.

"I, the Longbottom Regent, speak for the Houses." Augusta said formally.

"Who speaks for the Heirs?" Sirius asked.

Neville stepped forward from the gathered group of Heirs in the centre of the floor. "I, the Heir of the House of Longbottom, speak for the Heirs." His voice shook but his shoulders were back and his chin up.

"Do the Houses agree to follow the political will of the House of Potter from this day forth?" Sirius asked.

"We do." Augusta replied.

Magic stirred. They could all sense the tingle of it against their skin. This was important, vital, special.

Sirius threw a look of concern towards his son but continued. "Do the Houses promise to support and aid the House of Potter in magic, in law and in oath?"

"We do." Augusta said.

A rush of magic stirred her hair. She held firm but she could see that it was beginning to unsettle many in the Wizengamot, Dumbledore included.

"Do the Houses promise to be loyal and faithful to the House of Potter above all other individual alliances and agreements?"

"We do."
Sirius nodded at Harry to take over.

"I, Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir of the House of Black, accept your oath of allegiance and offer to you the protection and sanctuary of the House of Potter, my wand and my magic in your defence, to lead you with fairness and honour. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

His quiet voice was drowned out as the griffin cried its approval. The Ancient and Noble Houses within the alliance felt their magic stirring and with a rush all of their house totems appeared beside them. The shock of it took Augusta's breath away as the bear of Longbottom stood on its hind legs and roared.

Their family magics had responded to the call of the House of Potter!

She remembered the blessing ritual and looked worriedly to Sirius to find him with his eyes riveted on Harry. A quick glance around the Chamber revealed most people were staring with open shock although whether they realised it was Harry who had called the totems and not the Heads of the Houses...

Sirius took a breath as though to steady himself. "And the Heirs, do you agree to follow the political will of the House of Potter from this day forth?"

Neville's voice was steady when he replied and Augusta swelled with pride. "We do."

"Do the Heirs promise to support and aid the House of Potter in magic, in law and in oath?"

"We do." Neville said.

"Do the Heirs promise to be loyal and faithful to the House of Potter above all other individual alliances and agreements?" Sirius continued.

Neville straightened his shoulders. "We do – and more."

More? What did he mean 'more'? That wasn't in the script – Augusta looked at her grandson alarmed as Neville went down on one knee and the rest of the Heirs followed him. She gasped as did many around her.

Neville raised his head and looked straight at Harry. "The Heirs swear fealty to the House of Potter; our magic is your magic; our wands are your wands; our lives are yours to command in battle and in peacetime. We stand together with you."

Augusta swallowed hard torn between so much pride she could drown in it and fear because her grandson, her beautiful sweet grandson, had just pledged his life to Harry Potter – as had every other Heir. They'd effectively given him an army and every House in the Wizengamot knew it. She wondered exactly what had transpired at the afternoon tea – how had Harry inspired them to this?

Everyone held their breath as attention turned to the stunned figure of the Boy Who Lived who threw a questioning look at Sirius, who thanks probably to the blighted Black upbringing, was the only one in the Chamber maintaining his composure. Sirius nodded at him as a silent conversation of 'what do I do?' and 'accept it of course' took place without words across the expanse of the Chamber.

Harry straightened up; the totems beside him glowed brightly and he suddenly looked like a wizard who could defeat a Dark Lord. His robes swirled around him, his eyes shone with passion and power, his chin came up defiantly.

"I, Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir of the House of Black accept your oath of
allegiance and…of fealty." He gazed down at the Heirs. "I offer to you the protection and sanctuary of the House of Potter, my wand and my magic in your defence, to lead you with fairness and honour." He paused, gold and silver magic stirring his robes and his hair. "We stand together. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

And the totems of the family magics voiced their approval in a cacophony of sound that cowed everyone else in the Chamber before they disappeared.

Augusta gathered her torn composure and gazed around the rest of the alliance. The other Heads and Regents were similarly breathless and shocked by their Heirs. Their political opponents looked subtly taken aback, horrified, grim or a mix of all three. The Potter alliance was back and it was back with a vengeance.

On the floor, she saw Neville getting to his feet and grinning shyly up to Harry who smiled back at him. Sirius caught her eye and gave her a relieved nod. He was probably thankful the spirit of Morgana hadn't turned up again, Augusta thought with a breathless laugh. Her amusement returned fully when she glanced across and saw Dumbledore and Cornelius looking spell-shocked. Croaker looked positively gleeful while Bones was staring hard at her niece.

It was left to Dullard to try and regain order which seemed to finally break the Chief Warlock out of his trance so he could recognise the alliance.

Everyone sat down. Neville cast a nervous look her way as he made his way back up the steps and she smiled at him proudly. He beamed back at her.

No, Neville wasn't Frank, Augusta mused as Dumbledore called for a recess before they reviewed the legislative agenda; but he was every bit as special and she wasn't losing him. She had a feeling Harry would wipe the floor with Voldemort, but prophecy be damned; she'd kill the bastard herself before she let him hurt her Neville.
Ron wasn't stupid.

He knew his Mum would kill him if she caught him and Ginny practicing Quidditch manoeuvres out alone in the field in the early hours of morning without adult supervision.

But that's exactly what they were doing.

He was practicing his Keeper moves with old gloves that had once belonged to his Uncle Octavius and Ginny was ducking and diving like a proper Chaser. Ron's plan was simple: if Harry was going to drop Divination (and maybe Ron didn't entirely blame him because Trelawney was a nightmare for predicting Harry's death) then Ron would join the Quidditch team so they could spend more time with each other. It was a good plan.

Yes, he'd kind of been thinking about it anyway because Oliver Wood had graduated and so Gryffindor would need a Keeper and Ron had always, always wanted to play Quidditch for his House team. Keeper was a good position; solid and unfancy but one that usually held the captaincy more often than not. Ron wasn't expecting that – he knew the others on the team would get first go since they'd been playing for longer than him and he didn't see anyone denying Harry the badge once the current Chaser girls graduated.

He ignored the twinge of envy and focused on his long term goal: if he did well on the House team, he might wrangle a try-out with a professional team and from there…one day he might become a Quidditch manager.

It was his dream.

His secret dream that he hadn't even spoken to Harry or anyone about it because, well, his Mum would have a fit about him not going to the Ministry, and Harry and he had never really talked about what they wanted to do after school. Ron was half-scared if he told Harry, Harry would tell him how stupid Ron's dream was (not that he thought Harry would because Harry was Harry) but more because his even more secret dream was that Harry would be the Seeker on the same Quidditch team and that was far too girly for words.

His plan wasn't as girly as Ginny's plan, thought Ron banging the gloves together as he positioned his broom to counter Ginny's run at the hoop. Ginny's plan (or as he had spotted her calling it on a piece of parchment with hearts and flowers drawn all around it, the 'Harry Will Be My Boyfriend' plan) had three points (which reminded Ron far too much of Hermione's organised mind): first, become Harry's friend; second, become a fantastic Quidditch player and have something in common with Harry which they both liked doing; and third, marry Harry and have his babies.

Ron thought she was barmy.

Personally, Ron didn't think Harry was all that interested in Ginny (he went into his 'I'm very uncomfortable' mode whenever Ginny was around but then she always went into her 'I'm next to the Boy Who Lived' mode so Ron couldn't blame him) which was a shame because Ron had thought in a vague kind of way that one day, possibly, way into the future, it would be OK with him if Harry married Ginny and became an official Weasley. Not that Harry would because if it had been a faint possibility when he'd been the Boy Who Lived, it was non-existent now he was Lord Potter and likely to end up with the most beautiful woman ever. Hence, Ginny was barmy.
He was only helping her with her Quidditch because Ginny had caught Ron sneaking out the second day and had blackmailed him into it. And maybe it was useful to have an actual person throwing the Quaffle at him rather than just performing the training drills.

Ron wasn't all that bothered about girls himself although he was beginning to get teased by his brothers about *looking* when they were out and about. And maybe he was – looking. Because yes, it hadn't escaped his attention that some girls were pretty and cute and had started to develop in interesting ways that certainly made his teenage hormones sit up and take notice. But looking was far different from doing the stuff Dean and Seamus had been talking about in the dorm the previous year (kisses with tongues sounded very disgusting and he really didn't think Amy Fairchild, the fifth year Hufflepuff prefect had done anything to Seamus in a broom cupboard no matter what he claimed). But he knew fourth year was the year most people started dating and he didn't want to be last, but he wasn't quite brave enough to think about approaching girls and was fairly relieved that Harry seemed happy enough not to bother either.

He blocked Ginny's run and threw her the Quaffle back. She was, he considered generously, quite a decent flyer. He checked his watch. It was time for them to go back in. He signalled for Ginny to head down but she shook her head, red hair flying like a banner behind her. He grimaced and flew over to her because if he yelled their Mum was sure to hear him.

"What are you doing?" He hissed. "Mum'll be up soon." He knew; he had it timed to the second when she got up.

"We have at least another five minutes, Ron." Ginny said, gripping the old broom she was using tightly. "Come on; one more run?"

Ron checked his watch again, estimated how long it would take them to sneak back in. They'd be cutting it fine…he sighed. "One more run." He flew back to avoid her triumphant expression.

He took up his position in front of the goals, imagining again Harry's surprise when Ron made the team. It was going to be…

Ginny shot towards him and Ron focused. He could save the goal; he could save the goal…

She raised the Quaffle and threw it…

It arched through the air…

Ginny lost her balance and screamed…

And tumbled down…

Down…

Down…

"GINNY!" Ron didn't care if his Mum heard him as he dived frantically, pushing the old broom past its top speed, a twig snapping free…

He wasn't going to make it…

His heart pounded, wind rushing over him as he spurred the broom on.

They were almost at the ground…but suddenly she was right there in front of him…
And his arm went around her, catching her, yanking her falling body towards his own…

The broom lurched and wobbled as Ron sought control…

And lost it.

They fell six foot onto the hard ground.

Ron tried to keep hold of his sister but couldn't and he landed with a thump onto his side, his hip taking the worst of it. Ron tried to catch his breath but his body was winded from the fall. He rolled over, trying to find his sister.

Ginny was lying motionless beside him.

His heart froze in panic. No. No. She was fine, she was fine, she was…

"Ginny!" Ron crawled over to her.

And thank Merlin, she moved!

"RONALD!" His Mum's voice screamed in the distance. "GINNY!"

Footsteps pounded over the ground towards them.

"Ron!" Ginny's face was wet with tears. "It hurts!"

Ron paled and his stomach roiled at the sight of her arm, bone sticking up through an angry gash. "It's OK," he swallowed hard, "it's OK, just a small…a break. Mum'll see you set right."

And Charlie was suddenly there. Ron gave a sob of relief at the sight of his brother who must have apparated to get to them so quickly.

"Ron…" Charlie began urgently.

"Ginny!" Ron motioned at her. "Check Ginny!"

Ginny was crying in earnest as Charlie hurriedly started casting spells to determine the damage.

"Ginny! Ronald! Oh, thank Merlin!" His Mum was there all of a sudden, nightie tangled around her legs. Her own wand weaved as she took over damage control. "What were you thinking?! You could have both been killed!"

"Mum!" Ginny burrowed into their Mum's embrace as she knelt down in the dewy wet grass to comfort her daughter. "Hurts!"

His Dad, Fred and George arrived, Percy bringing up the rear having stopped for a dressing gown and slippers unlike everyone else whose attire of pyjamas gave away that they'd run straight from their beds.

Ron swiped at his face. "Is she going to be OK?"

Molly shot him an angry look as she cradled Ginny closer. "She needs a Healer."

Run flushed under the weight of his mother's disapproval. She blamed him.

"So does Ron." Charlie stated briskly. "I saw him from my bedroom window after hearing her
scream. He fell a fair bit when he broke her fall. My diagnostic says he mostly bruised and he's sprained his shoulder."

"He broke her fall?" Arthur asked sharply.

"He dived like a mad thing to get to her." Charlie explained, waving his hand at Ron. "He caught her, almost had her, but lost control of his own broom."

His parents' ire ebbed a little.


"We'll look for the brooms…"

"…and the Quaffle!"

They took off before she could say anything else.

Charlie helped Ron to his feet and he was grateful for the support of his brother's strong hand under his skinned elbow. Ron's knees felt wobbly. He wondered if Harry had felt the same way after saving Ginny in the Chamber.

"Straight up to the bathroom with Ronald, Charlie!" Molly said as they reached the Burrow. "Get him cleaned up."

Charlie urged Ron towards the stairs as their father placed Ginny down on the sofa. Molly hurrying into the kitchen for potions. Percy was still kneeling in front of the floo explaining what had happened to Healer Primrose as Ron started up the stairs.

Charlie pushed him toward the bathroom. "Strip and shower in warm water. Your body will appreciate it later."

Ron grimaced as Charlie made him keep the door open in case he fell. He struggled out of his practice gear, wincing when his shoulder complained. He hopped under the warm water and let himself cry a little more under the cover of the noise. He could hear bangs and calls from downstairs. He washed himself quickly, surprised at the sting of soap on cuts and grazes he hadn't noticed. His left hip and thigh which had taken the brunt of the fall were covered with a huge bruise and twinges of pain spiked down his leg. He climbed tiredly out of the shower and wrapped his lower body in a towel.

Charlie helped him into his room and sat down with him. "She'll be OK, Ron."

"When she fell…” Ron swiped at his eyes again, "it happened so fast, Charlie!"

"It does. Hubert Shelling fell off his broom in a practice session once in my fifth year. Keith Teller tried to catch him but his broom wasn't fast enough…Madame Hooch was able to slow his descent." Charlie grimaced and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "He was still out for over a month with a fractured skull."

Ron stood up and retrieved a clean pair of briefs from his underwear drawer, needing to do something. He realised his hands were shaking.

"Here," Charlie ushered him under the duvet as soon as he had his underwear on, "you're in a fair amount of shock, Ron." He had just finished tucking Ron up when the Healer bustled in with their
Ron gave the old woman who had been their family Healer for years an anxious look. "Ginny?"

"Your sister's all sorted, young Ronald." Healer Primrose said sternly. She ran a quick diagnostic, opened her bag and took out several vials. "Calming draught." She handed him a vial and he drank it down with disgust. She waved her wand several times over his shoulder which suddenly stopped hurting so much. "The swelling and the slight sprain have been fixed." She frowned and did the same movement over his hip. "You're very lucky you didn't break your pelvis, young man."

He blanched at that thought but the sedative was already turning his mind to slush. "Take this."

He obediently swallowed the pain relief potion.

"Use this on the bruising." She handed him a jar of ointment and snapped her bag shut. "Well, I'm done. Arthur."

"Thank you, Dotty." Arthur said softly, looking tired; his thin red hair sticking up everywhere. "Charlie, can you see Healer Primrose out? Your mother's with Ginny."

Charlie gave Ron a sympathetic smile and left with the old witch. Ron was alone with his Dad.

"Ginny explained everything." Arthur said. "How the two of you have been sneaking out to practice for the past month. How she lost her balance when she threw the Quaffle and how you saved her."

Ron swallowed hard under the relentless blue glare of his father.

"I'm very proud of what you did in saving your sister," Arthur continued, "but I am deeply disappointed that you both put yourselves at risk by sneaking out in such a way. You, in particular, Ronald, should have known better as the elder. We could have lost you both today." His father's voice broke on the last sentence and he had to turn away to gather his composure.

Ron's eyes burned with shame, and one lone tear trickled out and down his cheek. In many ways, his father's disappointment cut deeper than his mother's anger.

"The draught Healer Primrose gave you will mean you sleep off most of the shock. When you wake up, you will remain in your room and think about your actions for the rest of today. Your brothers will check on you throughout the day and bring you your meals." Arthur said firmly. "Understood?"

Ron nodded. "Harry's supposed to come over later." He said roughly.

"I'll owl Sirius and cancel."

His father made to leave.

"Dad…" Ron pressed his lips together. "Is Mum…"

"Your mother has had a very big shock and is with your sister." Arthur said not unkindly. "You need to give her some time to calm down, Ron."

Ron swallowed around the hard lump in his throat and nodded again.

"Go to sleep, son."
It was as though the words were magic because Ron felt his body give up and sleep overtake him.

When he woke up, Charlie was there. He threw down the Prophet and shepherded Ron through another round of ablutions, an application of the bruising ointment, and getting dressed in some comfortable clothes; old pyjama bottoms and a softened Quidditch tunic that had originally been Charlie's and had Weasley stamped on the back. He reassured him Ginny was sleeping.

It was Charlie who brought his lunch of two huge cheese sandwiches, and a couple of apples, all accompanied by a glass of milk and more pain potion. He promised him that the twins had been nowhere near any of it. After lunch though, Ron was left alone.

He tried in a desultory way to tackle his homework but he was too upset and his mind wouldn't settle on any of the essays. He threw himself back on his bed and had another cry, careful to keep quiet so he wouldn't alert anyone to the fact that he was crying, while at the same time wanting to be discovered so someone knew how badly he felt.

The whole thing was Ginny's fault, Ron determined morosely. She had been the one that had insisted on flying with him. She had been the one that had lost her balance and fallen. It was her fault.

He had saved her life.

And he was injured!

Why was he being punished? They should be thanking him!

But the sense of self-righteousness dissipated with the memory of his sister lying so still on the ground…

The afternoon sun travelled across his bedroom as Ron contemplated the horror of almost losing her. It would have devastated their family. Ginny as the only girl was special. Ron knew that she was valued for that alone as much as he resented it. He fell asleep again, uneasy with thoughts of what could have happened.

It was Bill beside his bed when he woke again.

Bill set his book down and his eyes scoured over Ron with concern. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore." Ron said honestly. And stiff, his muscles protested as he sat up.

"Want the loo?"

Ron nodded and blushed as Bill walked him to the bathroom. His brother did refrain from entering and Ron washed up, feeling a little better with his immediate needs taken care of. Bill walked him back and left him, returning with a tray of food for both of them.

"Don't get too excited," Bill warned him, "Charlie cooked."

The stew wasn't bad; the beef was a little tough and the pepper was a tad on the heavy side but the gravy was otherwise tasty and it warmed Ron.

"How's Ginny?" Ron asked once his initial hunger was sated.

"Out of it which is to her benefit since Dotty gave her Skele-gro." He waved his fork. "She'll be fine by tomorrow."

Ron nodded slowly and wished he could go see her if only to remove the horrifying image of her
lying on the ground from his head.

"You want to talk about it?" offered Bill, licking his fork and tearing another piece of bread to dunk into the gravy.

Ron shook his head and swallowed the mouthful he'd taken. "No, not really."

"Sounds like it was pretty scary from what Charlie said he witnessed." Bill commented.

"It was." Ron admitted. He scraped up the last of his stew and set the plate aside.

Bill handed him dessert – a bowl of ice-cream with some tinned peaches. Ron took it gratefully. He wasn't sure he would be allowed dessert since sometimes his Mum used withholding pudding as a punishment.

"You know when Mum was pregnant with you," Bill began, "Uncle Fabian had brought round his and Uncle Gideon's old brooms for me and Charlie to learn on. Anyway, Dad was working a lot of hours, Uncle Fabian and Gideon were never around either, and Mum was, well, pregnant with you and dealing with Percy and the twins all the time. Everybody would promise, 'next weekend, Bill' or 'I'll come home early tomorrow' but then it never happened."

Unwillingly, Ron found himself captivated by his brother's story. Bill and Charlie rarely told stories of their childhood but there again, Ron had never really asked either.

"So, there I was feeling very sorry for myself that nobody was paying attention to me," Bill continued, "and Charlie was almost as desperate so we snuck out after lunch one day while Mum was busy with the twins. Charlie gets on a broom and he's immediately in the air looking like he was born on the thing."

Just like Harry, Ron thought, the memory of Harry outclassing Draco to get Neville's Rememberall raising a small smile.

"I tried to do the sensible older brother thing and keep Charlie close to the ground but he was off dipping and diving." Bill pushed his finished stew aside and reached for his own bowl of ice-cream. "Anyway, there was a sudden gust of wind and Charlie lost height for a sec but somehow he managed to cling on and remained in control of the broom— but it was enough to unsettle me, I lost control and I took a tumble. I didn't fall far only about eight feet or so and landed in a bush but it was enough to knock the wind out of me, give me a nice set of bruises and scratches, and somehow a twisted ankle."

Usually Ron would be annoyed that he hadn't managed to do something unique; that his brothers had once again done something first. But Bill's story was comforting, a shared experience rather than a reminder that Ron was the youngest. Suddenly Charlie's sympathy that morning made a lot more sense.

"Anyway, my fall scared the pants off Charlie who screamed for Mum and then…well…after Dotty came by and fixed me up, I was told to stay in my room and think about what I'd done." Bill made a circular gesture that took in all of Ron's room. "I spent the time feeling rather sorry for myself in truth. Then Dad came home and gave me his disappointed look – you know the one?"

"Gave it to me this morning." Ron agreed despondently, pushing his empty bowl away.

"And we talked about what could have happened and how it was important that there was always an adult watching or aware of when we flew," Bill said, "and I had a good cry on Dad's shoulder and then…" he smiled, "and then he told me how he had snuck out with his little brother when they were
twelve and ten and done pretty much the same thing only he'd ended up with a broken finger."

Ron's mouth gaped open.

"I'm fairly certain that Fred and George have sneaked out to fly," Bill went on, "they've probably just been lucky not to get injured."

It was immensely comforting to know that he hadn't been the only one to make the same mistake, Ron considered with relief.

"Ginny could have died." Ron said slowly, openly acknowledging the truth of it out loud for the first time.

"She could have but she didn't and that's what you need to focus on." Bill said firmly. "That and not doing something so stupid as to go flying without telling anyone again."

"Mum was furious." Ron said, his throat closing up.

"She'll come round. She just needs to be with Ginny today." Bill assured him. "But she loves you too."

And he knew that. Mum loved all of them fiercely. Sometimes he thought she loved them too much.

"So why have you been sneaking out exactly?" asked Bill pointedly. "Charlie said it has been going on for weeks."

"Oliver left," Ron explained, "and there's a Keeper position open. Ginny…" he stumbled over his sister's secret 'Make Harry My Boyfriend' plan and opted for something less humiliating for her, "…she's thinking about Chaser eventually."

"And that's all there is to it?" Bill pressed.

Ron blushed under Bill's intent regard. "Well, I might have thought it was a way for me and Harry to spend more time together since he's dropping Divination."

He found himself confiding in Bill about his secret dream of Quidditch as a career for himself and Harry.

"I know it's stupid…" Ron mumbled.

"It's not stupid. I think you'd make a great manager." Bill said, propping his feet in bright red socks up on Ron's bed. "And I think Harry would probably be Seeker for you because it would be you who asked."

"You think?" Ron began, excitement beginning to creep past the guilt and shock of the day's events.

"Of course whether he would really want to play Seeker is a different matter." Bill said.

Ron's mouth dropped open. "Why wouldn't he want to? He loves Quidditch!"

"Maybe, he's certainly out on his broom any chance he gets and he might have even mentioned Quidditch as a possible career the other day," allowed Bill, clasping his hands behind his head, "but have you actually asked Harry what he wants to do?"

He shook his head.
"How would you like it if Dad organised a job for you at the Ministry doing the administration for the Quidditch league?" Bill asked. "I mean you love Quidditch, right? So, you'd be happy with that job?"

Ron slumped back against his pillows, seeing Bill's point. "But Harry loves Quidditch." He repeated anyway.

His brother looked at him kindly and Ron could see he was debating internally what to say. "Harry is a great kid," he said eventually, "but his muggle family did a right number on him, Ron. Sirius and Remus are helping to build his confidence up but I get the impression he's still fairly unused to stating explicitly what he wants and what he likes."

Ron opened his mouth to argue before his brain caught up with him. "Harry is confident!" He insisted. "He faced down all those traps and stood up to You-Know-Who when he was Quirrell! He took on a basilisk for Ginny! And…and he even told Remus and Sirius not to kill Pettigrew because his Dad wouldn't want them to be murderers!"

Bill shifted; resuming a sitting position and leaning forward. "He's very brave and, believe me, I know, I've seen his memories of some of those events, but there's a difference between standing up in the heat of the moment and taking charge because there isn't really a choice type of confidence, and the being able to state clearly to someone you love and care about what you want type of confidence."

There was some truth in Bill's words that touched Ron quite deeply.

"You know he threw up twice the morning of the Wizengamot session and didn't tell Sirius because he didn't want to let Sirius down?" Bill said quietly.

Ron didn't say anything because his head was suddenly filled with a picture of Harry the morning of his first Quidditch match; shaky and pale and...had he thrown up then too? Ron had been so excited that his friend got to play Quidditch, he hadn't really considered that Harry might not have wanted to play.

"Afterwards, Sirius found out anyway," Bill said, "and he told Harry that he'd wished he'd said something because if Harry really didn't want to do it, Sirius would have organised things differently. Of course, it's not that easy because Harry does have responsibilities as Lord Potter and he has to get used to having to do stuff he doesn't want to do sometimes, but Sirius is trying to instil in Harry that he shouldn't feel that he always has to do what others want and expect of him ahead of his own wants and needs."

Ron tried to sort through Bill's words. He knew Harry had hated the idea of the Wizengamot session but he'd done OK with it, hadn't he? The Prophet had been filled for the last few days with the story of how wonderful Harry had been. Ron had envied him the adulation. But had that been what had Harry wanted? He had scowled when Ron had shown him the news articles when he'd come over for dinner the next day...

"You haven't been reading those, have you?" Harry said, throwing himself down on the grass next to Ron.

"Hey, I'm not the one who made headlines!" Ron argued, a hot rush of jealousy in his belly. "Why didn't you tell me everyone was going to swear fealty to you? I would have come and done the same!"

"Why would you want to swear fealty to me? And I didn't know they were going to do that!"
"Why wouldn't I want to swear fealty to you? I'm your best mate!" Ron retorted, slightly mollified that Harry hadn't kept things from him because he knew Harry was keeping some things from him because he'd said Sirius wouldn't let him tell him everything.

"Exactly!" Harry poked him in the arm. "You're my best mate!" He frowned at Ron. "Look, who was at my side when I went after the Philosopher's Stone? Or went to fight a basilisk? Or when we faced down Pettigrew in the Shack? You, and you didn't need any oath of fealty to be there either, did you?"

"Oh," said Ron getting that it was taken as read that he would fight beside Harry as his best friend, as Harry rolled his eyes at him.

"You know I think the wizarding world has it backwards; an alliance of friendship is much more important than the others."

"I don't really know what all the alliances mean." Ron muttered.

"Well, our alliance is one of friendship which from a Wizengamot perspective means that the other Houses know you're our friends and so may be more inclined to like or dislike you because of that." Harry explained. "But to me it means that you're my friends and if I needed you, I know you'd be there for me – and vice versa."

"Definitely vice versa, mate." Ron confirmed, trying not to blush like Harry was doing. "So what about the others and the fealty thing?"

"Well, alliances of mutual aid and support, mean one House agrees with another House's political agenda in the main and if called upon would provide political support, financial backing, that kind of thing," Harry pulled at the grass. "That's the kind of alliance we have with Neville and why his Gran is helping us so much with the political stuff."

"OK." Ron nodded his understanding.

"The Potter alliance thing…Hermione says it's like a muggle political party?"

Ron stared at Harry blankly.

"Right, um," Harry searched the sky for inspiration, "well, with a mutual aid and support alliance, the Houses can agree to disagree on bits that conflict in their agendas, and generally it's bad form to call upon the mutual aid and support if you know that the House isn't in favour with that bit you're trying to push. The Houses in the Potter alliance have agreed that my agenda is the best overall and they'll vote for my agenda even if it conflicts with their own."

"That's pretty cool," commented Ron.

"The fealty…well, you have to have and be part of something like the Potter alliance before a House can swear fealty anyway. But it means that if I can call upon the Houses or the Heirs in this case to provide me with military support – wands and magic to be used under my command in battle. Neville's Gran made him apologise to me for springing it on me and I think most of the others have been grounded for doing something like that without asking permission from their parents first. But like I said," Harry pushed his shoulder, "if you're my friend, you're going to be there beside me anyway."

"Too right, mate." Ron agreed, feeling better about not swearing fealty. He was Harry's friend; he didn't need to swear fealty.
"Come on," Harry dragged him to his feet, "you can beat me at chess! That always cheers you up."

"Let me ask you this, Ron," Bill said quietly breaking into Ron's thoughts, "did anyone ask Harry if he wanted to play Quidditch?"

Ron cast his mind back. "No," he said finally, "I don't think they did. McGonagall saw him catching Neville's Rememberall after Malfoy threw it when we'd been ordered to stay on the ground. He thought she was marching him off to be expelled, but she took him to Oliver and told him she'd found him a Seeker."

"That doesn't sound like he was given much of a choice," Bill remarked. He waved at Ron. "What about the pair of you? Who usually decides what you do when you're not in class?"

Ron's heart sank because, adventures aside, he knew Harry usually went along with whatever Ron or Hermione wanted, or came up with some compromise to keep the peace. It wasn't that he never expressed a preference; just rarely – and then it was usually something like going to Hagrid's for tea which was obviously because he wanted to please Hagrid. "Why wouldn't he say anything if he didn't want to do something I wanted?" He said miserably.

"Because I suspect he's been trained not to express his own wants too much by his muggle relatives, and he probably doesn't want to lose your friendship – it means a lot to him."

"It means a lot to me too," Ron said defensively.

"Seeing as you're planning on a career for the both of you, I can see that," Bill teased gently. "But it is possible to stay friends with someone and not do the same thing. Look at me and Kevin. He's off doing his thing at Unified Apothecaries with potion research and I'm working as a curse-breaker. And, you haven't gone along to all of Harry's lessons this Summer and you're still friends, right?"

"Yeah, but..." Ron sighed heavily. "That's just it! He's Lord Potter now and he has all of these new lessons and new friends and...and what will he want with me anymore?"

"Ah, Ron." His brother stood up and crossed the room and dragged Ron into a one-armed manly hug.

Ron was grateful for the solid comfort although his bruised body wasn't.

Bill patted his back and sat back on the bed. "Do you think Harry's a bad friend?"

"Of course not!" Ron said.

"Then why do you think he's going to dump you just because he's made friends with some other people and has lessons to help him deal with his heritage and position?" Bill asked patiently.

"He wouldn't, he's not like that," Ron allowed, reddening brightly. "I know that and I know it makes no sense but...I just thought – I don't know how to fit in with him now. You don't know what it's like, Bill, because you were the first! I've never gotten anything new." He suddenly had a thought which pointed out the lie in the statement and blushed again. "I mean, apart from the dress robes. I did say thanks, didn't I?"

"You did." Bill reached over and mussed his hair.

"Anyway, Harry was the same, really. I mean, I know he had the money from his parents for school but the muggles were awful to him and never gave him anything nice and it's not that I wanted him to stay with them..." he trailed away, unable to put his thoughts into words. "He's got all these new
clothes and a new house and – and I'm happy for him, I am, but…" he shrugged unhappily. "I mean, Hermione's being sponsored by the House of Black so even she'll fit in better than me!"

"OK, that was a lot." Bill commented. "First things first: Harry's your friend, he's not about to dump you one way or another. He doesn't care about your clothes and your social position. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Ron said, something settling in his gut at Bill's confident assertion.

"Now, I can understand wanting to fit in and not wearing second-hand stuff is part of that," Bill continued, "that's partly why Charlie and I got you the dress robes. So let's tackle that part of it first. You have an educational fund from Sirius so when we go shopping for your school stuff, you can replace your old robes – we might even be able to sneak a couple of new non-school robes for your weekends in. I'm sure Sirius will agree a broom and Quidditch gear falls under the fund."

Ron snorted. "As if Mum will let me!"

"Ron…"

"No!" Ron protested vehemently. "You know what she's like! She'll say there's no need to waste money and she already thinks of it as charity even though it was to make up for…you know. And she hates Sirius! She'll not spend any of it just to spite him!"

"I'll talk with her." Bill promised. He paused and sighed. "Well, I'll get Dad to talk with her." He gave a small smile. "She has been better about Sirius since Harry's birthday."

Ron nodded at that because she had. Poor Harry, Ron thought, couldn't even have his birthday without getting a death threat.

"Right, so materially you'll be fine by September. And I do know how you feel, Ron. Once Mum had Percy, I ended up with second-hand robes and books just as much as the rest of you because money was tight. And while I will say that Dad's view that we're rich in love and money shouldn't matter is a nice one, I understand that in reality when you're at school and standing next to your peers, it does help your confidence and your ego to feel on you're on an equal Quidditch pitch. So I'll sort it for you either way. Agreed?" Bill said briskly.

"Agreed." Ron said a little apprehensively because he trusted Bill but their Mum was a force of nature and he couldn't see her changing her mind. But he was also a little more hopeful.

"Now, status and position." Bill sighed. "Well, you know that stuff's never been important to us. Dad's always said that what's important is that you're a good person and you live your life decently and honourably."

"I know." Ron said quietly, a little ashamed that status and position did matter to him.

"But the truth is that while neither Dad nor I really took any of the Ancient and Noble House stuff seriously, the last month has brought home to us that it is important." Bill concluded.

Ron looked up at him in surprise.

Bill nodded gravely. "We're an Ancient and Noble House. We should have a seat in the Wizengamot and we should be helping to decide our society's future. But we don't because Great-Granddad gambled away the seat and the bulk of the fortune, and Gramps rebelled against the establishment in response, and Dad is a good man but who has never been all that ambitious for himself." He gestured at Ron. "You've done more to help rebuild our status than either Dad or I."
"Me?" blurted Ron, shocked.

"You made friends with Harry. He approached us for an alliance of friendship." Bill stated. "That's because of you." He prodded Ron gently on a patch of unmarred skin. "Dad and I are doing our bit now but everyone in the family has a part to play in helping us rebuild our status including you."

"Me?" blurted Ron again.

"Yes," Bill said, "you remain a genuine friend to Harry – that's why he asked us into the alliance in the first place. Second, you get your head down, stop being a lazy prat and put some effort into your school work." His gaze drifted purposefully to the desk by the window which held Ron's untouched and uncompleted homework. "Sirius isn't going to stand for Harry having less than good grades. You need to keep up if you want to fit in and I know you're not stupid. You picked up learning your alphabet and numbers pretty quick."

Ron flushed but nodded.

"Third, if you're serious about your Quidditch career which I think is a great goal, then it would probably benefit you to go along to Harry's lessons on etiquette and politics. You'll need to learn how to interact with people on a social basis and influence them as a manager. That's essentially what Harry is learning." Bill concluded.

"Do you think he'll still let me come along?" Ron asked.

"I'll ask Sirius and Harry tomorrow but I don't think it'll be an issue." Bill said.

"What about Mum? She complained that Harry shouldn't have the lessons so I doubt she'll let me go to them." Ron pointed out.

"I'll talk with Mum." Bill promised before waving his hand. "Well, I'll get Dad to talk with Mum." He patted Ron's bad leg and Ron winced. "Sorry. OK with everything now?"

Ron nodded slowly. "Bill, is Harry OK? It's just…I know there's something more going on. There was that death threat and he was really upset a few weeks back when he and Sirius went to visit the Ministry but he said he couldn't talk about it and…"

"He's OK." Bill assured him. "He's dealing with a lot of change and – do you really think Sirius isn't going to give him the best protection he can?"

Ron shook his head. "I'm happy for him, you know, about Sirius. You can tell he really cares about Harry not like the muggles."

Bill ruffled his hair and stood up. He picked up a pain potion and gave it to Ron. "Come on. Take that potion, visit the loo and hop into bed."

Ron pulled a face but he followed instructions. Bill left him tucked up in bed but Ron wasn't all that sleepy. He heard a hoot and a tap on his window and hurried over to let Hedwig in.

"Hey there." Ron said stroking her head. She offered him her leg. Ron took the letter eagerly.

"Ron,

Heard what happened!

Sirius said your Dad told him you'd saved Ginny! Go you!"
Hope you're OK though and didn't hurt yourself too badly. It's a shame you're grounded (I told Hedwig to deliver the letter directly to you late on when hopefully your parents aren't watching) – Hermione says you should take advantage and do your homework.

Write soon and tell me all about it (the fall not your homework), Harry."

Ron gave a chuckle. He scrawled a brief note; just enough to give Harry the highlights with a promise to tell him more the next time they saw each other. Hedwig took flight and Ron closed the window, slipping back to his bed.

He was almost asleep when he heard the vague sound of his door being opened and footsteps padding up to his bed. A hand swept through his hair and he mumbled indistinctly, caught on the edge of sleep.

"We could have lost him, Arthur."

His Mum sounded like she was crying.

"He's safe and thanks to him, so's Ginny." His Dad's calm tone soothed Ron back towards the pull of sleep. "Come on Molly-wobbles."

Ron felt the press of lips against his forehead and it jolted him back into semi-awareness. "Mum?"

"Shush now," his Mum said, "go to sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

"OK," mumbled Ron and leaning into the warm touch of his mother's hand on his hurt shoulder, he fell asleep.

o-O-o

The stone on the desk looked innocuous enough, Sirius thought. Dark and oval shaped, it didn't look anything special.

He looked across the desk at Dumbledore who stared at the stone with so much longing that it gave Sirius the creeps. His gaze quickly resettled on Bertie to his right who wore a grim expression.

"You're telling me this is the Resurrection Stone out of some old children's tale of the Hallows?" Sirius said sceptically.

"The Hallows are very real." Dumbledore said, lifting his gaze from the stone for the first time since they'd entered Bertie's office.

The small cramped space didn't scream 'office of the Head of the DOM,' instead it seemed more suited for a researcher who preferred books to people. Every inch of wall space was covered in bookshelves stacked high and deep with books and journals. The desk was small with hardly any wood showing under the mountain of parchment and more books; two plain chairs took up the available floor space in front, a comfortable worn leather office chair took up the space behind. It suited Bertie.

Bertie sighed heavily and nodded in agreement with Dumbledore. "The story of the Peverells is quite based in truth, Sirius." He sank down into his chair, looking old. "You know it?"

"It was Regulus's favourite story. He wanted another brother so we'd make three. Mother laughed at him." Sirius said in a clipped tone. He had read the story for nights on end to his little brother and they had played at being the brothers or Sirius had played at being Death and Regulus had played at
being the hero Ignotus who managed to hide from him.

"Three brothers came to surging river created by Death as a trap for the unwary traveller. They worked together and used their magic to build a bridge to cross it." Bertie began the tale anyway. "Death appeared and congratulated them, offering them each a gift for their ingenuity but wanting in truth to trap them into giving up the lives they felt they had cheated him out of collecting."

"The eldest brother Antioch asked for a powerful wand," Dumbledore chimed in, "so Death went to an Elder tree and snapped off a branch fashioning it into a wand. He gave this wand to Antioch and Antioch went on his way."

"The second brother Cadmus had just lost his sweetheart to a plague and asked for a way to return the dead to life. Death picked a stone from the river bank and made it into a portal allowing the owner to bring back the shades of those who had died." Bertie recited.

"And the younger brother, Ignotus, asked to be allowed to leave without Death following him."
Sirius said, impatiently. "Death gave him his own cloak of invisibility. Antioch was arrogant, boasted about his wand and immediately got killed by a thief who stole it from him; Cadmus brought his sweetheart to life again only not, realised the difference and committed suicide; Ignotus hid from Death under his cloak and lived a long life until he willingly went to Death." He pointed at the stone. "You really think this is the Stone."

"See this etching." Bertie pointed with his wand at the strange marking on the Stone. "It is the mark of a Hallow." He gestured tiredly. "Regardless of the story, it is likely that the Peverells were powerful wizards capable of creating wonderful artefacts; the artefacts themselves are real even if the story of Death gifting them to the brothers is a child's tale."

"OK." Sirius rubbed his forehead tiredly. "So it's a Hallow. It can call the dead back…" he blanched as he suddenly realised; James, Lily, Regulus even – all could be called back by the small innocuous stone on the desk.

"And there you see why it is such a temptation." Dumbledore said gravely. "Who would not wish for a moment to talk once again with a loved one? To spend time in their presence and ask for forgiveness…"

Sirius glanced over at Dumbledore whose gaze was once again affixed to the stone. Sirius shared a concerned look with Bertie.

"Clearly, Lawrence realised the stone was the Hallow." Bertie sighed heavily. "I should have spoken with him more when he said he needed more time to work out how to separate the stone from the ring setting."

"How is he?" asked Sirius.

"We amputated his wand arm." Bertie said succinctly. "Unfortunately, the curse is such that cutting away the dead flesh is irrelevant. He will die within a matter of weeks."

"We may be able to prolong that," Dumbledore said dragging his eyes away from the stone, "I will speak to Severus. There may be potions…"

"I'm not sure prolonging his life would be a gift." Bertie snapped.

Dumbledore blinked at Bertie. "We should offer Lawrence the choice, surely?"

Bertie nodded grimly.
"It wasn't your fault, Bertie." Sirius said firmly. "He knew the curse was on the ring and he put it on anyway."

"I'm afraid I could have fallen into the same trap as poor Lawrence. I feel blessed that until today I haven't had time to see the ring for myself." Dumbledore confessed as he transfigured one of the chairs into a chintzy armchair and sat down.

Sirius suspected Lawrence had known Dumbledore would know what the stone was and that had spurred his hasty action. "I suspect he wished to bring his daughter back."

"It's a very dangerous artefact." Bertie agreed, leaning back. "At least that damnable ring has been destroyed."

Sirius nodded. He'd watched it melt and be eaten away in the furnace. There were two possible horcruxes left: one at Hogwarts and one potentially at Godric's Hollow. "Do Bill and Caro know what's happened?"

Bertie shook his head. "They're still at Godric's Hollow trying to make the house stable enough to enter. There's a great deal of dark magic seeped into the building. They have to cleanse it before they can deal with the structural issues. And they have to do all of it working under an illusion to ensure the tourists that stop by don't realise what's happening."

"Bloody ghouls." Sirius growled. He'd been angered by the report that there was evidently a tourist trip based around Godric's Hollow and the Potters' old cottage. He was going to sue someone as soon as Brian tracked down who was behind the business.

"I'll inform them about Lawrence when they report in this evening." Bertie sighed.

Losing a team member was always hard, Sirius mused, but Lawrence had known the dangers and ignored them despite having resisted temptation for the fortnight that had passed since they'd discovered the ring.

It had been a strange couple of weeks since the death threat at Harry's birthday party, filled with the Wizengamot session – he felt a knot of guilt again at how he hadn't realised how nervous Harry had been about the whole affair but Harry had been fantastic – and more dinners and meetings than he could shake a stick at.

Ron Weasley's flying escapade with his sister had resulted in him joining Harry for etiquette and political lessons which pleased Harry no end and Sirius couldn't help but be impressed at Bill who'd sold the whole thing to his parents as punishment for Ron's transgression.

"So we're left with the question of what to do with the Hallow." Bertie said, pulling Sirius back to the present.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "I thought you'd want to lock it up in some musty storeroom here for further study."

"Yes, well," Bertie shifted uncomfortably, "we can only do that if we're certain the artefact isn't a family heirloom."

"Can't it be confiscated from Riddle?" Sirius demanded, confused. "I mean, we're surely not going to give him the means of bringing back the dead even if they're just shades."

"Oh, I don't mean Riddle!" Bertie said emphatically. "I don't think the Gaunts genealogically are directly related to the Peverells. Cadmus was said to have tossed the stone and himself into the river
to drown. No, more likely that some other ancestor of theirs happened across the stone and set it into the ring without knowing what it was. I don't believe Riddle knew otherwise he no doubt would have tried to access its power."

"But there is one living descendent of the Peverells who has a claim on the stone." Dumbledore said, his eyes sparkling with that annoying 'I know something you don't' twinkle that Sirius hated.

"Who?" asked Sirius outright, refusing to dance around and make wild guesses for the next hour.

Bertie cleared his throat. "Well, the line of Ignatus Peverell eventually renamed itself from Peverell to…"

"Potter." Dumbledore supplied with a warm smile.

"Harry." Sirius sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He should have known.

"Have you never wondered about that wonderful cloak of invisibility, Sirius?" Dumbledore chided gently. "It is the Potter family heirloom and yet its charms remain strong and vibrant despite centuries of wear."

"So, Harry's cloak is the cloak?" Sirius sputtered. He'd used the cloak many times as a Marauder. Dear Merlin! "Death's cloak?"

"Well, probably in reality the first true invisibility cloak invented by Peverell himself." Bertie said cheering up a little. "I was aware the Potters' had it but Charlus refused to give it to me for study."

Sirius frowned and sat down abruptly. "That's the stone; Harry has the cloak; so where's the wand?"

"Ah, well that's the question isn't it?" Bertie asked. "There is a marvellous theory that if all three are owned by the same person then he or she becomes the Master of Death. Unfortunately the wand has a rather tricky history and was last known to be held by…"

"Alas, it was lost." Dumbledore cut in.

"Sirius's eyes narrowed on the old wizard.

Bertie subsided. "Perhaps it is better to consider it lost, yes; a very good point." He sighed. "Anyway, my previous point such as it was is that the stone and the rest of the Hallows," he glanced at Albus, "if they belong to anyone, they belong to Harry."

Sirius sighed. "I will talk to Harry but my recommendation to him will be to lock the thing away in the family vault."

They all looked pensively at the stone.

"Did Lawrence see his daughter?" Dumbledore asked eventually.

Bertie shook his head. "The curse struck before he could complete turning the stone."

Dumbledore's eyes drifted back to the artefact but he nodded slowly. "Perhaps it was for the best."

Bertie picked up his wand and levitated the stone into a box. "I will lock it up here in the meantime, Sirius." He confirmed. "Let me know once you've spoken with Harry."

"Will do." Sirius got to his feet. "Please give my best to Lawrence and his family."
"And mine." Dumbledore said rising, the chair configuring back to its usual state. "I must get back to Hogwarts and make arrangements for your visit to the Chamber next week."

Sirius walked out with him. "Are you back in the country for good now?"

"I am." Dumbledore confirmed. "The last details of the Tri-Wizard Tournament have been finalised and my Summer is once again my own. It is a shame that Bartemius remains so ill."

He placed a hand on Dumbledore's arm before they exited the Ministry. He ushered Dumbledore into an alcove and raised a privacy bubble. "Albus, this stone seems to…you seem unusually interested."

Dumbledore sighed heavily and his eyes grew dim. "In my youth, I fell in love and my partner and I dreamed of uniting the Hallows; so many grand plans we weaved. My brother objected fiercely to my leaving home and a fight broke out amongst us. My sister Ariana was caught in the crossfire. We never knew which spell was the one to…"

Sirius felt his heart squeeze tight in sympathy.

"I became penitent and sought to never again give into the temptation of power. But even today…to talk with Ariana one more time…" Dumbledore sniffed and blinked back tears. "You are quite right, Sirius. I will leave the stone in Bertie's capable hands and think no more on it. I once told Harry that it does no good to dwell on dreams; I should take my own advice."

He left, taking the privacy bubble down and leaving Sirius feeling like he'd kicked a puppy. Sirius made his way to Black Manor but immediately left again for Griffin House.

Remus and Harry were in the sun room and Sirius brought them up to speed as Dobby brought them glasses of lemonade and chocolate biscuits.

"Poor Lawrence." Harry said, compassionately. "Does he have family or…"

"A sister." Remus answered. "His wife died a few years ago and his daughter…she died during the last war at the hands of Greyback, the werewolf who bit me."

Harry folded his arms and frowned. "Why haven't I heard this story of the brothers before?"

"It's a wizarding story in a popular book called 'Tales of Beedle the Bard,' Harry." Remus explained. "Most wizarding children learn to read with that book. I certainly did."

"You did have a copy in your nursery," Sirius said thoughtfully, "if Bill and Caro ever make it actually into the house at Godric's Hollow they may find it. I'm sure James gave you the Potter copy passed down through the generations."

"But once I was living with the Dursleys there was no way they'd ever allow me to have a wizarding book or hear any wizarding tales." Harry nodded. "I'm really related to this Ignotus Peverell?"

"So it seems." Sirius said.

"I'll check." Remus offered. "But if both Bertie and Albus agreed that you are his descendant…"

"It's probable that I am." Harry said with a sigh. "I'm not having my cloak locked up."

"Nobody's suggesting that." Remus soothed him while sending Sirius a questioning look that clearly said 'are you?'
"Remus is right," Sirius quickly confirmed, "your cloak is your cloak but as your parent and an ex-Marauder I wish you'd use the thing for pranks rather than getting into dangerous situations."

Harry grinned at him. "You're so cool."

Sirius happily hammed it up and preened. "Thank you."

Remus laughed at his antics. "Only you, Padfoot."

Harry's amusement faded. "But you think the stone should be locked up?"

"The stone is..." Sirius made a half-hearted gesture and his hand fell to the table, "...a temptation to drive yourself mad."

"Like Cadmus the original brother who owned it." Remus said. "He wanted to bring his love back but Death tricked him. The stone brought back her shade but not her body. He couldn't kiss her or make love with her..."

Sirius almost snickered at the bright red colour on Harry's cheeks. There was a plan to give Harry and Neville the Talk in motion. They'd certainly do it before the boys went back to Hogwarts.

"...so eventually he realised he didn't have her back at all. She was still dead and he was still alive and never shall the twain meet for good reason." Remus finished.

Harry thought about Remus's words so hard Sirius could almost see them turning over in his head. "It must be like the Mirror of Erised."

"Hmmm?" Sirius murmured confused.

"The Mirror which the Headmaster used to hide the Philosopher's stone in showed you your heart's desire," explained Harry, "I found it at the Christmas break in my first year and...and it showed me Mum and Dad. We were together as a family and happy."

Sirius reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I kept going back to look at them." Harry confessed sheepishly. "Just to look because I'd never seen them before and...it was before Hagrid gave me the album."

"What happened?" inquired Remus gently.

"The Headmaster caught me." Harry admitted. "He told me it didn't do to dwell on dreams. I guess he wanted me to focus on the present and not the past. I suppose he was right, I mean I would have stayed with the Mirror all the time if I could back then."

Sirius squeezed his shoulder.

"And...and I guess this stone is like that." Harry said, tracing a pattern on the table top idly. "If I...if I brought Mum and Dad back just to talk with them once..." he paused and ducked his head, "I don't think I could give them up again." He admitted in a pained voice.

"Me either." Sirius admitted roughly.

Remus sighed. "Me either."

They sat in silence for a long moment, all once again mourning James and Lily.
Sirius cleared his throat. "The stone stays locked up, then?"

Harry nodded jerkily. "I think I'll go up to my room and read a bit."

Or go up to his room and mope a bit, Sirius corrected in his head, not that he could blame Harry; he was probably going to do the same when he went up to bed.

He let go of Harry's shoulder and watched as Harry wandered back into the house. "Poor kid. If it's not one thing, it's another."

"You didn't have to tell him."

The rebuke was mild but it was there and Sirius glowered at Remus. "This from the man who encouraged me to risk him in getting the stone in the first place!? I won't keep secrets from him. He needs to know he's trusted to know these things and to make his own decisions."

"I don't disagree entirely," Remus began, "but sometimes I think you overestimate how much he can handle. He is only fourteen!"

"Don't you think I debate every decision I make about Harry a hundred times or more?" demanded Sirius hotly, knowing Remus had been as horrified as he had been when Dobby had let slip that Harry had thrown up the morning of the Wizengamot session.

"I know," Remus held up a hand placating Sirius, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to turn into Molly, it's just..." he hunched his shoulders as he crossed his arms tightly around himself, "sometimes I think your original idea of wrapping him in cotton wool and hiding him somewhere safe was the one to go with."

"Me too." Sirius said in a heartfelt way that made Remus snort. "Healer Allen says he's doing better."

Seeing a mind healer to help cope with the impact of the prophecy had been a very good idea. Jasper Allen was a former protégé of Noshi's and he was an excellent choice. He met with Harry and Sirius once a week and had helped them deal with some of the immediate fears: for Harry that he had to become a murderer and Sirius's that he would lose Harry and wouldn't be able to protect him.

"Harry's enjoying his art therapy." Remus said. "Some of his drawings are very good."

Sirius picked up his lemonade and took a swallow, wandlessly switching some of Remus's lemonade for the contents of a vial of potion secreted in his robes; Remus deserved it for giving him a hard time. "Do you think the Master of Death thing could be Harry's power, you know, the one the Dark Lord knows not?"

Remus paused, his own glass almost to his lips. He set it down again while he considered the question. "It's a bit convenient, isn't it?"

"It's power." Sirius commented.

"Let's pretend for a moment that it's true," Remus said, "we would need to find the Elder wand to complete the set..."

"I think Albus knows where it is." Sirius said. "Bertie has an idea. I'm sure it couldn't be that hard to track down."

"Yes," Remus said dryly, "because the Elder wand, the most powerful wand in the world which has
been lost for ages, would be really easy to find if only we put our minds to it."

"Well, when you put it like that." Sirius complained.

"No, no," Remus said, "let's not throw realism over your enthusiasm, let's say we find it and Harry unites all three Hallows…what's the power?"

Sirius looked at him blankly.

"He has a cloak of invisibility," Remus listed, "which is good for hiding and that's great but he has that already. He gets a stone to bring back the dead but for what purpose? To answer questions or help him? Well, he already has the living for that and any other use of the stone will drive him mad. He gets a powerful wand but he's a fourteen year old wizard who, despite being an excellent duellist for his age, would struggle against Voldemort with his years of experience and vast range of dark spells. If Voldemort won a duel, he'd win the wand's loyalty and then where would we be? Nowhere, that's where."

"You're rambling." Sirius pointed out. "OK, look," he waved his hands to stop Remus talking, "I admit that individually each item has its uses and its disadvantages and possibly it makes no sense but if there is more to being the Master of Death, if it comes with some kind of other power…to, I don't know, call Death himself or take a life without using an Unforgivable or blowing the bastard up…maybe it would be 'the power he knows not.'"

Remus looked at him with raised eyebrows. "I think you're nuts, Padfoot," he said finally, "but I'll investigate the wand."

"Thank you." Sirius said feeling a little vindicated.

His friend raised his lemonade in a silent toast, placed the glass against his lips and lowered it again abruptly.

"What?" asked Sirius. Remus couldn't be suspicious about the lemonade, could he? Sirius hadn't spiked any drinks for at least two weeks with pranking potion.

"Just…" Remus's face screwed up in thought for a second, "one of the origin stories for the family magic we found last week suggested that Merlin avoided one of Death's traps and when Death asked him what he wished for Merlin said that he wouldn't ask for anything in life but he would ask for something in death."

"And he asked for the family magic?" Sirius frowned.

"No, in the story Death sent Nimue who tricked Merlin into becoming a tree; always alive and never dead and thus he would never ask for his gift." Remus said. "Merlin, in a last ditch effort to save himself, cast a counter-spell to Nimue's trap. He sent his magic to the most powerful wizards and witches of the day with the condition that when a single wizard or witch united his magic once more, the tree would wither and die. At that point, he would be able to claim his gift from Death."

"Some common themes." Sirius commented. "But it's not the same is it?"

"No…just it made me think." Remus said, finally taking a sip of his lemonade.

His hair turned a nice shade of purple. Sirius kept his face straight; a reaction would give away the prank before its surprise revelation to Moony.

"I'm not sure any of the origin stories about the family magic are actually going to make sense of
Harry's use of family magic." Remus mused out loud, stretching out and staring out at the garden. "I personally think his affinity for it will be the power in the prophecy. Voldemort doesn't have any family magic to draw upon although I guess we don't know if Slytherin devised something similar but his line wasn't part of the Wizarding Council at the time they became the Ancient and Noble Houses."

Sirius coughed to hide the bubble of laughter that rose up as Remus's hair turned pink.

"I take it with Albus back we're going to be able to organise getting into the Chamber of Secrets?" Remus asked.

"Finally." Sirius managed to get out as Remus's shifted to orange.

"Harry asked me this morning if Ron could come along with him." Remus said.

Sirius grimaced. "I'm sure that would go down well with Molly." Although in truth she had stopped sniping at him since the birthday party and Sirius could admit he could settle for the strange truce that had developed between them.

"It may help the cover story." Remus pointed out. "If all we're supposed to be doing is going down there to recover the basilisk and take a better look around, Harry having someone like Ron along – who did go with him on his first adventure too – would be a useful cover."

"That's rather cold of you, Remus." Sirius said, surprised. "You know better than anyone that we're not going down there to recover the basilisk but to find a horcrux and it could be very dangerous. I trust Harry with it because he was brilliant with the ring but Ron?"

"Yes, it could be dangerous but I think Harry knows that and will keep Ron from doing anything risky. Bill will be there too so Ron will have another set of eyes on him." Remus said.

"Bill will know why we're really there and do you think he's going to agree to it?" pressed Sirius, drinking deeply from his own lemonade.

"I think he will if I tell him Ron is getting very curious about what Harry is up to." Remus replied. "Harry told me that both Ron and Hermione have been trying to get him to talk since the death threat; to confide in them. He says that they know he's not telling them everything, and he understands he can't tell them about the prophecy or the treasure hunt for their protection as much as his, but he thinks if he gives them something they'll let up. I think he's struggling keeping these types of secrets from his friends when they've been the ones to help him before."

Sirius harrumphed but settled back to think about Remus's words, ignoring the blue colour of Remus's hair. "Talk to Bill and let him make the decision. If he agrees then we'll invite Hermione along as well; she's got a sensible head on her shoulders and will be able to corral Ronald."

"Good idea."

"Hopefully, it'll give them both enough to satisfy their curiosity." Sirius said with a sigh. He didn't want Harry feeling torn.

"I've noticed that you seem…conflicted about Ron's friendship with Harry." Remus said suddenly, surprising Sirius into looking at him.

"I'm…cautious about him." Sirius admitted. "He's been a good friend to Harry these past few years, I know that, but…"
"But?" prompted Remus quietly.

Sirius shifted restlessly in his chair. "Some of his behaviour reminds me..." he hesitated and plunged on, "...reminds me of Peter."

Remus frowned but he didn't jump all over Sirius for making the observation; instead he seemed to consider the idea. He sighed heavily. "If I compare Peter – the Peter we knew at school – with Ron as a student from what I saw last year at Hogwarts, I agree there are similarities. He's bright but he's a lazy student. I'm certain Minerva's end of year notes will have 'could do better' written all over them just like Peter's did. He's attached himself to Harry in much the same way Peter attached himself to James and you."

"And you." Sirius said.

"Oh no," Remus shook his head and the brilliantly red colour caught the sunlight like a corona, "Peter wanted to be seen with the most powerful and popular. He considered me an equal – a fellow follower."

"Ron has flashes of jealousy and I remember seeing them on Peter's face when James got cheered for a Quidditch win, or brought a new broom to school, or one of us did something in class quicker and faster than anyone else." Sirius said. "I didn't think anything of it back then."

"Nobody did." Remus said quietly. "But then it wasn't all Peter was back then. Sometimes I think back and I remember how he used to sneak me chocolate the day after the full moons while I was in the infirmary, and I remember how he confided in me that he knew a rat wasn't a great form but he still wanted to become an animagus to help me, and I remember how he crushed on Kirsty Sapworthy so badly that he begged me for advice." He sighed heavily. "I have a hard time reconciling that Peter with the crawling, cowardly cheat who betrayed us and killed James and Lily."

"Me too." Sirius agreed. "I loved Peter same as you and James...I trusted him absolutely and..." he folded his arms tightly as his jaw clenched in renewed anger and pain. Peter had betrayed his trust so comprehensively and it had cost Sirius so much more than years in Azkaban. He would never forgive him.

"Ron isn't Peter though." Remus continued. "Yes, there are some superficial similarities in their current nature but that's all. Is it possible you're projecting your anger and distrust at Peter onto Ron?"

Sirius tried to consider Remus's comment without simply snapping a denial. He could be right. The similarities were superficial and hadn't Ron started to come round? He'd actually made some good contributions in the political lesson that week and Andy had commented that he'd obviously been taught good manners; they just needed to be used and polished.

He sighed.

He knew he'd fallen into casting Harry's friends into roles that were associated with his own: Hermione as Remus – intelligent and sensible, Ron as Peter – lazy and sycophantic, and possibly with some wishful thinking Neville as James – loyal and brotherly...but he shouldn't. The kids were themselves, their own characters with their own foibles, and comparing them to his friends was daft. If he asked, Sirius thought wryly, Harry would probably cast Ron as James.

"You have a point," conceded Sirius, "I will endeavour to be more objective."

"One thing you might keep in mind is that Peter was an only child with only his mother, who let's
face it, was sweet but a complete hypochondriac, and Ron has a very supportive family very rooted in the Light," Remus said. "From the sound of it, I think Bill's taken Ron in hand and pointed out a few things to him – he's got him into the etiquette and politics lessons, and I overheard Ron asking Harry about his Charms essay on Monday. Since both Hermione and Harry teased him about not doing his homework at the last minute like always…"

"He's trying to change." Sirius nodded slowly, remembering a conversation with Bill about Ron's place in Harry's new life. Bill would help his brother and maybe that would make all the difference and steer Ron away from what temptations had seduced Peter to Voldemort's side. "I get it."

Remus stood up, stretched and rolled his neck to ease out the cricks. "I'll go check on Harry."

Sirius nodded absently. He had some correspondence to get to that Penelope had handed to him that morning and decisions needed to be made on a few business issues Remus had highlighted earlier in the week. He set off for his study and was half-way through a letter when he heard a shriek resounding through the house…

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY HAIR IS GREEN!?"

Sirius snickered. At least Harry would be smiling again.
"Time's up!"

Harry set his quill down and massaged his cramping right hand with his left. He breathed in deeply the way Healer Fay had instructed; his magic responded to his call and healed the strained muscles. He instantly felt better and took another breath as the Runes teacher, Professor Bathsheda Babbling, took his completed parchments with a bright sunny smile. She reminded him a little of Hermione; wild chestnut hair, kind brown eyes and an intelligent face.

"Ah, excellent, Mister Potter." Professor Babbling said happily. "I'll have these back to you by the end of the day."

Harry nodded nervously. It was the first test he had sat since Sirius had assumed guardianship of him, and beyond the goal of getting into fourth year Runes, he also wanted desperately to have done well. The test had been really long though and the questions towards the end included deciphering runes in strange combinations that he and Sirius hadn't covered in their tutoring. Maybe the syllabus had changed since Sirius had been a student, Harry thought ruefully. But hopefully, hopefully, he had done enough.

Professor Babbling dismissed him briskly and Harry gathered up his things and exited the classroom. Padfoot waited for him in the corridor and Harry made for the dog, giving him a hug before stepping back so Sirius could transform back into a man.

"Well, don't keep me in suspenders!" Sirius said urgently. "How did it go?"

Harry smiled at Sirius's obvious interest. "I think I did OK. There were a lot of questions for an end of year exam and some of the combinations at the end we hadn't covered."

Sirius frowned. "Did you break down the combination and work them out though like..."

"Like you taught me." Harry nodded. "I think I got tangled up on one and I'm pretty sure I said the Norse rune for healing was for blessing in another but..." he heaved a sigh, "I think I did enough to get in the class?"

"Good. Excellent work." Sirius said, slinging an arm around his shoulder and prompting Harry to walk toward the Great Hall. "Everyone else should be gathered for lunch. We'll have a quick bite to eat and then it's off to the Chamber of Horrors."

Harry smiled. The quiet return to the Chamber to search for another one of the objects Voldemort had left behind like the diary had turned into a huge undertaking to maintain the cover story. Some of it, Harry admitted to himself, was his fault as he had asked for Ron to come along. Bill had agreed but in convincing his mother, somehow the condition had been set that the Weasley matriarch and Ginny should attend too. According to Ron, Ginny had "gone mental" demanding that if anyone should be allowed to return it should be her and, after some discussion with Madame Pomfrey, it had been decided it would be beneficial for Ginny to face her demons.

In addition to the Weasleys, Sirius had gained agreement from the Grangers to allow Hermione to attend and the Headmaster in announcing that they were recovering the basilisk had found himself with an influx of volunteers from the excited Hogwarts staff, all wanting to catch a glimpse of the infamous Chamber. Minerva, Hagrid, Professor Flitwick, Professor Snape, Professor Sprout and the new DADA Professor Alastor Moody were all coming along. A contingent of Gringotts Creature
Specialists had also been hired for the basilisk removal and rendering. With the treasure team, Bertie, Sirius and Remus, Harry felt they had enough people that even the massive Chamber he remembered was going to feel cramped.

The Hall was bustling with people when Sirius and Harry entered. A long table had been laid out in the centre and everybody was milling about with beverages. The house elves were popping in and out with canapés, looking immensely thrilled to be busy.

"Harry!" Hermione came rushing up with Ron trailing behind her. "How did you do? Did you manage all of the questions? Were they hard? Did you answer the essay question on Norse or Celtic runes? I did Norse but after the exam I thought I should have done Celtic and…"

"Blimey, Hermione!" Ron interrupted as both Sirius and Harry started chortling at the stream of questions. "Give the bloke a chance!"

Hermione blushed but crossed her arms and pinned Ron with a glare. "You're not even interested!"

"It's an exam!" Ron retorted. "One I didn't have to do! Of course, I'm not interested!" He suddenly seemed to realise that his words could be offensive to Harry and winced visibly. "Sorry, mate!"

Harry shrugged. He doubted he would be that interested in an exam Ron did that he didn't have to sit for. "It was OK," he said in reply to Hermione, "yes, I managed all the questions but only just in the time, some of them were really hard and I did the first essay question on Norse runes and the second one on Celtic."

Hermione frowned. "My exam only had one essay question."

"Maybe she added some questions to test me more since she didn't teach me it and this is to prove I have the knowledge to get into fourth year." Harry theorised. There had been a lot of questions. His stomach growled.

"Lunch time." Sirius said firmly, leading him to the table.

"You should try these little sausages on sticks," Ron said enthusiastically, "they're brilliant!"

Hermione sniffed. "You'll ruin your appetite eating all those before lunch."

"Your appetite, maybe," Ron shot back, "mine no way!"

"Well, that's because you're a growing boy." Molly said, walking up to join them. She gave Harry a light hug. "Glad to hear it went well, dear. Sit down and have your lunch."

It appeared that with Sirius and Harry both seated at the table, everyone else began to wander over and in no time at all, the table was filled.

Sirius sat one side of Harry with Hermione on the other. Ron sat across from Harry in between his Mum and Ginny. Remus ended up next to Sirius, Bill next to Ginny. The Professors grouped together at the head of the table where the Headmaster sat presiding over everyone. The rest of the treasure team, Bertie and the Gringotts' Creature Specialist team (two Goblins named Footlock and Brimbold, an old wizard named Casper that Bill had greeted happily and a young wizard called Aontius who was Bulgarian and a Gringotts' intern) gathered together at the bottom.

A lively debate broke out about the imminent Quidditch World cup with Aontius defending Bulgaria and Bill taking the side of Ireland. Ron chimped in on Aontius's side surprising his brother. Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian seeker, according to Ron, was the best seeker in the entire world.
Harry took part enough to contribute his own point of view that Ireland had the better Chaser formation before turning and engaging Hermione in a conversation about why she'd wanted to do the essay on Celtic runes rather than the Norse as she had done. Remus and Sirius were happy to debate the relative merits with both of them and since it had the added benefit of preventing Sirius from glaring at Snape every few minutes it was all to the good. The initial meeting between the two hadn't gone well…

*Harry smiled as he stepped out of the floo without stumbling and into the Headmaster's office.*

Remus was already there and waved his wand to clear him of soot. "You're getting better at floo travel, Harry."

"He couldn't get much worse." Snape sneered, drawing Harry's attention to his presence. Snape was lurking at the back of the office by a bookcase.

Dumbledore smiled widely. "Now, Severus, it does take everyone some time to get used to travelling by floo."

Harry exchanged a look with Remus but thankfully Sirius arrived, stepping out of the floo with a poised grace and elegance that Andy had promised Harry he would one day achieve for himself.

*Sirius smiled at Harry before his eyes caught on Snape and his expression lost all semblance of good humour. "Snape."*

"Black."

"What's he doing here?" Sirius asked sharply.

"As our Potions Master, Severus is helping with the basilisk." Dumbledore said mildly but Harry could hear the rebuke in Dumbledore's tone at Sirius's question. "He, of course, is also aware of the real reason for our descent into the Chamber today."

"I still don't know why I have to suffer the presence of the man who tried to feed me to a Dementor!" Sirius snapped.

Snape bristled and took a step forward, hands clenching into fists at his side. "You tried to feed me to a werewolf!"

"You tried to feed yourself to a werewolf!" Sirius retorted.

"The werewolf in question would like to point out that he prefers a nice steak." Remus inserted, subtly placing himself beside Harry protectively.

Harry couldn't help but chuckle.

Snape glared at him. "I suppose you think that's funny, Potter?"

"Everyone except you thinks it's funny including the phoenix!" Sirius said, and he was right; Fawkes was amused. Sirius put a protective hand on Harry's shoulder.

"I don't have to stand here and be insulted by you!" Snape snarled, his wand appearing in his hand.

Sirius moved in a blink and his wand was out and pointed at Snape. "Bring it on, Snape. We might as well duel now and get it over with because I don't see you having the self-control to actually treat Harry with decency and civility and I won't stand for you bullying him!"
"You and your little group bullied me for years and you know it!" Snape sneered.

"I don't deny it." Sirius said, taking the wind out of Snape's sails in a major way if the blank look of shock on Snape's face was anything to go by. "Oh yes, Snape. I've been honest with Harry about the mistakes I've made and I've admitted to him that I'm not proud of how we behaved with you. But when we bullied you, Snape, we were all the same age and perhaps it wasn't fair, four on one, but it was a damn sight fairer than a grown man picking on a child who can't even remember the man you hate him for looking like!"

Snape glowered angrily. "I have a role to play, something you would know nothing about."

"Don't try to justify your atrocious behaviour as a teacher because you're a spy!" Sirius snapped. "And I know exactly what it means to play a role with Death Eaters! I was undercover for almost six months with a pack of them on the continent. So don't give me that!"

"Gentlemen!" Dumbledore said loudly, finally rising from his chair to intervene. "Sirius, please; we are all on the same side."

"I'm not too sure about that." Sirius growled, anger turning his grey eyes stormy.

"Severus has my complete trust..." Dumbledore began.

"And no-one else's." But Sirius lowered his wand and Snape put his away with a haughty sniff.

Remus gave a small sigh and Harry looked at him surprised, realising how tense Remus had been about the confrontation.

Sirius gave Snape a glare. "I'm only going to say this once, Professor Snape; I hear of one incident that involves you being less than professional in regards to Harry and I will ruin you. Don't think you can hide behind Albus's robes; not even he will be able to protect you."

Snape's nostrils flared in anger. "You think just because you're Lord Black now you can get away with threatening me?"

"It's not a threat, Professor," Sirius smiled humourlessly, "it's a promise. That, and the fact that I'll be assuming my place on the Board of Governors and will be keeping a close watch on the teaching standards here at Hogwarts."

Snape gave an incoherent snarl of fury and stormed out of the room, his robes billowing behind him.

"I had so hoped a private meeting would have given you an opportunity to put aside your differences and agree to work together." Dumbledore remonstrated.

"Firstly, if that was your intent, you should have forewarned me of a meeting and it certainly didn't look like Snape got the memo on your agenda," Sirius snapped, "and secondly, I'll put aside my differences when he apologises to Harry for being a complete bastard and..." he stopped himself abruptly, "and other things." He held up a hand when Dumbledore went to speak. "Keep your pet spy on a leash or I will do exactly what I promised, Headmaster."

"Well, I never," Phineas Nigellus said from his portrait, "speaking to the Headmaster in such a disrespectful tone and..."

"Your Lord Black commands you to silence!" Sirius turned around and snapped at the portrait which immediately shut up, bound by the Black family magic to follow the order.
Harry shifted uncertainly by Sirius's side, knowing that something in the confrontation with Snape had upset Sirius hugely as had Dumbledore's defence of the Potions Professor. He placed a hand on Sirius's arm comfortingly. "Headmaster, is Professor Babbling waiting in her office for me?"

"The Runes classroom, Harry." Dumbledore smiled at him, evidently appreciative of Harry's attempt to change the subject.

"We'd best be making a move then." Sirius agreed, taking Harry's cue and running with it.

"I'll stay and go over the details of when everyone else is arriving with Albus." Remus promised with a fond smile for Harry. "Good luck!"

All in all Harry was relieved that Snape was down at the other end of the table from Sirius. He appreciated Sirius sticking up for him but he truly didn't think it was going to make any difference to Snape's behaviour. But it felt good to know there was someone who would stand up for him. If he'd told his aunt or uncle about Snape's behaviour they would have just told him he deserved it.

Harry set his spoon down as he finished his dessert and caught sight of Ginny's pale face. He wondered if it really was the best thing for her to face the Chamber. He had to admit his own nerves had started up with his exam out of the way.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Dumbledore stood up and smiled benevolently down the length of the table, "thank you all for coming today. This is a special occasion. We all have the honour of descending into Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets. Our primary objective today is to recover the basilisk which Harry killed in self-defence when rescuing Miss Weasley. We have the help of our esteemed visitors from Gringotts led by Goblin Master Brimbold. Half of the revenue will be donated to a new trust for the maintenance of Hogwarts including purchase of new teaching equipment, books and supplies; it will be known as the Phoenix Trust and will be administered by the Potter steward. The rest of the revenue will be split in various amounts between all those affected by the basilisk and her master including: the family of Myrtle Bootle, Rubeus Hagrid, Argus Filch, Colin Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Penelope Clearwater, Hermione Granger, Ronald and Ginevra Weasley. Oh, and there will be a new perch for Fawkes in recognition of his bravery and assistance in defeating the basilisk along with a small donation to St Mungo's for the on-going care and treatment of Gilderoy Lockhart. On behalf of the school, I would like to thank Harry for his generosity."

There was a small round of applause which had Harry blushing. His discussion with Sirius about how to divide the basilisk revenue had been an interesting one. He had debated endlessly about Fawkes and Lockhart: the former because Harry placed a lot of emphasis on the role the phoenix had played in helping him, and the latter because as much as Lockhart was an obliviating fraud, Lockhart had only been down in the tunnel because Harry and Ron had forced him into it. In essence the trust to the school was recognition of the phoenix's major contribution since Harry couldn't exactly gift the money to Fawkes personally. He'd also debated about the Weasleys since they hadn't been harmed by the basilisk so much as its master; Ginny had been rather silly writing in the diary but then hadn't Harry done the same? And Ron...well, Harry firmly believed that Ron deserved something for braving his demons and going into the forest; for his want to rescue Ginny even if he'd ended up on the wrong side of the cave-in. Still the Weasleys' share was very small compared to those that had been petrified and Harry was content he'd made the right decision to give them something.

"Now, while I'm sure we're all excited about visiting the Chamber," Dumbledore continued, "I must remind everyone that although there is no longer a basilisk protecting it, there may be other dangers. Salazar Slytherin was a very cunning and powerful wizard and it is unlikely that the basilisk was the only protection. We may also come across artefacts from Slytherin and these may also be dangerous."
Therefore, our underage students today must remain with an adult at all times, and I would encourage the adults to allow our specialist curse-breakers to lead the way."

Harry glanced at Sirius who gave him an encouraging wink. They had already discussed Harry remaining with Sirius and following the same rules as the expedition to get the ring.

"Well, if we're all done with lunch, may I suggest we make final preparations and gather in ten minutes for Harry to lead us to the Chamber." Dumbledore finished.

There was an immediate scramble for the loo. Before too long Harry found himself in another familiar bathroom.

"You came back!" Myrtle appeared with a splash from a toilet and Harry shot Sirius a 'don't you dare tease me in front of everybody' look.

"I did, Myrtle," Harry said, politely, "we're all going to see the Chamber, do you want to come with us?"

"Oh no!" Myrtle shook her head. "We ghosts can't go down there!"

"Fascinating," Dumbledore murmured behind him.

"A ghost ward of some kind?" Bertie offered as an explanation.

Harry crouched down and set his eyes on the small squiggle that represented a snake. "Open." He hissed.

The sink moved aside just as he remembered and the long steep slide revealed itself.

"Try asking for stairs." Bertie said quickly before Harry could move. "I doubt Slytherin would slide down; far below his dignity."

Harry nodded, closed his eyes to conjure up a picture of a snake in his head and whispered the word 'stairs' in parseltongue.

The whole tunnel shimmered for a second before the top of the pipe was raised and steps appeared, roughly hewn and very steep but there.

"Oh, well done, Harry!" Dumbledore said.

"Right then!" Bill wriggled his way to the front. "Caro and I will go ahead."

"Be careful, William!" Molly called out.

Bill rolled his eyes at Harry as Caro smirked at him. Harry grinned and moved away from the opening. The Treasure Team, Bertie, the Creature Specialist team and most of the Professors all headed down before he and Sirius followed, the lumos spells lighting their way, Remus behind them with Hermione and Molly with Ginny and Ron.

Walking down took a lot longer than sliding and Harry was slightly out of breath by the time they reached the cave-in where Lockhart had tried to obliviate them. Someone had created balls of light that lit up the area, relieving the dark. Most of the group was working to clear the tunnel and shore it up to make it safe.

Harry stayed back to let them work but shivered suddenly as his mind started to churn with the memories of terror and horror and…
Sirius moved closer, wrapping an arm around him. "You OK?" He whispered.

Harry nodded, unable to speak and his eyes sought out Ron and Ginny. They looked as pale and frightened as he felt. Ginny was clinging to her mother; Ron looked milk white under his freckles.

"If you want out at any time, Harry, just say and we'll leave." Remus said quietly.

"It doesn't matter if we have to come back so no worries, alright?" Sirius added, supportively.

"Yeah," Harry managed with a small smile, "sorry, it's just…coming down here…I didn't realise it would bring it all back so much."

Remus nodded and catching Harry glance towards the Weasleys again, he smiled. "I'll go check on them."

Hermione's hand gently took hold of Harry's and he shifted his grip to hold hers in case she was feeling scared.

"I wish I'd been with you." She whispered.

"Me too." Harry replied, remembering how she'd helped him with all the traps with the Philosopher's stone. But at least she hadn't been hurt beyond the petrification. If she'd come with him and Ron, would she have ended up beside him fighting the basilisk or dead or…

"Wonderful!" Bertie's shout dragged Harry's attention to where everyone else was gathered.

Where there had once been a heap of rocks and stone stood a brand new archway built out of the rubble.

"That's a nice bit of transfiguration, Albus!" Bertie said.

Minerva nodded. "It'll hold for a good year or more."

"Would you give me an Outstanding then, Minerva?" teased Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling.

Snape rushed forward and started to examine the huge cast-off skin that lay on the other side of the archway.

Brimbold followed and turned to Harry. "How large is this beast?"

"I'm, uh, not sure of the size," admitted Harry, "but it was really big."

"I'd estimate around fifty to sixty feet based on Harry's memory; as thick as an ancient oak tree." Bertie said. "Harry, if you could, we're going to need you for the next bit."

They all carried on down the tunnel to the massive doors, a strange silence settling over the group.

Dumbledore turned around and held up his wand for attention. "It has been over a year since Harry defeated the basilisk so there is likely to be some decay. You may want to cover your mouths and noses until the smell has been dispersed."

"Here." Sirius handed Harry a handkerchief and conjured another for Hermione's use.

"There's a perfect spell called the Bubble Head charm for this type of situation but they don't teach it to us for another couple of years yet and, oh look! Professor Flitwick's demonstrating it." Hermione rambled in Harry's ear.
Harry looked at their Charms Professor and saw a strange translucent bubble surrounding his head.

"It's mainly meant to be used underwater like the old deep sea diving suits but an alternative use is in potions and as a supply of fresh air in spelunking." Hermione continued to ramble and Harry didn't object knowing it was her way of dealing with her nerves. "Of course, it is very unstable if cast inexpertly and can easily be disturbed which makes it very dangerous!"

There was a loud sob and they both turned to look at Ginny who was a trembling mess.

"That's it!" Molly declared as she rubbed Ginny's shoulders. "I'm taking you back up! I knew this was a bad idea."

"No…" Ginny sobbed. "I just…" her eyes snapped open and arrowed in on Harry. "Please, can I stay with Harry?"

Molly sent Harry a helpless look. Ron mouthed the word 'mental' at him.

Harry nodded reluctantly. He held out his free hand to Ginny who immediately rushed over and grasped it tightly. Hermione, who held his other hand, gave him a subtle squeeze of support.

"Well, since Harry's got his hands full, a handkerchief isn't going to work anymore so…" Sirius frowned. "Moony?"

"You always were hopeless at remembering the wand movements for the Bubble Head, Padfoot." Remus said, performing the magic so that a secure Bubble Head appeared around Harry. He did the same for Hermione and Ginny.

"Excellent work, Remus!" Professor Flitwick grinned at him.

Bill motioned for Harry to step forward and he whispered once again for the doors to open.

From the distressed sounds that the people with only handkerchiefs made, Harry was glad of the Bubble Head. Bill and Caro were both casting in unison and Professor Flitwick and Snape hurriedly moved alongside them to help.

It was Caro who gave the signal it was all clear and Harry felt the Bubble Head disappear, and wrinkled his nose at the slightly stale musty smell that remained. Bill entered with Caro and Harry waited patiently while others walked in; he was in no rush. Eventually Hermione nudged him gently and he cleared his throat.

"You ready, Ginny?"

She nodded, her face wet with tears.

Her mother had walked up to stand beside them and she took Ginny's other hand. "Come on, dear."

Harry was glad of Sirius's warm presence behind him; his hand on Harry's shoulder.

They cleared the doors and shuffled around the frozen group of adults gazing at the remains of the snake. It came into view slowly; a large green creature with torn sightless yellow eyes that had dimmed with decay. Its mouth was open and filled with sharp fangs that sent another shiver through Harry.

"Bloody hell!" Ron muttered under his breath and nobody remonstrated with him about his language.
Ginny raised her head from its hiding place in Harry's shoulder, took one look at the huge corpse of the basilisk and fainted. Molly and Sirius reacted quicker than Harry as Hermione had tightened her hold on his other hand. They both caught Ginny before she hit the floor.

"I thought this would happen." Molly muttered. "I knew she wasn't ready for this! But she was so determined and wouldn't listen to me! Her own mother!"

Bill hurried over to his sister's side. "How is she?"

Remus checked Ginny's pulse. "It's just a faint but I think it's best we get her up to the infirmary. I'll carry her for you, Molly."

"Thank you, Remus." Molly said. "Come on, Ron."

"But Mum…" Ron complained.

"You've seen the basilisk and the Chamber." Molly said briskly. "In fact there's no need for any of you children to be down here anymore."

"Mum, Harry needs to stay in case a parslemouth is needed and I'm sure he'd appreciate Ron and Hermione's support." Bill said, before anyone could argue.

Molly looked for a moment as though she wanted to protest but in the end gave a nod. She turned to Sirius. "Thank you for catching Ginny."

"Not a problem." Sirius said.

Harry frowned at the strain in Sirius's voice but waited until the others had left before he said anything. "You OK, Padfoot?"

Sirius nodded and clasped the back of Harry's neck. "Just…I know I've seen your memory of what happened but seeing that beast for real and knowing how close you came…" he stopped abruptly.

Harry sent Hermione a look and she let go of him so he could hug Sirius. He mouthed a thank you at her and she sent him an understanding smile back.

Sirius held onto him for a long time – long enough for the others to collect themselves and begin organising.

Brimbold had his team start on breaking down the basilisk with Snape hovering in wondrous appreciation for the potions ingredients. Bill and Caro moved ahead to examine the walls of the Chamber and the Professors followed after them, talking in reverential tones. A few of them, Hagrid and Moody in particular, looked sympathetically towards Sirius and Harry, and Minerva wandered over to engage Ron and Hermione in a discussion. Sirius stayed wrapped around Harry and for once Harry didn't protest the hug going on too long or in front of someone, knowing that it was Sirius who needed the comfort not him.

Eventually, Sirius took a deep breath and loosened the tight hold he'd had on Harry. "OK."

"Yeah?" asked Harry softly.

"Yeah." Sirius said quietly. "Just promise me no more basilisks."

"I promise that I will not fight any more basilisks if I can help it." Harry said.

"That's good enough." Sirius patted his back and eased away, still keeping a hand on Harry's
Moody wandered over and Harry smiled at the old Auror who gave him a nod of acknowledgement. "I'm looking forward to having you in my Defence class, Potter. You did a good job with this bloody basilisk."

"I was lucky." Harry replied. "Fawkes helped me out a lot."

Moody nodded. "Luck's half the battle, lad." His magical eye swivelled and fixed on Sirius. "Black, you're as pale as a ghost. Here." He thrust his flask at him. "Take a sip and don't argue with me."

Sirius took a swig of what Harry assumed was whiskey or some other alcoholic beverage, and handed the flask back. "Thank you, sir."

"None of that 'sir' business. Haven't had the chance to say anything to you since you got cleared but I cocked it up with your arrest. Should have checked on you after Crouch hauled you off and made sure there was an interview." Moody said grimly.

"I don't blame you, Alastor." Sirius said. "I remember what the office was like back then. You were lucky if you got a minute to do the paperwork before there was another raid to go on."

"Still, it's no excuse." Moody said crisply. His magical eye suddenly swivelled towards Harry. "Where's your wand?"

Harry grinned and showed him his wrist holster.

"Good lad." Moody nodded at him. "Always remember…"

"Constant vigilance!" Sirius and Harry chorused together.

A chuckle behind them had them turning to find Remus smirking at the two of them. He ruffled Harry's hair. "I had a moment of déjà vu there. You know after every training session with Professor Moody here Sirius and James would turn up and yell 'constant vigilance' at me?"

Moody looked over at Sirius who had a hint of colour in his cheeks.

"We might have maybe sometimes done that…" Sirius allowed. "Anyway, enough about me…"

Harry exchanged an amused look with Remus at Sirius's discomfort.

"…how's Ginny?" Sirius asked as Ron and Hermione gathered back around them.

Harry sobered and awaited Remus's reply eagerly.

"With Madame Pomfrey." Remus said. "I sent a patronus message to her so she was waiting in the bathroom. She's taken Ginny to the infirmary; she thinks it was just too much for her."

"Mum and Dad tried to convince her not to come but she wouldn't hear it!" Ron confirmed, but there was relief written across his face with the news that Ginny was fine.

"It was brave of the lass to make an attempt." Moody said.

Snape gave a large snort in the background.

Remus put a hand on Sirius's arm so he wouldn't retort. "How are things going down here?" He said lowering his voice.
"Well, so far I've freaked out, Harry gave me a hug and Moody gave me some Firewhiskey." Sirius answered.

"I don't do hugs." Moody deadpanned.

They all burst out laughing at that.

"Some of us are trying to work." Snape snapped.

Sirius was prevented from retorting again by Remus who suddenly pointed at the statue of Slytherin. "Didn't the basilisk originate from the mouth of the Slytherin statue?" He began walking towards it and Sirius settled for glaring at Snape before nodding at Harry in agreement that they should follow Remus.

The others saw their direction and Bill walked over to join them. "We haven't found anything here in the outer chamber." He admitted. "Bertie, Caro and Professor Dumbledore are going over it a second time but I don't think anything's here."

"But the basilisk came out of the statue so perhaps there's something beyond it?" Remus mused out loud. He started waving his wand in a scanning spell that Harry recognised from the ring search.

Bill joined him, repeating the movements. He inhaled sharply. "There's a parseltongue ward."

"Didn't the…the diary version of Riddle say something when he called forth the basilisk?" Sirius prompted.

Harry nodded. "Should I…?"

"Just wait a moment until we've updated everyone." Bill said, walking back towards Caro.

It seemed to Harry to take forever before everyone bar the Creature Specialist team were back in front of the statue – or rather to the side in case any additional mythical beasts came out – and waiting for Harry to say the password.

"Speak to me, Slytherin! Greatest of the Hogwarts four!" Harry stated loudly. The rumbling sound of the mouth opening had Harry instinctively ducking his head, the memory of the basilisk emerging uppermost in his thoughts.

Sirius and Remus immediately moved closer to him. Hermione sneaked her hand back into his and smiled at him reassuringly as Ron hovered closer.

It took a long moment but he realised there were no sounds of slithering – nothing was coming out of the mouth.

"Right." Caro said briskly. "I'll go up and take a quick look." She transformed into a tiny sparrow and took flight.

Harry watched her wide-eyed. He'd been thinking about his animagus form ever since Minerva had agreed to allow him the same deal as his father since Sirius would actually be teaching him. He really didn't want to be a stag. He loved that his patronus was a symbol of his father but he wanted to be something different. He got 'you're so like your father' enough without adding his animagus form to it. He had toyed with the hope of canine forms – a wolf or a dog; he wouldn't mind either as both would represent his respect and affection for Sirius and Remus. He wasn't sure about cats; he didn't mind them but he remembered his days of hell with Mrs Figg too much to want to be one. He definitely didn't want to be a snake. He didn't mind snakes, basilisks aside, but he didn't like the idea
of transforming into one. A bird though…to be that free…

Caro transformed back into her human form and shouted down that there was a room…and suddenly there was a shriek…

A tiny sparrow zoomed out of the mouth followed by a large black cloud…

Harry was pushed behind Sirius and Remus with Hermione and Ron; the two men took up a defensive position – wands out as the sparrow fled the black mist…

Harry could see that the others were scattering, hiding behind pillars and raising their wands…

Bill yelled something at Bertie that Harry couldn't hear over an ominous rumble coming from the statue…but the two of them raised their wands and began casting something white in the direction of the black cloud…

The cloud took shape into a snake and abandoned its chase of the sparrow; it dived for the two wizard threatening it…

Harry's heart pounded fast in chest.

Dumbledore moved, his wand weaving sharply in the air as he cast the same spell to the rear of the cloud…

But it wasn't going to be enough…

"Stop!" Harry's voice hissed out.

And the black cloudy snake disappeared just before it hit Bill and Bertie, leaving an eerie silence in its wake.

Harry could hear Hermione's ragged breathing and he took her hand as he turned to check she was alright. She nodded at his questioning look and they both turned to Ron who gave a shaky nod and clapped Harry's shoulder.

"Well done, mate!" Ron said. "What was that thing?"

"A guardian spirit." Remus explained. "Obviously deactivated by parseltongue."

"Yes, obviously." Sirius said, rolling his eyes, but he grinned at Harry. "Good thinking, Harry."

Harry decided he wasn't going to tell anyone that it had been pure instinct.

"Yes, well done, my boy!" Dumbledore beamed at him. "I haven't had this much fun in years!"

Minerva shot him a 'I can't believe you said that' look.

Caro transformed back. She barely looked out of breath or startled. "I triggered the spirit when I couldn't respond to a snake ornament up there but I think that was the only thing there." She looked at Bertie. "Try again?"

Bertie nodded.

Everyone moved back to their defensive positions as Caro flew back up in her sparrow form once more. There was a brief silence and then she called out it was all clear. Harry watched as ladders were pulled out of Bill's satchel and ropes to tie them securely in place. They were floated up to Caro
to anchor and Bill headed up first, followed immediately by Bertie and Dumbledore.

"Are we...are we going up?" Hermione stared at the ladders with foreboding.

Harry remembered that she hated heights and squeezed her hand gently. "I don't think so. I don't think we're needed anymore."

"What about if they need you for another one of those spirit things?" Ron asked bluntly.

Harry shook his head. "I think that was it."

Sirius cleared his throat. "I think Harry's right. We should head upstairs. If they need you for parseltongue again we can come back."

Minerva nodded sharply. "I'll send a patronus if we need you." She smiled warmly at Harry. "You did very well, Harry."

"Thanks." Harry was relieved as they set back off, leaving the basilisk and the Chamber behind. Sirius sent a ball of light through the tunnel to lead the way and Hermione chattered on about the spell that he had used; Ron rolled his eyes at her in exasperated fondness.

The climb back up was arduous and they were all breathing heavily by the time they got to the bathroom.

"You're back!" Myrtle warbled in greeting.

Harry didn't immediately have the breath to reply; he waved at her.

"The redhead girl was carried out this time." Myrtle informed him. "Her mother was not pleased! My mother wouldn't have been pleased either."

"We'd best go see Ginny." Harry said to Ron and Hermione.

"You're leaving me already?!" Myrtle complained.

"We'll come back and see you when school starts," Harry said, "I promise."

"Me too, Myrtle." Hermione said.

Myrtle gave a huff and jumped in a toilet, water splashing on the floor.

Sirius laughed. "Somehow I think she wanted Harry to herself, Hermione."

Harry shot him a look as Ron and Hermione joined Sirius in chuckling.

Remus steered them towards the door. "Let's get to the infirmary."

They trooped through the school with Remus and Sirius telling stories of events in various corridors. Harry and Ron listened eagerly, sniggering as Hermione's expression morphed from one of interest to horror at the rule-breaking.

"You can't encourage Harry and Ron to do that!" She exclaimed as another tale ended (with a boy called Mulciber dressed in a fetching purple thong dancing down the corridor they were walking through). "Do you know how many school rules you broke?"

"Five, six if you consider Mulciber was out of school uniform and it was essentially our fault."
Remus answered absently.

Sirius stared at his friend for a moment and burst out laughing. "Only you, Moony."

"And we can't really say anything, Hermione," Harry pointed out, amusement colouring his tone, "how many rules did we break rescuing Buckbeak and Sirius?"

"Or saving Ginny in the Chamber?" Ron agreed.

"That was different!" Hermione protested. Her chin went up and her lips took on a stubborn set that Harry knew all too well. "Besides, when we saved Sirius we had the Headmaster's permission so technically we didn't break any rules, and you did have Lockhart with you when you went after Ginny so…"

Sirius and Remus broke out laughing again. Hermione looked at them askance and Harry just shook his head at her when she turned to him for support.

They all sobered up though as the doors of the infirmary came into sight. Harry felt his gut twist. He seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time in the infirmary and he had never liked the place. He followed Remus inside and immediately spotted Molly sat by a bed in the corner; Ginny was tucked up and looked fast asleep.

Molly waved them over. "She was hysterical when she came to – she wanted to go back. Poppy gave her a sleeping potion. Poppy said she was suffering from shock. I've left a message with Arthur's secretary. Hopefully, he'll be able to get here once his meeting is finished." She stroked Ginny's cheek gently. "She was so determined to come. We thought we were doing the right thing."

"You couldn't have known how she would react for certain, Molly." Remus said soothingly. "Nobody really does know how they'll face the site of a traumatic event until they're there."

"I freaked out too." Harry confessed, hoping to make Molly feel a bit better about allowing Ginny to go along.

"Me too." Ron admitted, shifting closer to his Mum.

"And me three." Sirius said gently. "And I only saw Harry's memory of what happened."

"If she had been able to handle it, it would have been a positive experience for her to face her fears." Remus added.

"Which was why I endorsed the effort." Madame Pomfrey bustled into the room and glared at the crowd of people surrounding the bed. "You may have to return her to her mind healer, Molly. She's clearly still dealing with the after effects of her experience."

Molly went bright red. "She…we…" she stuttered before getting hold of herself, "Ginny hasn't seen a mind healer. She seemed back to normal and the Headmaster said she was OK so…"

Madame Pomfrey's eyes widened dramatically, her face turning as red as Molly's. "And when did the Headmaster receive his healing qualifications?" She all but shouted.

Harry felt supremely awkward standing in between the two women.

"I told you at the time that your daughter would need…"

Sirius cleared his throat. The mediwitch shot the assembled crowd a look and took a calming breath
evidently reigning in whatever she'd been about to yell given the presence of other people.

"I highly recommend that you engage a mind healer now." She said briskly. "If you'll excuse me…" She swept away before anyone could say anything.

Molly's colour hadn't abated at all and she wouldn't look at any of them. "I thought she was fine. She's had a few nightmares over the last year or so but nothing that would indicate a real problem."

Harry had no idea what to say and he had a feeling Ginny would be mortified to hear her mother discussing her problems with so many people.

"Kids are remarkably resilient," Remus assured her gently, "but with her reaction to the Chamber, she obviously hasn't come to terms with her experience. I'm sure a mind healer would be able to help her."

"I can recommend a good one." Sirius added, a little hesitantly.

Ron stirred restlessly. "We can use the money from the basilisk, Mum." He bit his lip, before he continued on anyway. "You can have my share if Ginny's won't cover it."

"That's kind of you, Ronald," Molly patted his hand and smiled at her son, "and you're a good brother for offering but that money's a nest egg for you."

"I'm sure Ginny's share will more than cover it." Remus said. "Basilisk products sell well."

Molly nodded and met Sirius's eyes with a determined expression. "A recommendation for a mind healer would be appreciated."

Sirius smiled. "I'll owl you his details when I get home."

A Hogwarts elf popped into the infirmary and bowed to Sirius. "Professor Babbling is ready to meet with you and your Heir, the Lord Harry Potter, at your convenience, Lord Black."

"Thank you." Sirius said formally.

The elf popped away again.

It was his test results. Harry was assaulted by a rush of nerves; twisting, torturing nerves that writhed in his belly and made him want to throw up. What if he hadn't passed? What if he'd failed? Sirius would be so disappointed in him…

His mouth went dry.

"Come on." Sirius nudged his elbow. "We shouldn't keep Professor Babbling waiting."

Molly managed to dredge up a smile for Harry. "Good luck, Harry."

"Yeah," Ron said, punching Harry's upper arm lightly, "good luck, mate."

"You'll be fine, Harry. You can't have discussed Runes as much as you did at lunch without knowing enough to have passed the requirements for fourth year." Hermione informed him as they wandered out of the infirmary with final farewells to the Weasleys all consisting mainly of hopes that Ginny would feel better shortly.

When they reached the main staircase, Remus paused and nodded at Harry. "Hermione and I will meet you at the entrance. Good luck."
Sirius's firm hand on Harry's shoulder guided him back through Hogwarts' maze of corridors to Professor Babbling's office.

She greeted them warmly and within moments Harry found himself sitting rather uncomfortably on a wooden chair in front of her desk, Sirius beside him.

Professor Babbling smiled a tad nervously. "Well, firstly, I have to admit to making a mistake."

"Oh?" Sirius asked immediately protective.

"I accidentally gave Harry part of the fourth year final exam along with the third year." Professor Babbling confessed ruefully.

So that was why there had been so many questions! But that meant he hadn't had the full time for his third year questions and…Harry bit his lip, nerves rushing him again.

"Now, it has led to some surprising results." Professor Babbling continued. "On the third year material, taking into account your reduced time for the essay question and so removing it from consideration, you scored an Outstanding."

Outstanding!

He'd gotten an Outstanding! He almost drowned in the relief and turned to Sirius with a happy grin.

"I'm so proud of you, Harry." Sirius said, reaching over and gripping his shoulder. "That's excellent work!"

"Yes," Professor Babbling smiled widely at him, "you did very well. Only your friend Hermione and Anthony Goldstein did better on those portions of the exam and I'm sure if you had been given the full time you may have equalled or surpassed them."

Harry flushed warm with the praise and the almost definable paternal pride he could see oozing from Sirius as the Professor continued talking.

"But the really interesting thing for me," Professor Babbling said, "is that you scored an Acceptable on the fourth year material you answered, and really once again, if you'd had the proper time you may well have scored an Exceeds Expectation. Certainly your analyses of the Runic combinations were very well done."

"That's brilliant!" Sirius declared when Harry remained speechless. "So I assume there is no issue with him taking the fourth year class?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to discuss with you." Professor Babbling leaned back and fixed Harry with an intent stare. "If you continued tutoring for the rest of the Summer, I believe you'd pass the fourth year final exam, and would therefore be able to sit with the fifth year class in September."

Harry looked at her astounded. "You mean…I'd…" he gestured jumping weakly with his fingers.

"Skip a year, yes." Professor Babbling said with a smile. "There are advantages; firstly, it would keep you challenged. I think a fourth year placement would bore you. Secondly, you could take the OWL at the end of the year and this would mean one less OWL for you to take next year which given the fifth year syllabi for the core subjects is recommended. Thirdly, on the assumption you would take your NEWT in your sixth year, I would not be adverse to signing you up to complete the initial Mastery year in your seventh. Whether you continue or not, the training would be useful in several professions."
Harry swallowed hard and darted a look at Sirius. He was really pleased to be considered but he wasn't sure if he wanted to jump a year but there were no hints at Sirius's thoughts as his father was intently listening to Babbling.

"There are disadvantages, of course," the Runes Professor said with a wave of her hand, "you'll be taking classes with the year above you and outside of your peer group which may lead to some resentment and suggestion of preferential treatment. Additionally, you would be sitting an OWL a year early and that would make fourth year exams slightly more stressful for you. But I think the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages in your case, Mister Potter. What do you think?"

What did he think? He glanced again at Sirius who looked back at him with calm thoughtful grey eyes and he knew Sirius was waiting for him to make his own decision.

He really didn't want to skip a year. People would think it was favouritism and special treatment. He would stand out; be different; not normal again. His entire being wanted to blurt out that fourth year class was fine with him.

But.

Hadn't he promised Sirius to always do his best? If he didn't skip a year, wasn't that holding himself back? Just as he had with all of his schooling before Sirius? Wasn't his aversion to his classmates resenting him just a reverse kind of peer pressure to conform?

"Mister Potter?" prompted Professor Babbling gently.

Harry bit his lip and sighed. "I'd like to try for the fifth year class if I can continue being tutored?" He looked over at Sirius who nodded.

"I can continue tutoring you, Harry; that's not an issue." Sirius assured him.

"I am worried though," Harry murmured, getting a sudden spurt of inspiration, "about people thinking that it's favouritism? I mean, I've only gotten the chance to move into fifth year Runes because of switching subjects and an accident with the exam so…” he sighed heavily, "is there any way we can offer the same deal to anyone else who might have gotten an Outstanding on the third year exam?" Like Hermione, who would probably jump at the chance to sit the fourth year exam with him and hopefully enter fifth year Runes alongside him.

"Oh, what an interesting question." Professor Babbling said, slumping back in her seat as she considered it.

Sirius winked at Harry seemingly understanding his ploy. "I think it's an excellent suggestion." He smiled at the Professor. "I'm thrilled Harry's done so well and has the opportunity to enter fifth year but I'm also concerned about his alienation from his peer group. He has enough obstacles in that regard with the Boy Who Lived nonsense. I think offering the other students who gained an Outstanding the opportunity to sit the fourth year exam at the beginning of September and the chance to move up would alleviate the majority of any resentment."

"I will need to run it by Professor McGonagall but I don't see any reason why we can't owl the Outstanding students by tomorrow and make the offer, explaining the circumstances." Professor Babbling confirmed.

Sirius smiled at her again. "Excellent."

The Professor rose to her feet and Harry leapt to his, grateful it was all over until he returned to school officially. He barely managed the goodbyes as Sirius hurried them out.
As soon as they were in the corridor, Sirius pulled him into a quick hug.

"I am so proud of you," Sirius said again. "You aced the test and you were brilliant about the whole moving up a year thing."

Harry returned the hug, feeling giddy with delight at Sirius's visible happiness in Harry's achievement. "I couldn't have done it without your help." He pointed out as they made their way back to Hermione and Remus.

"You're an excellent student, Harry." Sirius countered. "And, yes; I am an excellent tutor!" He winked at him and Harry chuckled.

They spied Remus and Hermione waiting by the massive front doors. Hermione was almost bouncing by the time they reached them.

"Well?" She demanded. "Did you pass? Did it go OK? It's OK if it didn't go OK but I'm sure you did fine and…"

Remus put a hand on her shoulder. "Take a breath and let him answer, Hermione." He looked hopefully at both Sirius and Harry. "Well?"

Harry smiled happily. "I passed."

"He got an Outstanding!" crowed Sirius.

Hermione squealed and launched herself at Harry.

Harry gave an omphf as he caught her, his arms automatically wrapping around her and noting that she was a girl in the way her body pressed against his in interesting places. He looked startled over her bushy hair for advice from Sirius who simply smirked back at him. Hermione untangled herself from Harry with a sheepish expression but she surprised him when she held onto him, one of her arms wrapped around one of his.

"Well done, Harry!" Remus congratulated him. "I think this calls for cake and ice-cream."

"Oh, there's more," Sirius said and motioned for Harry to speak.

Harry explained the accident with the fourth year exam papers and the opportunity to test into fifth for all of the Outstanding students.

Hermione squealed again but he was ready for her hug and grinned at her beaming face. "Oh, Harry! This is fantastic! Just think! We could sit our OWL a year early and that's one less for our fifth year and – oh, but there's only a month and I've only just started reading for Runes! And then there's…"

"You're more than welcome to join Harry's tutoring lessons, Hermione." Sirius said quickly.

"And if I can get into fifth year Runes, you definitely can." Harry assured her. "You did better than me on the third year stuff."

Hermione smiled up at him and nodded briskly. "Anthony Goldstein and Daphne Greengrass probably got Outstandings as well. Maybe Sue Li? I wonder if they'll want to take the test. Probably Anthony will. He told me before the exam that he was already half a term into the fourth year material."

The sound of someone approaching had them turning around rapidly to see Bill running up to them.
Sirius sent Remus a questioning look and Remus nodded.

"I sent a patronus asking if we were needed to remain here and for an update. I didn't expect a personal reply."

Bill waved at them as he joined them before bending double and catching his breath. "Merlin, that's some climb!"

"I preferred Fawkes helping me out." Harry admitted.

"So, what was in the secret room?" asked Sirius. "Do you need Harry?"

Bill shook his head. "There's nothing in the room."

"Nothing?" questioned Remus sharply, his eyes narrowing before he sighed deeply. "Of course, anything of value, Voldemort would have taken when he discovered the Chamber as a teenager, as Tom Riddle."

"That's our theory." Bill confirmed. "There's evidence that there were books, potions and there are some old cauldrons that were left lying on the floor but..." he shook his head, began to speak and stopped again at the sight of Hermione before he opened his mouth again, "definitely nothing of value."

Harry knew that meant the object they were looking for must be hidden elsewhere in Hogwarts. They'd have to regroup.

Sirius sighed. "I guess it was unlikely he would have gone back there if he'd taken everything of value with him."

"Bertie and the Headmaster are doing another check to see if there are any other nooks and crannies down there where stuff might have been hidden away but..." Bill shrugged.

Hermione was looking from Sirius to Bill to Remus with a calculating look that Harry knew all too well.

He hurriedly cleared his throat. "We should get going."

"Me too," Bill said. "I volunteered to come up so I could check on Ginny."

"Poppy gave her a sleeping potion." Remus informed him. "But I'm sure your Mum would appreciate the support. She's had a bit of a shock."

Bill nodded. "See you guys."

Sirius nodded. "Tell Bertie I'll owl." He ushered Hermione and Harry out of the door. "Come on. The sooner we get clear of the wards, the sooner we celebrate with cake and ice-cream!"

Harry smiled at Sirius's antics but his eyes caught Hermione's contemplative expression again and his heart sank. He didn't want to keep secrets from his friends but Sirius and Remus had discussed the necessity of it with him many times and he knew it was for their protection as much as it was for his. They didn't need to know about the treasure hunt or about the prophecy (and there were times as he had confided in Healer Allen that he wished he hadn't been so insistent on learning about it himself) and knowing about either would only put them in danger.

Hermione suddenly slipped her hand into his again. "It's OK, Harry." She whispered as they fell
behind the two men striding away down the path out of the castle. "I know you can't tell me and I know it's probably something to do with the death threat and with him, but if you need me…"

He tightened his grip on her hand so relieved at her unequivocal support that he couldn't speak for a long moment. "Thanks." He managed eventually.

She smiled at him and started talking about fourth year Runes and how he wasn't to tell her what was on the exam but she had started reading about the recombinations of Runes in protection in her fourth year text book and what were Harry's thoughts?

They discussed Runes all the way to the Hogwarts gates and caught up with Remus and Sirius waiting for them on the path. Harry and Hermione came to a halt in front of the two men and Harry waited impatiently; weren't they supposed to be doing something like apparating them?

"Harry," Sirius said dryly, "I'm afraid you're going to need to let go of Hermione so Remus can apparate with her to Black Manor."

Harry looked at him confused for a long moment before he realised he was still holding onto Hermione's hand. He blushed furiously as they untangled their fingers and Hermione, her own cheeks a rosy red, stepped away towards a visibly smirking Remus.

Sirius winked at Harry and placed an arm around Harry's shoulders as Remus disappeared out of sight. "Hold tight."

They reappeared in the reception room and Hermione smiled at him shyly.

Harry blushed again but smiled back to reassure her there was no harm done, and wondered again at the flip-flopping sensation in his belly. Cake, he decided as he followed Sirius out of the room; he just wanted cake; it had nothing to do with Hermione.
Harry exchanged a nervous look with Neville as they were ushered into the study. Sirius and Remus had been strange all day, and the way Sirius had abruptly informed them that Neville's Gran had given her permission for Neville to stay for a bit longer before he'd hustled Hermione to the floo after the politics lesson made Harry's 'Marauder' alarm start ringing very loudly.

Sirius waved them into a sofa in the seating area. The coffee table had a waiting pensieve filled with a silvery memory. Remus sat in a chair next to them and sent a pointed look to Sirius, who was hovering with a strange expression on his face by the open door. The two Marauders seemed to have an entire silent conversation before Sirius heaved a sigh and shut the door.

"Right," Sirius cleared his throat as he walked over to join them, "so you're probably wondering why we've brought you two in here."

Harry swapped another bemused look with Neville before they both nodded.

"Right," Sirius repeated, taking a deep breath, "we're here to have a discussion with you about…" he gestured, "well, um, I guess you could say, about courting?"

_Courting?

Harry's green eyes were startled wide as he realised where the discussion was heading. He shook his head quickly. "That's OK, Padfoot, really! I think Neville and I, uh…"

"We know." A very pale Neville managed to get out.

"Yes, you know," Sirius agreed fervently before he sighed, "but do you know?"

Harry frowned in confusion and was relieved Neville's expression was equally bewildered.

Sirius cast a desperate look at Remus.

"What Padfoot is trying to say is that we are aware that you may know the biological facts but that is rather different to the art of courting." Remus said. "There are also certain emotional and physical implications about dating someone and becoming sexually active. And, we should check that what you do know is accurate and not a tale from Mister Finnegan's imagination."

Harry was fairly sure Neville was looking as horrified as he was.

"Right," Sirius said again, "I think we should just…get on with it. Here," he pointed at the pensieve, "is a memory." His face softened in remembrance. "It's your Dad, Harry. Your Granddad actually gave James this kind of talk the Summer after our fourth year. We Marauders went to visit him and so…"

Harry brightened at the news. It was a memory of his Dad! How bad could it be?

"We're all going to enter the pensieve." Remus said. "If you have a question at any point, we'll pause the memory and explain before we move on."

Sirius smiled at them. "Ready?"

Harry glanced at Neville who gave a nervous smile. They leaned forward to enter the pensieve…
They fell into the memory and found themselves in a large sunny bedroom. An unmade bed could be seen to the left but four boys were gathered on the floor, a plate of snacks in the centre of them and they each had glasses of butterbeer.

Harry soaked up the sight of his fifteen year old Dad; everyone was right, they did look alike with the same messy dark hair, slim build and Potter features. But there were differences beyond his Dad's hazel eyes…his father had a casual elegance and air of status about him that Harry knew would have come from the etiquette lessons he must have had as a child; there was also a faint hint of the arrogance Sirius had confessed to Harry; and, finally, there was the openly mischievous smirk that adorned his face.

His gaze moved to the boy to his Dad's immediate left – Sirius. There was already a hint of the rebel about Sirius in his muggle clothing of jeans and t-shirt. Fifteen year old Sirius still had shadows in his eyes but Harry knew the shadows had nothing to do with Azkaban and he recognised the guarded wariness all too well from looking in a mirror when he'd been growing up with the Dursleys; a desperate loneliness and a want to belong.

Remus sat to the left of Sirius, opposite Harry's father. There were fewer scars across his face and his hair was a glossy sandy colour. His brown eyes were warm and friendly.

The rat was the last of the group but fifteen year old Peter didn't look like the crawling betrayer that Harry had encountered at the end of his third year. Peter looked like the others – young and mischievous if a little nondescript with his brown hair and eyes; a little slovenly with his twisted collar and the faint stain of some condiment on the front of his robes.

Neville shifted beside him. "That's Pettigrew?"

"Younger and not yet in Tom's pocket but...yeah." Harry admitted quietly.

"We couldn't delete him, unfortunately," Sirius added, "but he was always pretty quiet so you shouldn't have to put up with him saying much."

Harry nodded absently as he tuned into what his Dad was saying…

"...and then he sits me down and gives me the Little Wizard's Talk!" James announced, waving his sandwich at them. "I mean, me!"

"At least he went to the trouble to sit down and talk with you!" Sirius said disgruntled.

"Exactly." Remus nodded. "I think my parents are trying to ignore the fact that I'm a teenager." He sighed. "Not that having the Talk would make a difference to me. With my condition I can hardly go out with someone."

"Bollocks, Moony!" remonstrated Sirius. "There are plenty of girls who'd like you to escort them to Hogsmeade if you'd just get over yourself."

"And when they find out the truth?" shot back Remus. "How many do you think will stick around after that?"

"The ones that deserve you." James interrupted. "If they don't want to know you because of your furry little problem, they don't deserve to be with you."

"Hear, hear." Sirius said.

Harry noticed their Remus was shooting Sirius an irritated look as their memory versions started their
campaign for James to spill the beans on what had been said in his Talk.

"I thought you were going to start the memory from a later point?" Remus hissed at Sirius.

Sirius shushed him and pointed back at the boys. "James is about to begin properly."

The look Remus shot Sirius promised retribution. Harry wondered what Remus would think up; he could get quite creative with his pranks.

"Alright!" James held up his hands. "I give in! I'll tell you what my Dad said."

Remus's eyes narrowed on his friend's wicked smile. "You have to promise on Marauder's honour to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"Moony!" James protested dramatically. "Don't you trust me?"

There was a chorus of 'no!' from all three of his friends.

"Fine," grumbled James, "I promise I'll make no embellishments. Let's get organised!"

He made the other three sit in a line on the floor facing him and he sprawled out in front of them, brushing off his dusty robes. Remus had somehow gotten parchment and ink and was poised to take notes.

"Alright, boys," James began brightly, "as you are now fifteen years old, you may have started to notice girls or boys or both. This is because you are becoming a man and your body and emotions are maturing. You are beginning the journey to…"

"Sex!" interrupted Sirius cheerfully.

James shot him a look that clearly said 'shut up.' "…finding someone to love and marry; someone you can build a family with."

"Well, not if it's a boy." Remus pointed out. "If you settle down with a boy, having a baby is out."

"Adoption." Sirius said. "You can blood adopt which is just as valid or go with a surrogate."

"True." Remus conceded.

"But who would want to kiss a boy?" joked Peter.

"I already have." Sirius stated somewhat stiffly.

Harry's eyes widened with the admission and he cast a look over to the older version of Sirius who was very carefully ignoring them all.

"Really?" asked Remus, his eyes shining with curiosity. "What was it like?"

"More to the point," James interrupted, "who was it and when?"

"I'm not saying but it was…” Sirius shrugged, "fine. Not ground shaking or anything. It's a bit like kissing a girl."

James sighed but didn't push Sirius. "Anyway, my Dad said that he didn't mind if I ended up with a girl or a boy as long as I was happy."
"My Mum would throw a wobbly if I brought home a boy." Peter said. He suddenly clasped his hands together and wailed dramatically. "But what about my grandchildren?!"

Harry noted that it was quite a funny impression even if it was Peter.

"Your Mum? What about mine? Your Mum might cry and wail a bit, but mine will have a complete fit and hex me half to death before marrying me off to some pureblooded bitch from Bulgaria. Not that it matters since I'm leaving home as soon as I can." Sirius made a 'get on with it' gesture at James.

"So then..." James said quickly, moving the subject on. "'Son,' he said, 'at some point you will go from noticing people in general to noticing one person in particular..."

"Lily," coughed Sirius.

"And he explained what a crush was – you know, being very attracted, wanting to be with them, wanting to be noticed by them, dreaming about being with them – assured me again that it was all perfectly normal." James's expression took on a sheepish look. "Then he explained that it was a fine line between a crush and obsession, and to make sure I didn't allow myself to slip from one to another."

"You mean like following said crush everywhere?" Sirius teased.

"Stealing her timetable to know where she is every hour of the day?" offered Peter with a sly smirk.

"Making notes of what she eats at meals so you can deduce her favourite foods?" added Remus.

"Alright, alright!" James held up his hands. "I admit my Dad's talk did actually get me to think maybe I've gone a little overboard with Lily."

Harry's heart ached a little at his Dad's miserable expression.

Younger Sirius obviously had the same reaction because he cleared his throat loudly. "Well, maybe your Dad has some advice to offer about how you could win the heart of the enigma that is Evans?"

"Yes!" exclaimed James, pointing at him. "Wooing was the next thing he talked about."

"Wooing?" Sirius pulled a face. "He actually called it wooing?"

James ignored him. "Basically, he said that when you found someone you liked, that the next stage was wooing – getting to know them better and allowing them to get to know the real you."

"But what if they're a teacher?" asked Peter.

"Well, I think you probably have to be realistic and appropriate about the object of your affections," Remus supplied quickly. "right, James?"

"Sure, I mean Dad didn't say anything specifically, but I think he was assuming that the other person would be within the same age range and someone you knew personally." James frowned at Peter. "You don't still have that crush on Professor Linney?"

"She's so beautiful." Peter said dreamily.

All three other boys exchanged knowing looks.

"So," said James loudly, "you like someone near to your own age, not a teacher," he threw Peter
another look, "or someone unattainable like a Quidditch player or whatever, and you want to get to
know her – or him – better." He gestured. "He said the first stage was to become friends with them,
get to know them. Sometimes it works out that once you do know them…”

"You don't fancy them anymore." Sirius concluded.

"But sometimes you'll continue to like them and will progress to the next stage; asking them out. He
suggested that you take them a token – a flower or a chocolate or something – and in private, ask
them in a sincere way if they would do you the honour of allowing you to escort them to
Hogsmeade…or wherever. If they say no, accept it graciously and don't push it." James sighed and
reaching down pulled on the toes of his socks straightening them out.

Harry wondered why his father looked so disheartened.

Sirius nudged him. "Your Dad had spent our fourth year asking your Mum to accompany him to
Hogsmeade in front of the entire Gryffindor Common Room every time there was a weekend
announced. It was a bit of a running joke by the end of the year that he’d ask and she’d turn him
down."

"Oh." Harry realised that his Dad must have compared the advice he'd been given to how he'd asked
his Mum and understood he'd made a mistake.

"Neville's Dad, on the other hand, wooed Alice exactly in the manner James's Dad recommended."Sirius smiled at Neville who brightened at the new knowledge of his father.

"How do you get one of them to go somewhere in private?" Peter wondered out loud. "They travel
in packs."

"Send them a note with the morning mail or sneak one to them in class," suggested Sirius.

"Or you could just ask them if you could have a word in private." Remus said logically.

"What if they don't like me, I mean, you, collective you?" Peter stammered out. "They're hardly
likely to go anywhere alone with me…you? You know what I mean."

"That's why there's the getting to know you thing first." Sirius said sagely. "So they can get to know
you enough that they would go alone with you somewhere."

"Dad said there were a few tips. Firstly, compliments should be sincere. If her hair looks awful,
don't pretend it does. But if she has a nice smile, you can say that you like her smile, for instance."James said. "Secondly, you should always be honest but never say anything unkind."

"Don't tell her she's fat, he means." Sirius chipped in.

"Any other tips?" asked Remus, making a note on his parchment.

"Uh, don't insult her friends." James muttered.

All three of the others looked at him but with varying expressions of horror, sympathy and pity.

"Well, you've kind of screwed the…"

"Sirius!" James snapped.

"He has a point," Peter said tactlessly, "we have hexed Snivellus a lot. It's no wonder she doesn't like
you."
Neville leaned in towards Harry. "Snivellus?"

"Snape." Harry whispered back. "He was my Mum's friend."

Neville stared at him in shock.

"I know." Harry said in amused agreement with Neville's disbelief.

"So, we do some damage limitation next year," suggested Remus, "we don't hex him unless he starts something with us."

Sirius didn't look pleased but James grinned.

"Fine," Sirius grumbled, "but I won't hold back if he does start something."

James reached over and patted his foot. "Your sacrifice is much appreciated." He leaned back and smiled. "Anyway, Dad said that if someone likes you they'll smile at you a lot, find excuses to touch you and talk to you. So you'll have a general idea about whether they'll want you to ask them out."

Remus nodded. "Find excuses...got it."

"So, first date, Dad said to make sure you bathe beforehand, dress nicely – make an effort. Uh, then there was nothing wrong with going with time-honoured traditions; greet her with a flower and a sincere compliment, go on a walk around Hogsmeade to places you both enjoy, followed by lunch at The Three Broomsticks, and escort the lady back to her House." James paused. "And should everything have gone well, then..."

"KISSING!" shrieked Sirius.

"Or just one kiss." James agreed with a smile.

"Tips for kissing?" Remus asked organising his parchment.

"Practice good dental hygiene, don't eat anything too spicy or garlicky beforehand or have a breath mint handy, don't lunge at her or you might knock heads, be gentle, and remember to breathe." James reeled off quickly.

"What about French kissing?" Remus pointed his quill at James.

"Dad said you tangle your tongues together in a stroking fashion. It's a lot more intimate and you should probably not try it on a first kiss." James instructed.

"So how far do you go and when?" Peter asked, brushing some crumbs off his robe.

James smiled at him. "Good question, Pete! I asked my Dad the same thing."

"And the answer?" prompted Remus, quill poised to write it down.

"Dad said you should talk about it once you've gone on a few dates and have agreed you're properly a couple." James's cheeks coloured. "He said that it was better not to rush into, uh, you know; doing it and that there was a lot you could do before it."

"Talking seems sensible." Remus agreed.

"You don't want to schedule it like homework though!" protested Sirius. "Where's the spontaneity? The joy? The having fun in the moment?"
"Dad said to agree rules." James said. "So before a, um, snogging session, you'd agree that you could place your hands on her..." he made a descriptive gesture with his hands that Harry assumed meant breasts, "and whether you could touch her above or beneath her clothing."

Harry's face was bright red. He was certain Neville's probably was too. This was a really bad idea, Harry thought. He didn't want to think that his Dad and his Mum had probably had that kind of conversation at one point.

"Oh, well, that makes sense." Sirius conceded. "I did get slapped by Kathy Pickleton for accidentally touching her bits."

They all looked at Sirius before James cleared his throat and motioned with his hand, drawing their attention again.

"There are rules," James said, "that Dad said were sacrosanct whatever was agreed." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Let's see: everyone should have fun..."

"An excellent rule!" Sirius said fervently.

"But nobody should feel humiliated, uncomfortable, misused or taken advantage of afterwards. No means no and you should always stop when someone asks you to stop. You shouldn't pressure someone into doing something and they shouldn't pressure you." James continued.

There was a sombre moment as all the boys absorbed that rule.

"Anything else?" Remus asked.

"Well, we, uh, then had a very embarrassing conversation about, uh, touching." James admitted.

"Touching?" Sirius asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Touching yourself and, uh, someone else. You know," James shrugged and refused to meet any of his friends' gazes, "how touching certain parts might lead to, uh, orgasms and stuff."

"Ah." Sirius grimaced.

"Masturbation is a normal activity for young men and women." Remus lectured.

"Would you want to discuss wanking with your Dad?" demanded James.

Remus winced. "No, not really."

"Well then." James said satisfied his point had been made. "Then he said at some point, if I had been going with someone for a while, it might lead to, uh, full on sex."

He remained silent long enough for the others to cast looks at each other before Remus was evidently silently volunteered to say something.

"And what about sex, James?" prompted Remus.

James sighed and smoothed down his robes. "Well, some of it was advice about waiting until I was ready, not rushing into it, that kind of thing. And then," his lips twisted, "most of it was checking that I understood where everything went..."

"Which we can skip." Sirius agreed hurriedly.
"He also taught me the contraceptive charm," James's face was aflame, "and said I should always make sure I was safe."

"No getting someone pregnant or getting some kind of sexually transmitted disease." Remus stated firmly. "It's what you'd expect your Dad to say really."

"There was other advice as well," James said, "he said that you should make sure you're in a comfortable and safe place; make it special with candles and maybe some music." He sat up and changed position. "He mentioned that there's a lot of pressure for both people the first time and to talk about expectations and stuff before. He said if I ever thought I was getting to the point where I thought I was going to have sex then he'd give me some books to read about technique and..." he gestured weakly, "making sure my partner and I had a good time."

"Back to the fun thing, huh?" Sirius asked.

"He said it was better if you trusted each other and could laugh when things didn't quite work out the way you wanted. Then he had this anecdote about his own first time," James added as the others winced in sympathy, "and frankly that was more than I ever needed to know about my Dad's sex life."

Harry was relieved when the memory ended and they tumbled back into themselves. He and Neville sat back down on the sofa.

Sirius moved the pensieve and handed them parchment, quills and ink. "So we need to check that, well, we need to check as James said that you know where everything goes. So I want you to write down what you know about sex."

"Can't you just accept our word for it?" asked Harry desperately.

"As your parent, of course, I accept your word and trust that you know if you say you do," Sirius said brightly, "but as your sex education tutor, no; I need proof. We can either do this verbally or in written form so..."

"Written is fine." Harry said hurriedly.

Neville nodded.

For the next few moments, Harry focused on writing about human procreation in as few succinct sentences as he could manage. He slapped his quill down and handed the parchment to Sirius; he was quickly followed by Neville.

Sirius quickly scanned them as everyone else fidgeted and waited. "You both pass the quiz portion of the discussion."

"Thank Merlin!" Neville said, slumping back.

Sirius cleared his throat. "To recap; it's OK to like girls or boys or both. You may start noticing one person in particular and crushes are normal but try to make sure you don't become obsessed. If you do like someone, get to know them better and don't hex their friends." He looked up. "Are there any questions you would like to ask so far?"

Harry exchanged a swift furtive look at Neville and they both very quickly shook their heads.

"If you do like someone, ask them on a date. Be respectful and try to ask them in a private location. If they say no, move on. Plenty of fish in the sea." Sirius continued. "If they say yes don't worry
about doing something fancy – although I can highly recommend a picnic by the Black Lake when the weather is nice…”

"Or stargazing on the top of the Astronomy tower," interjected Remus.

"If the date has gone well then a goodbye kiss is appropriate but ask before you do it. A simple 'may I kiss you' works wonders," Sirius informed them briskly. "Equally, if you move onto snogging, always check the boundaries about what you can and can't touch or you may get slapped."

It was actually very good advice, Harry thought slightly dazed. He certainly had no wish to get slapped.

"The more touching you do, the more, um, intimate you'll become. If you think you're ready for sex," Sirius stumbled a little over his words and there was a streak of red across his cheeks, "well, quite honestly, I'm hoping that you don't think that for a while, a long while…a very, very long while…”

Remus coughed.

"But if you do," Sirius pulled himself back to his original discussion point, "you should both know Remus and I are always willing to talk with either of you and provide you with the relevant literature that James mentioned at the end there, and obviously discuss any concerns that you may have."

"Do you know the contraceptive charm?" asked Remus bluntly.

"Yes." Harry said. "Arthur showed Ron before third year and well, when he said so in the dorm, Seamus said he also knew, and they both taught the rest of us."

"The incantation?" checked Remus.

"Duosterillus." Harry and Neville chorused.

Remus nodded, satisfied. "Do you have any questions?"

"No." Harry answered immediately. He hoped that was the end of it.

"No." Neville echoed faintly.

Sirius nodded. "Well, I just want to reiterate that waiting until you're ready is good; don't be pressured into doing something when you don't really want to. I, uh, didn't wait and I've always regretted it."

That regret was written across his face.

"When did you…" Neville stopped and when Harry turned to look at him, Neville looked thoroughly appalled as though he couldn't believe he'd begun to ask such a personal question.

"I was fourteen." Sirius answered calmly.

"I was sixteen." Remus added. "But unlike Sirius my experience was a positive one and with a girl who I'd dated for a few months."

Harry wondered…

"Your Dad was seventeen, Harry." Sirius informed him before he could complete the thought. "I'm not sure about your Mum; girls don't tend to confide that kind of information in blokes."
"Didn't my Dad and my Mum…" Harry stopped abruptly, not sure he wanted the answer or to really ask the question.

"Your Mum wasn't your Dad's first lover." Sirius said quietly, answering the question anyway. "Your Dad took your Granddad's advice to heart in our fifth year. He asked your Mum once in private before the first Hogsmeade weekend if she would like to go out with him and when she refused he decided to move on. He dated other girls until your Mum finally consented to go out with him toward the end of sixth year. Again, not sure about your Mum; your Dad and I never discussed it."

Harry glanced at Remus who nodded in support of Sirius.

"Keep in mind that most girls don't take kindly to having their sex lives the topic of gossip and discussed in the boys' changing rooms or dorms. If you do get together with a girl, how far you go and what you do together should remain between her and you unless you're asking for advice." Remus said. "James never said a word about Lily which is why we don't know."

"It's about respecting your partner." Sirius said. "Confiding in a good friend is OK if you need advice but only if you trust them to keep quiet."

"Any other questions?" asked Remus brightly as Harry and Neville remained silent.

They shook their heads.

"Well, if you do have questions, Remus and I are always happy to talk to you." Sirius said. He motioned at them. "Harry, maybe you could see Neville to the floo?"

Harry nodded quickly. He and Neville escaped the study and both of them sighed with relief as they closed the door behind them. They walked to the floo in silence and Neville took a pinch of floo powder. He turned back to Harry slightly hesitantly.

"Well, that was…" Neville began awkwardly.

"Yes." Harry nodded. "Let's…"

"Never mention this again?" Neville suggested with a smile.

Harry grinned back at him.

Neville nodded still smiling, threw the floo powder and called out his home floo address before stepping into the flames.

Harry rubbed his forehead. Maybe he could obliviate himself…maybe? On the other hand, he couldn't deny that in between the excruciating embarrassment of the topic, it had been good to see the memory of his Dad, and there had been some useful information if he was going to be dating when he went back to Hogwarts.

If.

o-O-o

The cold of the basement skittered over his skin but Barty ignored it despite the fact that he was half-naked, shirtless, after spending the day in the garden sun-bathing under a disillusionment charm. It had been so good to simply soak up the sun and breathe fresh air. It wasn't something that had happened often in the last twelve years of his life. But life had certainly changed for Barty during the
previous few weeks since Peter Pettigrew and the Dark Lord had rescued him.

It was a bizarre story really, one Pettigrew had told in the Crouch's front parlour, stumbling and sliding over his words while the Dark Lord looked on from the eyes of the two year old child he had possessed. In short, Pettigrew had been hiding but had been discovered the year before by Sirius Black and Harry Potter; he'd escaped and ran for Albania where he knew the last person to find the Dark Lord had gone and had managed to track him down (through a combination of what Barty believed was sheer luck and chance rather than any kind of skill).

Fortunately for Barty, Pettigrew had also stumbled into Bertha Jorkins and the Dark Lord had realised just what a treasure trove of information the gossipy woman was since she worked at the Ministry. Jorkins' mind had cracked like an egg as the Dark Lord had raped it of every memory she had ever had including the memory of coming to the Crouch house to deliver a report to Barty's father and accidentally seeing Barty, who was supposed to be dead, in one of his escape attempts. His father had obliviated her but even his strong magic was no match for the Dark Lord who had recovered the memory and found it fascinating.

Upon arriving back in England, the Dark Lord had ordered Pettigrew to the Crouch house. They'd quickly overcome his father and Winky, and liberated Barty from the depths of the basement where he was imprisoned. Winky had been fine once Barty had ordered her to obey the Dark Lord and to tell no-one of his father's capture. He detested the house elf who had been as much his jailer as his father but she was useful. Nobody considered house elves as important and they were always overlooked. She was also loyal and terrified of being given clothes. His father, on the other hand…

He descended into the tiny space down the wooden steps swishing his wand like a sword in front of him. There just enough space for a single bed, a small rickety table and an old Formica dining chair that looked like it should have been left in the Seventies. A single light illuminated the dank space; a candle on the tiny child's bedside table by the bed.

Barty grinned manically at the sight of his dear old Dad lying stiff on the bed. The draught the Dark Lord had fed Barty Crouch Senior would keep the old man comatose but alive. Barty had wanted to kill him but the Dark Lord had said no; Dad was much more useful alive than dead especially with the Tri-Wizard Tournament they had learned about from Jorkins. The Dark Lord had wanted to send his father back to the Ministry under an Imperius curse but Barty had argued that his father might be capable of breaking free – hadn't he broken free of his father's on occasion? So, the potion had been used and Dad would sleep…at least until someone pure of heart kissed him.

Barty giggled at the thought. No-one knew his father was missing; no-one was going to come looking for him; certainly no-one pure of heart. They'd sent an owl to the Ministry saying Barty had Wizard's flu and had been confined to the house. His father's new assistant, Percy Weasley, had offered by return owl to keep things running smoothly and, even better, to send regular progress reports. They had to put up with Weasley's brown-nosing simpering with each missive (and each one turned Barty's stomach with its nauseating flattery of his father) but it was worth it. The ruse was working perfectly. They were fully informed about the Quidditch World Cup, fully informed about the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and the Dark Lord was pleased and making plans of plans of plans…

Barty grinned again.

Barty would have a role to play, an important role. Someone was going to have to impersonate his father eventually and who better for the job than himself, his father's son? The Polyjuice potion would be ready soon enough with the Dark Lord's tutelage on improving the standard recipe to enable it to brew faster and in greater quantity, to last longer and duplicate his father's voice and not just his appearance.
"Ah, Father," Barty taunted as he dragged the chair over to the bed and sat down, "it's been so long since we've talked."

His father had ignored him for the most part except on the anniversary of his mother's death and Yule. The former would involve a lecture on how much of a disappointment Barty had been to his mother (which was so not true – his mother had died in Azkaban because she believed in him), and the latter would involve a lecture on how much of a naughty boy Barty had been and a single present of getting to spend the day in the main part of the house leashed to Winky like he was three years old.

"The Dark Lord is away with Pettigrew doing something important for his plan, gaining his vengeance on his dead father," Barty murmured, "and as it is only you and I for the first time since they arrived, I thought we should talk. Well, I will talk and you will listen."

His mind was finally fully clear of the fog that his father's Imperius curses had left behind. He had devoured the newspapers, the old ones that Winky had stacked away for recycling; the new ones that were delivered every day.

He had read of Black's innocence and how he had gained custody of Potter. He had read of Black's first Wizengamot session and the death of the LeStranges…

Rabastan.

Barty felt his grief stir again. He had been so in love with Rabastan, the dark haired handsome man who had loved him and cherished him. The LeStrange home had been a haven for him; a sanctuary of acceptance away from his father's exacting and never-met standards. Bella had mothered him and Rodolphus had provided big brotherly advice when Barty had floundered. And Rabastan…

"I loved him beyond measure," Barty said out loud, "I loved him more than anything, I would have done anything for him including bowing to the Dark Lord and taking his Mark, and I did." He laughed harshly. "It wasn't so bad, you know. I mean, I didn't believe half of it, didn't care in truth because what did it matter to me if the Dark Lord wanted to kill all the muggles and muggleborns? Who cares truly? Not you. You just wanted power and control. Like you controlled Mummy. Like you tried to control me."

His father had made his mother's life a torment. His mother had been a kind, gentle soul. His father had dictated every aspect of her life from her dress to her manners, from her friends to where she went and for how long. Everything had to be in its place just as dear old Dad wanted it, or there would be harsh words that tore at her self-confidence and had her weeping while her husband ignored her.

Barty had grown up hating his father for how he'd treated his mother.

And yet just like his mother there had been a part of Barty that had desperately wanted his approval. He'd worked so hard at Hogwarts to sort into the right house, to do well in his studies, to excel in every magical way so that his father had no complaints – and yet, there had been no praise or approval at the end of each year just questions why he'd gotten less than Outstanding for Care of Magical Creatures or why hadn't he made Seeker for the Quidditch team instead of the Chaser position he had excelled in, or why hadn't he been considered for Head Boy and was just a lowly prefect. Nothing had ever been good enough.

"I wonder what was worse for you, Father dearest," Barty wondered, "was it finding out that I was a Death Eater or that Rabastan and I were lovers? I rather think it was the latter."
He knew his father would never approve. In his fifth year he had kissed Regulus Black on a dare and they had briefly conducted a secret affair, thrilling and terrifying in equal measure. It had been Regulus who had introduced him to Rabastan.

And Rabastan had loved him utterly and devotedly, just as he had loved Rabastan. They'd planned to be properly bonded, and Bella had even offered to carry a child for them who would become the LeStrange heir as Rodolphus was infertile thanks to a dark curse. They'd had so many plans and they had all come undone in one terrifying night.

"Bella and Roldophus were so distraught when the Dark Lord disappeared," Barty said to his unhearing father, "they desperately wanted to find out what had happened. They didn't believe you see that he was gone. Well, the Potters were dead but I knew that Alice and Lily had always been close. We just wanted to find out what had happened; where the Potter boy was."

Only the Longbottoms hadn't known anything and Bella and Rodolphus had taken their anger and frustration out on the pair while Rab had left off torturing them to join Barty in playing with the baby. They'd joked that it was practice for their own child but then…

Aurors had arrived and there was a battle and at the end of it, Barty had found himself in a cell at the Ministry awaiting his trial.

"I didn't torture them. You never believed me, Father, but I didn't. I kept the boy safe but was I thanked or rewarded? No." Barty sighed. "The only thing I did was lead them there and help them get through the wards."

Frank hadn't suspected him; not the son of his boss.

"For that you punished me with a lifetime in Azkaban." Barty stood up and paced back and forth. "I still don't know how Mummy convinced you to let her take my place. I suspect there was a potion involved, she was always very good at potions. She had to be, didn't she? She wasn't allowed to be anything less than perfect. But good for Mummy!"

His mother would have done anything for him, Barty knew that. She had loved him. She had also been the first one to buy him a broom and teach him how to fly; the first to buy him a present to celebrate his being a prefect, or getting perfect grades. She had been a wonderful woman; much too good for his father.

"I won't ever forget that she sacrificed her last days of freedom for me," Barty said firmly, whirling around and pointing his finger at his comatose parent, "but you wasted it! I'm sure she never wanted me to exchange one prison for another! To be locked away under your control, never to leave the house, never to know sunshine or a lover's touch again! You dosed me with potions to make my mind pliable and get around the Occlumency Bella taught me! You used Imperius curses on me to keep me obedient. Well, no more!"

His voice vibrated with rage.

"My Lord has freed me! He will be my father now!" Barty sat back down suddenly. "Yes, you heard me! He told me of his own father – a pitiful man who didn't see the greatness in his own son – just like you! He loves me! He will rise again stronger than before and I will take my place as his Heir, yes, I will be Slytherin's Heir, Father, haven't I done well, now?!"

He paused and wiped a hand across his mouth to wipe away the spittle that had lingered after his passionate spiel.
"We will get revenge on all those who have wronged us." Barty promised, his eyes glittering. "You will eventually die by my hand – the Dark Lord has promised me that just as his father died at his!"

He got to his feet and paced again. He stretched out his body. Winky had actually kept him in good condition. She hadn't stinted on his food, ensuring that he had potions to make up for the deficiencies in nutrients caused by his incarceration in the basement, and she had been the one to help him exercise every day.

Another week or so and he would be in peak condition, able to assume his father's place – no, not his father, he wouldn't call the man that any longer; he was undeserving of the title. No, he would take his sire's place at the Ministry and then the real fun would start.

Barty laughed.

Those Death Eaters who had denounced his Master would regret the day they had denied him, had lost faith in him. The Dark Lord had already planned his revival. The ritual was long and complicated and would take almost a year to complete but it would return the Dark Lord to his former glory. And Barty would be trusted with the most important part: delivering Harry Potter to the Dark Lord.

Harry Potter.

Barty had seen the newspapers and seen the Boy Who Lived's photo. He was a young boy; nothing special. The Dark Lord had already told him it had been the mother – Lily – who had performed some ancient Wiccan magic that had protected the boy and deprived the Dark Lord of his body. But the Dark Lord wanted Potter for his resurrection; needed the boy's blood and so Barty would deliver Potter. The Dark Lord would kill Potter then.

And so Barty would deprive Sirius Black of someone he loved just as Black had deprived Barty of his love.

Anger raged through Barty, hot and fierce, and he sent a cutting hex towards the still form on the bed.

He would destroy Black for killing Rabastan, Barty thought furiously. He would reduce Black to nothing. He would take everything Black loved and tear it to shreds. He would deliver Black's precious child to the Dark Lord and when the Dark Lord was finished with him, Barty would deliver Potter's head to Black personally.

He sent another curse at the bedridden man who had once been his father.

It would take time for the Dark Lord's plan to come to fruition – the ritual he wanted to use was powerful and required months of preparation. But there was no reason why Barty couldn't start on his part early or on ruining the rest of what Black held dear. He had already begun with sending Potter a Happy Birthday message since Weasley had been so eager to tell his boss how the Boy Who Lived would spend the day at the Burrow. But there would be more he could do and he would do it.

He grinned again.

The World Cup presented an opportunity. They'd received word via Weasley again that security was being tightened thanks to a tip of some kind of attack. The Dark Lord had laughed and had theorised that it was his old supporters desperately trying to win back favour because they knew he was back and growing in strength again because the Mark darkened. He had given Barty permission to show them how it was really done.
He'd target Potter, of course. If he could kidnap him before he went to Hogwarts so much the better. The boy could face the torment and trials the ritual demanded while chained to a wall next to Barty's dear old Dad.

But there needed to be a grand gesture and something else…

Barty chuckled. Weasley. Didn't he deserve something for his mindless brown-nosing? Perhaps the loss of his father would be enough and it was a good choice; the older Weasley had just been appointed to the Wizengamot and some Muggle Affairs thing the Dark Lord had ranted about.

Yes.

Yes.

It would be brilliant.

The Dark Lord – his new father – would be pleased.

"The next time I see you, old man, it will be to kill you." Barty promised gleefully. He bounded back up the stairs and into the kitchen. "Winky!"

Winky cowered in front of him.

"Go heal him." Barty ordered. "And bring me Weasley's correspondence. I have some planning to do."

Winky's ears flapped unhappily, her big round eyes filled with tears, but she nodded and popped away.

Barty grabbed an apple, biting into it enthusiastically as he went out to enjoy the sunset.

o-O-o

Another Friday meeting. An extended one with all that had happened during the previous week.

Sirius stretched and eased the kinks out of his neck as he waited for the others to arrive. Remus had agreed to attend although he was currently encased in a chair and napping. The full moon and the lycanthropy had taken its usual pound of flesh. Bill was also there at Bertie's request; he sat in a chair reading an old book he'd gotten out of the library. The contrast of his rebellious muggle clothing and the intent studious expression amused Sirius. He wondered if he had looked the same once upon a time.

His connection to the wards tugged on him and he knew the rest of the War Council had arrived. He revived Remus and Bill set his book down with a sigh that spoke of being irritated at the interruption to his reading. Sirius's lips twitched as he assured the young curse-breaker he could take the book home with him.

Within moments the study was filled with the most senior members of the British Magical government, the bustle of getting settled, refreshments arriving and the exchange of small talk although Sirius noted Amelia seemed quiet.

Sirius cleared his throat. "We should begin." He nodded at Cornelius but Amelia held up her hand before Cornelius could speak.

"I believe I should go first: the monitoring wards in Little Hangleton were tripped yesterday night at
approximately nine-thirty."

Everyone suddenly sat up straighter.

"Why weren't we informed immediately?" demanded Cornelius and Sirius had to agree with him – they should have been informed.

Amelia sighed. "Let me explain. As soon as the wards pinged, Wood and Cambridge responded to investigate and reported back that Pettigrew, a snake and what looked to be a small child – a toddler – were inside the Manor. I was about to contact you when they made a second report that Pettigrew had left on foot so I held off on the assumption that there would be more to report. That was around ten o'clock. He made a visit to the cemetery in Little Hangleton and according to Wood collected some bones from Tom Riddle Senior's grave."

Both Bertie and Dumbledore exchanged a knowing look at that piece of information and Sirius's jaw tightened.

"Pettigrew returned to the Manor around midnight at which point things basically went pear-shaped." Amelia said. "Cambridge watched as the muggle caretaker, Frank Bryce, was killed by the toddler in the presence of a large snake."

"It is not a toddler then," Dumbledore said gravely, "but a homunculus bearing what remains of Voldemort's soul."

"From the memory I watched I suspect he's possessed a two year old innocent magical child," Amelia said, "unfortunately Bryce's murder happened too quickly for Cambridge to intervene and he took a step back in his horror at what had happened, stumbled over something and alerted the snake to the fact that something or someone else was present – it reacted anyway. He quickly conjured a mouse to account for the noise and portkeyed away to prevent discovery." She paused and took a gulp of her drink. "Wood remained behind as he was hidden in a different location outside and watched as Pettigrew apparated away with the toddler and snake. He was unable to place a tracking charm and unable to follow given the danger of following an apparition trail straight into a trap."

"Bugger," said Sirius. They'd been so close.

"Wood anonymously alerted the muggle authorities to the death and returned to base." Amelia sighed. "I felt it wasn't worthwhile disturbing your sleep to inform you of what had happened given the result and our meeting now."

Sirius sighed heavily. He saw her point and he could see her guilt at what she must perceive as a failure of the Rat Squad. "Missions and plans go pear-shaped, Amelia. Nobody knows that better than myself."

She nodded. "And plans rarely survive engagement with the enemy," she smiled sadly at Sirius, "I had the same training, Sirius. It's just…disappointing. If they had remained at the Manor, we would have had them in our sights once we dealt with the treasure hunt."

"Well, we still learned many valuable things from this encounter. Bertie soothed. "Namely, that our intelligence is correct; Pettigrew is working to restore Voldemort and he is with Voldemort back in this country."

"We've also confirmed that he's replaced his familiar as we learned at the Gaunt place." Bill said. "He's travelling with a snake."

"He's gained some form of a body – whether a child or a homunculus in which to house what
remains of his soul." Dumbledore chimed in. "But not one that I believe Voldemort intends to remain within given the theft of the bones of his father."

"Yes," Sirius said dryly, "I noticed you and Bertie got very excited about that."

Bertie nodded. "There are two main rituals that can be used to restore Riddle's body because he used the particular objects he did as the method of immortality. One of these involves the bone of the father, flesh of the willing servant and, if I remember correctly, blood of the enemy forcibly taken."

Sirius was angry enough that he couldn't speak.

"And neither of you thought to inform us so we could, I don't know, replace Riddle's bones with some other person which would screw up the ritual?" asked Remus, stepping in when Sirius remained silent.

Bertie and Dumbledore looked abashed.

"My apologies," Bertie said formally, "you're quite correct; I should have informed the Council. I just didn't think to."

"I'm afraid I also have nothing but apologies to make," Dumbledore said hurriedly. "My main focus on that ritual was around the assumption that it would give Harry an anchor to life rather than…" he twirled his finger to silently say 'bring Voldemort back from the dead.'

"That's true," Bertie said excitedly, pointing at Dumbledore, "and it would give us a link, a connection although I'm not sure how that would manifest itself, not to mention that…"

"That it's NEVER going to happen if I have anything to do with it!" growled Sirius angrily.

"And me!" Remus snarled, his entire body vibrating with fury.

"Thirded," said Bill coolly.

"Just what potions have the two of you taken?" asked Amelia caustically as she turned on Bertie and Dumbledore. "You're talking about a dark ritual that will require Riddle to take Harry's blood by force! I assume you do realise that in such an instance, Harry would no doubt be in dire straits and probably in severe danger of losing his life if such an event were to occur! You talk as though that doesn't matter at ALL! For once, pull your heads out of your ivory bloody towers and THINK!"

Bertie and Dumbledore both looked thoroughly chastised.

Sirius was tempted to burst out laughing as the two men hastily made another apology.

"Now," Amelia said, "it appears that we know the ritual he intends to use." Her eyes narrowed on the two sheepish old wizards avoiding her eyes. "Is there anything else about this ritual, something say that may give us a tactical advantage?"

"Summer solstice," Bertie blurted out under her hard glare, "the ritual is best performed on the eve of the Summer solstice."

"Renewal, rebirth," Bill said quietly, "I can see why."

"Well, this is an alarming coincidence." Dumbledore stated, the twinkle in his eyes definitely absent.

"What?" asked Sirius impatiently.
Dumbledore looked around the gathering. "The final task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament will be held on the eve of the Summer solstice."

There was a sudden silence as they absorbed the news.

"Who came up with the dates for the tournament?" Remus asked bluntly.

Dumbledore frowned. "In all honesty, I cannot remember. The tournament has been discussed off and on for over two years. I will review my memories and see whether I can track down who it was."

"That's a long time for You-Know-Who to wait," Cornelius commented, speaking up again, "and why gather the, uh, bones now if he isn't going to use them straight away?"

"The ritual takes nine months for the majority of its preparation."

Nine months, Sirius mused; nine months being the usual gestation period for a baby.

"The bones of the father will need to be sanctified first, and then prepared by soaking in amniotic fluid for nine months. Then the majority of them will then become the base of a potion that is required," Bertie continued dispassionately, "and the servant who gives his flesh must spend the vast majority of nine months ahead of the ritual truly serving their Master. If it is a child or a homunculus then Pettigrew will be tasked with seeing to its security, bodily and nutritional needs."

"And the enemy?" asked Sirius tersely.

"Is to be tested and challenged for the majority of the nine months thus living in fear of his life."

"The tournament," Remus said, jumping ahead to the obvious conclusion, "if Harry was entered into the Tri-Wizard Tournament, it would provide the perfect arena for such a condition to be met."

"Harry is NOT entering the tournament."

"There are safeguards, Sirius." Dumbledore assured him. "Entrants must be seventeen and over. There will be tight security around the goblet, I promise you."

"I think whatever security you have planned, you need to triple it."

"I will review the security measures with Alastor, Ludo and Barty."

Cornelius raised his eyebrows. "I thought he was still sick? Barty, I mean."

"He is but he will return and Percy Weasley is doing an admirable job of being a go-between." Dumbledore said. "I'm certain he will relay a message and return Barty's thoughts on the matter."

Sirius glared at him. "Albus, if Harry is entered into this farce and Hogwarts fails to protect him from that, I will remove him from the school."

"While I understand your position, Sirius, we're getting ahead of ourselves," Amelia pointed out, "if we assume Riddle is working on this ritual then firstly -- let's work on a way to keep Harry out of the tournament."

They all nodded.
"Secondly, I'd like a briefing document for the teams." Amelia said. "From the sound of it, Riddle is going to have to kill a pregnant woman to get the amniotic fluid. We can issue safety warnings – a pretend muggle serial killer perhaps and if there is a killing help use that to track down Riddle's location."

"Good thinking, Amelia." Sirius said, regaining his own balance in the face of her determination and steadfastness.

"Did Wood or Cambridge mention luggage?" Remus asked suddenly.

Amelia shook her head.

"You don't think they were intending to stay?" Sirius questioned Remus. "You think their base is elsewhere and they were only at Little Hangleton temporarily to get the bones so we would have lost them anyway?"

"It's a theory." Remus offered, spreading his hands.

"A good one," Amelia commented heaving a sigh, "and one that will help Cambridge. Thank you, Remus."

"We should probably kill the snake when we get an opportunity." Dumbledore said. "I fear Voldemort may have accidentally made another… object through the death of the caretaker. No doubt Voldemort has spent time possessing the snake prior to his new… home. It would be susceptible."

"I don't agree with your reasoning but better safe than sorry." Bertie said. "Shall we move on to the Treasure Team unless Amelia has something else to add?"

"The rest of my report can wait." Amelia sat back and picked up her abandoned drink.

Cornelius shifted restlessly, a frown on his face.

"I think we should revert to the agenda, if that's OK, Bertie?" Sirius asked smoothly.

Bertie nodded and gestured at Cornelius who smiled smugly at his success in trumping Bertie.

"Operation Power Play is on track and probably if I'm honest a little ahead of schedule. Let's see: the Potter alliance has approached the Order of Merlin recipients. The nine muggleborn recipients have already confirmed their willingness to join; the others are still contemplating their various alliances but we expect to have them all by the time the September Session sits." Cornelius said with delight.

"That's excellent news." Amelia said.

Sirius could see she was genuinely glad someone had something positive to report even if it was Cornelius.

"Augusta has been a boon," Cornelius admitted, "we couldn't have done it without her."

"She does seem to have gained a new lease of life." Bertie said with a nod.

"The neutral bloc has also made many overtures in the last few weeks." Cornelius continued, gesturing with his glass of iced mint tea. "Lord Greengrass has agreed an alliance with the Houses of Potter and Black. Zabini, Goldstein, Rickett and Smith have all invited Lord Black and I to various events over the next couple of weeks so I expect they will have alliances in place by the time of the
"And with the neutral Ancient and Noble houses ostensibly taking a side, the rest of the neutral minor houses are likely to fall in line." Sirius said. The minor houses always sought the protection of the Ancient and Noble.

"What about the pureblood alliance?" asked Dumbledore. He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Any news on that front? The alliance with Lord Nott was a surprise."

"According to my latest communication from Malfoy, Selwyn and Wilkes are contemplating a similar alliance arrangement with the House of Black as Nott." Sirius replied. "However, I expect that to be last minute."

"And similarly to the neutrals, if the Ancient and Noble Houses declare a position, the majority of the minor houses will follow." Cornelius said gleefully. "So, alliance wise, we expect to be in a strong position by the October session."

"Which is when we can start to make the major inroads on the legislative front." Sirius added.

"It's a remarkable achievement," Dumbledore said quietly, "you have systematically changed the power dynamic within a few short months."

Cornelius glowed with the praise even though it had been Sirius who Dumbledore had been looking at when he'd commented.

Sirius gave a sharp nod to the old wizard.

"The other small problem I know the House of Potter is dealing with is responding to the numerous requests to join the Potter alliance Heirs in swearing fealty to young Harry." Cornelius said with a teasing glint in his eye as he turned to Sirius.

Sirius grimaced. "Harry got inundated with requests following the Prophet article, mostly from children including his school mates."

Amelia smiled at him sympathetically. "I'm not surprised. Most of our children have been raised on stories of the Boy Who Lived. The prospect of swearing fealty and following him must seem like a wondrously adventurous lark to most youngsters."

"What does Harry think of it all?" Dumbledore asked pointedly.

Remus chuckled. "Mostly he's embarrassed at the attention."

Sirius hid his smirk at the indulgent looks that crept over the others' faces. Remus had known exactly what to say to dismiss any concerns that Harry was thrilled at the prospect of being able to raise his own private army – which he was a little bit – although Remus was right; Harry was mostly embarrassed. Sirius could quite happily torture the Dursleys for hours for the damage they had done to Harry's self-worth.

"He and the rest of the Heirs are sending replies back thanking people for their interest and providing more information about fealty including the fact that their parents would need to swear alliances with the House of Potter and be well known to Harry and myself before any vow of fealty could be accepted." Sirius continued. "There are a few families in there who we'd quite like to ally with...so we'll see what comes of it."

"I believe those are our highlights." Cornelius said pompously.
"Amelia, why don't you finish your report and then we'll cover the Treasure Team?" asked Sirius.

"One last thing to report then," Amelia said briskly, "namely, the Operation Quidditch is proceeding nicely. Avery has dropped out of the suspected Death Eater attack because of an invitation to go abroad on some junket – we believe Malfoy was behind it."

"He's probably protecting Avery's vote," Cornelius commented. "Avery doesn't have a mind of his own."

"Agreed," Amelia said dryly, "Travers and the others are on board. They've exchanged few owls but have met on three occasions to plan. Thanks to the help of Albus's spy, we cracked their code very easily to learn the details. They're planning a disruption the night after the game during the celebrations. Their main targets are the muggle family who own the campsite. Two of them will play with the muggles while the others wreck havoc among those staying at the campsite, targeting muggleborn families. The attack will begin at midnight. Rufus and Barty have been made aware that there is an imminent threat of something happening and will plan the Auror details around that. The Rat Squad will deal with the specifics."

"Are we sure we wish to specifically intervene beyond the Aurors acknowledging an anonymous tip? We risk revealing our surveillance of the remaining Death Eaters." Dumbledore pointed out.

"Politically, we need to ensure that the perpetrators are caught." Cornelius responded before Amelia could. "We need to make this a statement that we won't allow such activity."

"I have faith in Rufus and his team, Albus, but the Rat Squad will be there as a back-up to ensure that we don't let the buggers get away." Amelia said forcefully. "The Aurors and Bagman are being told that the Rat Squad will be there on the lookout for Pettigrew."

"Sounds like a good plan," Sirius commented firmly, feeling happier about allowing Harry to stay for some of the post-match celebrations, "and I guess that brings us onto Bertie?"

Bertie sighed. "Unfortunately, my news isn't as positive as Cornelius's and Amelia's World Cup report. As you all know we investigated the Chamber of Secrets and as fascinating an intellectual exercise as that was," he teased Amelia who rolled her eyes at him, "it was fruitless in turning up the object we hoped for."

"Unfortunately, anything of value was taken and nothing of value left." Bill said succinctly. "Wherever Riddle stowed the object, it wasn't in the Chamber."

"Which means we're faced with a systematic search of Hogwarts." Sirius sighed, rubbing his forehead, a twinge of pain signalling the onset of a headache.

"How long did he take from crossing the wards to appearing at the foot of the office staircase?" Remus asked. "Perhaps if we know that, we can theorise the route he took?"

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "I can review my memory."

"Well, that gives us two possible approaches." Bill said. "Unfortunately, Hogwarts is going to be a nightmare to search either way between moving staircases, corridors and rooms."

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore agreed. "Indeed rooms have been known to appear and disappear. I myself came across a chamber pot room once and…"

"Albus," Amelia broke in sharply and he subsided with his eyes twinkling mischievously. She turned back to the others. "You will need a cover story for being at Hogwarts."
"Additional security for the tournament?" Bill suggested immediately. "That way we have a legitimate reason to search rooms and be about the castle."

"I think that's a splendid idea." Dumbledore said with a nod at Bill.

"What about Godric's Hollow?" Cornelius asked. "Anything there?"

"Caro and I are almost finished with the cleansing." Bill confirmed, folding his arms. "We'll start shifting through the house after the World Cup." He paused and looked over at Sirius regretfully. "We'll pack up as much as we can for Harry."

"Thank you." Sirius said, a lump in his throat.

He was aware that Dumbledore was looking half-ashamed across the room; he should be ashamed, Sirius thought fiercely. He should have ensured the house was properly looked after rather than acquiescing to the Ministry simply placing it in a stasis charm as a horrifying memorial.

"Will Harry want to take a look at the house itself?" Bill asked.

"Maybe," Sirius shot Remus a look because they'd already had the discussion, "we were thinking of going at Christmas. The house will be dealt with and we can..." his throat closed up.

"Harry wants to visit his parents' graves." Remus explained. "That is he wants to but at the same time, he's said he's not ready yet."

"None of us are." Sirius muttered and determinedly changed the subject. "So, the treasure hunt is ongoing but stuck on slow for the foreseeable future."

After that, it didn't take long to wrap things up, the attendees heading for the floo and their usual Friday activities except for Bill who left for a date with Alicia Doge. Sirius privately thought it might be a good match but kept his mouth shut.

Remus stayed back to deal with correspondence and Sirius went home to Griffin House by himself. Dobby popped into the hallway as Sirius absently vanished the floo powder from his robe.

"Harry Potter is with his Professor McGoggles in the basement." Dobby informed him.

"Thank you, Dobby." Sirius said warmly; he'd grown quite fond of Dobby whose adoration of Harry knew no bounds it seemed. "Supper in the dining room today, I think."

"Yes, Harry Potter's Paddy, sir." Dobby said and popped away again.

Sirius shook his head. The elf clearly believed Harry was his master despite being nominally free and being paid. He made his way to the basement and watched unobserved from the doorway as Minerva continued to put Harry through his Transfiguration paces – non-verbally.

"Again, Harry." Minerva instructed, placing a hedgehog in front of him.

Harry's face crunched up and Sirius could see the way he bit down on his lip to prevent himself mouthing the incantation. He knew non-verbal casting took more concentration and focus; more control. It was a wonderful way to bring Harry's power under control which was why Dumbledore had suggested it and Sirius had to admit he had been right.

The hedgehog transformed into a beautiful purple coloured pincushion with its spike, sparkling silvery metal pins. It remained still.
"Excellent work, Harry!" Minerva praised him warmly, clapping her hands.

"Excellent work, indeed." Sirius said loudly, drawing their attention.

Harry's face lit up at the sight of him and Sirius felt his heart leap with glee at the sight of that. He would never get used to it. He was sure that Harry loved him even if he had never said anything.

"How was the meeting?" asked Minerva, starting to collect her teaching paraphernalia and pack it away, absently turning the hedgehog back to itself.

"Informative. There's been a sighting of Voldemort and the rat." Sirius said, leaning a shoulder on the door jamb.

Harry frowned. "Where?"

"Little Hangleton." Sirius said tersely. "Not the Gaunt place but the Riddle Manor. They were seen but they've gone again and it looked like they had no intention of staying."

He debated with himself about whether to tell Harry about the ritual and decided against it. He didn't like keeping information from Harry but maybe Remus had been right; Harry didn't need to know every single thing especially something as disturbing as a ritual that would call for Harry to be tested and challenged for nine months before his blood was forcibly taken. Sirius shivered violently. He'd wait; if Amelia turned up any sign of pregnant women going missing then he'd warn Harry but until then…Harry was only fourteen and deserved to spend the rest of his Summer having fun rather than worrying about a ritual that may or may not take place.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked concerned.

Sirius shook himself in a vague parody of how he did it as Padfoot. "Just…disturbed at the confirmation they're in the country."

"Yeah," Harry grimaced, "but at least we know. Knowing's better than not knowing, right?"

Sirius felt a twinge of guilt for the decision he'd just made about keeping the ritual secret but smiled at Harry as though in agreement.

"There's no clue as to their base of operations?" asked Minerva, zipping up the carpet bag loudly.

"No, although we know he's not staying with any of the listed Death Eaters." Sirius said. "Remus thinks there's a possibility that Wormtail had a bolthole."

"A good probability if he was a spy." Minerva said crisply. "Did Remus come back with you?"

"Correspondence." Sirius explained succinctly. "We've a few new business deals in the works." He winked at Harry. "Something about Potter and Longbottom Supplies?"

"Oh?" Minerva looked to Harry for an explanation.

Harry grinned at her. "Neville and I worked out that two properties we're managing are perfect for growing and sourcing the ingredients to various potions. He's growing the plant ingredients and I'm housing the animal. We're hoping if we can supply the ingredients cheaply, we can get potions like Wolfsbane produced more readily."

"That's wonderful, Harry." Minerva said. "Remus must be delighted."

"After quizzing us for hours about whether we were doing it just to please him." Harry admitted with
a smirk. "Neville told him it was just good business and it follows our political agenda on werewolves."

"Neville is a little political monster." Sirius commented dryly. He'd evidently picked up a lot from Augusta.

Minerva raised an eyebrow.

"He really is." Harry agreed happily. "Hermione thinks he's going to be Minister of Magic one day."

"Chief Warlock." Sirius countered and refrained from offering a bet in the presence of his former Head of House.

"Well, I am delighted to hear of Mister Longbottom's political prowess." Minerva said, with a small smile. "We should talk about your animagus training before Remus arrives back."

Harry immediately gave Minerva his attention. She had surprisingly acquiesced to his request for the same deal as James with a speed and alacrity that worried Sirius until she explained that she fully expected that if she didn't, Harry would find some other way.

"Now, have you read the material I gave you?" asked Minerva, falling into her teacher mode.

Harry nodded briskly.

"Tell me the three different ways you can find your form." Minerva instructed.

Sirius went back to leaning in the doorway as he listened to Harry recite the various methods: a potion that induced a trance-like state, meditation, or a forced animagus spell. The Marauders had used the first since James and he had been OK at Potions even if they hadn't been top of their class.

"I'd like you to try meditation first." Minerva said. "It is the least painful and the best way of finding your truest form."

"The book said we could have more than one form." Harry said. "How is that possible?"

"Different combination of traits may lean more to one animal than another but your total traits never leave you. When you begin several different forms may be open to you but ultimately once you've learned one, it is difficult to achieve another." Minerva said. "I had three possible forms when I meditated: a cat, a horse and a dolphin. I was drawn to the cat form above the others primarily because I thought it was the most practical. I've only ever managed to transfigure the hooves of a horse but I haven't been able to complete the transformation fully."

"We did the potion." Sirius spoke up. "Hearing of your three forms makes me regret we didn't do the meditation. I love my Padfoot form but now I'm wondering if there was a better one."

"Personally I think the Grim suits you, Sirius," Minerva said dryly, "but I wouldn't be surprised if you and James might have had the option to transform into wolves." She looked at Harry. "I would think with Remus in your life that would be an option for you too, Harry. There's a part of you that no doubt considers yourself as part of his pack."

Harry nodded. "So I guess I read up on the meditation technique and process?"

Minerva nodded. "We'll go over it at next week's lesson."

"Great!" Harry enthused. "I can't wait!"
"I highly recommend a dog form." Sirius said, shooting a teasing grin at Minerva.

"Cats are far superior." Minerva retorted, smiling.

"I was thinking of a bird." Harry responded with a rueful smirk, surprising. "I just…I love flying and it feels right."

"You are a natural flyer." Minerva said with a nod of approval. "It wouldn't surprise me if a flying form was available to you."

"I hope so." Harry said.

Sirius nodded. "I can see you as a bird." He admitted, although deep down he could admit to himself that he was hoping that Harry would choose a canine animagus form. He cocked his head, hearing Remus talking with Dobby in the kitchen. He turned to Minerva. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"I would like that." Minerva accepted.

He ushered her up the stairs before he reached out and pulled Harry to him in a one-armed hug. "Looking forward to the World Cup?"

Harry grinned. "I can't wait."

"Yes, thank you for my ticket, Sirius," Minerva said, glancing over her shoulder, "it's been a long time since I've been to a World Cup final."

"If it's anything like the Duelling finals, it should be excellent." Sirius said. The Duelling finals had been a fantastic display of skill and imagination – Harry had been enthralled.

"Filius said that it was a good match." Minerva commented as they emerged into the kitchen. "I understand Colin Blishwisk won?"

"Hilliard almost had him at the end there." Harry commented wistfully.

"Yes, and Toby Hilliard will be teaching the Duelling elective." Minerva said cheerfully. "I believe Filius was finally able to convince him by promising some private tutoring."

Harry grinned. "I'm glad I signed up for the elective then."

Sirius hid a smile at Harry's enthusiasm. He could see the change in Harry in regards to his schooling, the surge of curiosity and thirst for knowledge and skills; it pleased Sirius no end.

Remus cleared his throat. "Simeon made a fire call and confirmed his time of arrival tomorrow. He said he's looking forward to the Quidditch."

"It's just as well I bought an entire box for us to use." Sirius complained without any real ire. He figured Simeon had arranged his visit to coincide with the cup but he wasn't bothered – in fact he was pleased. Simeon was a highly trained Auror and it was good to have someone that skilled on their side given what they knew about the planned Death Eater activities even if Sirius had every intention of ensuring Harry was nowhere near the action.

"Everybody is leaving Dobby's kitchen." Dobby said sternly. "Dinner is ready for Harry Potter and Harry Potter's family."

A smile broke across Harry's face as he coaxed Dobby into coming and eating with them since Harry considered the elf part of his family; as Remus and Minerva made their way into the dining room.
talking about some obscure manuscript on family magic; and Sirius felt his own heart lift.

Harry Potter's family.

It sounded perfect to him.
Pronglet's World Cup:1

Part 6: Pronglet's First Quidditch World Cup (The 'Don't-Let-the-Death-Eaters-Ruin-It' Prank)

August 20th 1994

Hermione hovered nervously next to her parents as they dusted off their clothing in the Black reception room. The entire immediate House of Black was in attendance because of the arrival of Simeon Black and his family – his wife, Anna, and his baby son, Jason. The Regent Apparent for the House of Black had arrived earlier that day from Australia and everyone was gathered to meet and get to know him.

Penelope smiled at Hermione and ushered them out and down the corridor to the large Summer room. The furniture had been mostly cleared out although there were a few seating areas discreetly laid out. A table with drinks and nibbles took up the back wall but the French doors had been opened up, leaving the garden accessible as it was a lovely sunny day.

Hermione could see Andromeda and Narcissa on the lawn talking with a woman with blonde hair and cooing over the baby she held. Further into the garden she spotted Lucius talking with Professor McGonagall; Remus stood under a tree chatting to Ted. She grimaced as she scanned the room quickly and found Draco tucked into a corner, sitting on a sofa and glowering as Tonks chattered on about something to him.

Poor Tonks, thought Hermione. It looked like the young Auror had drawn the short straw and been told to look after Draco. She was vaguely aware that Andromeda and her family had been meeting with Narcissa and Draco since the last family meeting in July as a way to get him acclimated with interacting politely with people he would normally simply sneer at as he adjusted to the new world order.

In some ways she felt sorry for Draco; he'd essentially gone from believing he and his father were at the top of the food chain only to realise someone else occupied the position and would be quite happy to eliminate him if he so much as looked at someone the wrong way. But she couldn't deny that a large part of her was gleefully smug at him getting his karmic comeuppance for being such a bigoted prat. Unfortunately, she also knew that Narcissa had spent the Summer teaching him to hide his prejudice better not that he shouldn't be prejudiced.

She straightened as she realised that she had missed her parents greeting Sirius and Harry who stood by the door in a somewhat informal receiving line along with another man who looked very much like Sirius; black hair, blue eyes instead of grey, but the same haughty classical handsome looks that defined the Blacks.

"…and this is Hermione." Sirius declared, nudging her forward towards the stranger. "Hermione, Simeon Black."

Hermione curtseyed as Andy had instructed her, letting her head bow forward just a touch but not fully. "Senior Auror Black."

"Simeon, please." Simeon said with an easy grin, the faint hint of France in his Australian accent. "It is a delight to meet you and your parents, Hermione. I believe my Uncle Alphard would have given his wand arm to have met you; the first muggleborn daughter of the House of Black."
Sirius snorted. "We're lucky to have her and we have two now since your wife was inducted earlier." He winked at Hermione and nodded at Harry. "Why don't you kids catch-up now all the introductions are done?"

Harry grinned at him, shot Simeon a shy smile, and Hermione marvelled at the changes that had been wrought in her friend over the course of the Summer.

Harry looked better, for one thing; healthier – his skin glowed, his dark hair shone, his green eyes were bright and he looked a healthy weight. But he also looked cared for with his clothes good quality, clean and well-fitted; his glasses new and fashionable. He no longer looked unkempt. More importantly, he also looked happy; brilliantly happy and content in a way that Hermione had never seen in the three years of their friendship.

She’d had her doubts about Sirius's ability to take care of Harry despite the fact that she’d gently hinted to Amelia Bones in her interview at the start of the Summer that Harry would be better away from the Dursleys. After all Sirius was a stranger and what did they know about him beyond his innocence and that he was Harry's godfather? But Sirius had risen to the occasion. It was clear to everyone he loved Harry and would do anything to protect him.

Perhaps though, Hermione considered, as Harry walked her over to the refreshments as she began outwardly quizzing him on their Transfiguration homework, it was the other change in Harry that had Hermione flustered; his sudden appreciation for studying.

It wasn't as though she didn't know Harry was intelligent – he was very bright – but in their previous three years at Hogwarts, he had only displayed that when he had absolutely needed to and the rest of the time seemed content to fade into the background. As someone who loved studying and who couldn't resist showing how much knowledge she had, (a bad habit of her own, she knew – her own parents had remonstrated with her about showing off and intellectual arrogance), she couldn't understand it.

Well, she could when she thought about the additional attention Harry would garner from being smart and intelligent and top of the class.

She sighed inwardly. If she had learned one thing as the friend of Harry Potter it was that the wizarding world felt it had every right to know everything about him and had no compunction about highlighting the least little thing – not always in a positive way. At least Sirius was now controlling the press to some extent and tackling the awful fictional books that had been written about Harry's young life. And it seemed with that security and Sirius's encouragement for Harry to make the most of his studies, Harry had let go of whatever it was that was holding him back intellectually.

She felt a flutter of nervousness.

Hermione couldn't deny that she was maybe a little worried. Harry's knowledge of Runes was as good as her own and when he'd demonstrated the boost to his magic to her one day showing her some of the non-verbal transfiguration he'd done, she'd known he'd surpassed her in her favourite subject. She wanted to dismiss it as simply being down to his powerful magic but she'd known he couldn't do such a transfiguration if he hadn't understood the wand movements and theory behind it either.

He was good at debating too. He preferred to sit back and let her, Ron and Neville have their say first but when he entered the debate, they all listened; he just had a way about him. She was beginning to wonder whether he would need her help studying anymore; whether he would need her friendship anymore.
Which was silly, Hermione acknowledged as she listened to Harry talking about the Laws of Transfiguration and why he thought it should be possible to transfigure something living out of something non-living.

Harry wasn't her friend just because she'd helped him with his homework and contributed to solving some of his more adventurous problems. But she couldn't help remembering how Ron and he hadn't talked to her for weeks after the Firebolt incident. The initial falling out had largely been her own fault. She had gone behind Harry's back; if she'd talked with him…

But the length of time that they had taken to reconcile and her increasing depression at their failure to forgive her had been the fault of the boys. It had taken far longer than she had anticipated (and indeed calculated when she had weighed up her decision to take the broom situation to their Head of House). As Harry usually didn't hold grudges (besides Professor Snape who regularly tested her own deep-seated belief that all teachers deserved respect and Draco Malfoy who was a prat of the first order), she blamed Ron who had also been waging war at her over Crookshanks and Scabbers.

Her friendship with Ron was a completely different animal to her friendship with Harry. She doubted that without Harry, she and Ron would ever have been friends. It had been because of Harry that both boys had arrived at the bathroom in time to rescue her from the troll – the incident that had effectively begun the trio's friendship. Ron had disliked her intelligence and thought she was a bossy know-it-all and she hadn't been that enamoured of him either. But the day after the troll, when Harry had excused himself for the bathroom, Ron had quietly apologised for insulting and upsetting her, and offered her a slightly battered chocolate frog he'd been saving. Hermione had been touched at the gesture and sacrifice (because she knew how Ron loved his sweets) and accepted. Since then, their friendship had been a mix of the tension that had characterised their relationship before the troll (in other words, sniping at each other) and after (namely, something rather sweet and affectionate).

By comparison, her friendship with Harry had none of the volatility of her friendship with Ron. It was much more straightforward; they each accepted the other despite the irritation of their various flaws (Hermione knew she drove him round the bend with her attitude on studying and her bossiness at times whereas his ability to outright ignore authority and be stubborn drove her nuts) and treasured the friendship between them. She had a poster in her muggle bedroom that stated 'friends are people who know your flaws and love you anyway' and she thought it summed up her friendship with Harry perfectly. Perhaps, Hermione considered as Harry led her, drinks in hand, out to the garden to meet Simeon's wife and son, it was because neither she nor Harry had experienced friendship before Hogwarts (one of the few things Harry had let slip about his life with the Dursleys). They both appreciated their friendship more because of that.

And that was why she had been so hurt by his and Ron's refusal to speak with her. She had forgiven them both – partially because they'd been truly repentant, partially because she'd been truly repentant, and mostly because she'd missed them. But the whole incident had prompted Hermione to think about her friendships once the school year was over, and she thought it had maybe prompted Harry into thinking about his friendships too.

Since the beginning of the Summer and his return from the healing clinic, they'd grown closer. Some of it, Hermione believed, was her inclusion in the House of Black, but most of it seemed down to Harry's own decision to cultivate a closer relationship with her. He'd written to her (and OK, Ron too) in a journal which she had read cover to cover and more than once; he'd changed to Runes and dropped Divination and they were now studying together for the opportunity to skip a year; he'd asked Sirius if Hermione could join him for his Potions and his politics lessons without her reminding him; he'd let her hold his hand and comfort him in the Chamber of Secrets.

And she was warmed by his actions. She knew Ron held a special place in Harry's world because
Ron had been his first friend of his own age but now she felt she occupied something of a special position too beyond his first female friend – a more equal position, and it reassured her to some degree that Harry wouldn't just take Ron's side in future. She wasn't certain that had been Harry's intent but it was the result.

Interestingly, Harry had also seemed to make the same decision as she had about making more friends. Losing Harry's and Ron's company had made Hermione realise just how isolated the trio was – how isolated she was. Neville had been quite sweet to her – if he saw her in the Gryffindor Common Room he'd sit and chat with her if Ron and Harry weren't around. She'd also taken some solace in her Arithmancy study group which included Padma Patil and Lisa Turpin but they only met twice a week and truthfully, they focused more on studying than getting to know each other. No, she had decided early on in the Summer that she needed to make some additional friends outside of Harry and Ron. Luckily, Harry seemed to have come to the same conclusion and the Summer's activities had been great at building some decent nascent friendships with Susan, Hannah and Neville.

She had also tried to build something of a friendship with Ginny, prompted by an end of term conversation…

She sighed heavily and lowered her hairbrush, giving up on taming her hair, and turning away only to bump into Ginny who she hadn't noticed was hovering by her bed. "Sorry, Ginny. Did you want something?"

"I was hoping to talk with you." Ginny admitted, her hands twisting together. She looked around the empty dorm room and back to Hermione with hopeful eyes.

Hermione gestured at her bed and they both sat down.

"So what's this about?" asked Hermione briskly.

"Well, it's...it's about Harry...do you..." Ginny hesitated, looking around at the empty room again, before she took hold of her Gryffindor courage and ploughed ahead, "what do you think Harry thinks of me, I mean, as a friend?" She blushed bright red.

Pity stirred in her at Ginny's question. "I think Harry probably thinks of you as Ron's little sister," the same as she did, "rather than as a personal friend, Ginny." She said bluntly.

Ginny slumped and she folded her arms; a picture of dejected misery.

Hermione sighed. "Look, Ginny, if you're serious about being Harry's friend, then you need to get him to see beyond the 'Ron's little sister' tag and see you as your own person." Just as Ginny needed to see beyond Harry's 'Boy Who Lived' status and see Harry as a person. "You have to make an effort to be his friend rather than someone who sits with her brother and his best friends occasionally. Talk to him. Get to know him."

"I just never know what to talk about." Ginny admitted, looking down at her feet.

"Well, what do you like that Harry likes?" Hermione asked.

Ginny's expression cleared and she smiled brightly. "Quidditch." Her face fell again. "Not that my brothers and Mum let me play that much."

"It's a start." Hermione pointed out. She gentled her tone. "I know Harry appreciates friends so I'm sure he'd appreciate a genuine effort." And not as she suspected an attempt to get closer to the Boy Who Lived. "Just talk to him, strike up a conversation."
Ginny nodded slowly. "I just…it's hard for me to talk to him because…"

"Because he's the Boy Who Lived?" Hermione said scathingly.

"You weren't raised in the wizarding world, Hermione," Ginny said defensively, "you don't know what it's like! I was raised on stories about Harry! And I know they're fiction but it's hard not to think of him as a knight in shining armour especially when...well..."

"He's actually been your knight in shining armour." Hermione concluded with a heavy sigh. "Look, I understand that..." she held up a hand when Ginny started to get defensive, "troll, remember? He's saved me too. But Harry hates the Boy Who Lived stuff and you'd be better forgetting all about it and trying to get to know the real Harry." She paused to let her words sink in. "And you have to remember, Harry doesn't see himself as a knight in shining armour and he doesn't think that he's going to end up marrying the girls he saves – Merlin! Harry's more interested in Quidditch than girls." She'd thought she'd drive the point home. "Boys take a lot more time to mature than girls."

"But Fred said he and George started dating in their third year and so did Percy! Bill got caught in a broom closet when he was in fourth year." Ginny argued.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Maybe your brothers were ready for girls in third and fourth year but that doesn't mean Harry is or will be! Maybe Harry will want a girlfriend next year, maybe he will start dating someone but..." she motioned absently with the brush she still held, "I can guarantee that he won't look twice at someone who sees him as the Boy Who Lived!"

"But Fred said he and George started dating in their third year and so did Percy! Bill got caught in a broom closet when he was in fourth year." Ginny argued.

Hermione's expression turned to contemplation. "So he's more likely to ask someone out if they're his friend first."

"Genuinely his friend," remonstrated Hermione gently, "but, yes."

"Will you help me?" asked Ginny suddenly, shifting position to look at Hermione with a determined expression.

The request took her aback but she caved with one glance at Ginny's hopeful eyes. "I'll help you become friends, Ginny." Hermione agreed. "But really you're the one who has to make the effort to talk with him."

Of course, Hermione had talked with Harry about Ginny, and Harry seemed OK with the idea of being friends with her, but Ginny seemed to still have the same problem about talking with Harry that she'd always had. It seemed like Ginny couldn't get over her crush and her blushing and stammering made Harry feel uncomfortable so he rarely talked with her for long. Still, at the last dinner with the Weasleys they'd attended together, Harry had commiserated with Ginny over the pain of using Skele-gro and Ginny had managed five minutes without clumsily upending her dinner by being in his presence, so maybe things were progressing towards a friendship (and Hermione was pleased about that, she was). She believed Ginny would always want more than that though.

Hermione dragged herself away from her thoughts long enough to shake hands with Anna, Simeon's wife, and say hello to the baby. She happily chatted about their different muggleborn experiences until Anna began questioning Harry about the Wizengamot. She stood back and let her thoughts drift again.

Truthfully, Hermione was aware that she'd had a similar problem to Ginny – Harry saving her from a troll might have engendered a small, miniscule, tiny crush – but she'd been more fortunate that Harry had been completely clueless and she'd been able to act normally around him for the most part and build a friendship with him. And at the beginning of the Summer she truly hadn't thought of Harry as
boyfriend material for herself when her parents had teased her.

Three years of friendship with Harry (and the rift over the Firebolt) had made that the most precious thing in her life; she didn't want to lose it over fanciful romantic notions that she was sure Harry would never return. Hermione wasn't unaware that objectively there were prettier girls than her in Hogwarts and she had believed Harry was more likely to fall for a pretty girl than a smart girl thanks to the pressure on Harry to conform to expectations for the Boy Who Lived. Not to mention her unswerving belief that Harry wasn't thinking about girlfriends yet – something their conversation at the first barbeque of the Summer had upheld to some extent.

Hermione had in contemplating her own romantic readiness determined that she was ready and she secretly wanted to have a boyfriend who would pay her compliments and hold her hand and maybe share a kiss or two. She also thought it unlikely that anyone would want to date her, (she knew the common mythology was that boys didn't go for smart girls), but she hoped, hoped that someone would.

Of course, she had intellectually considered Ron and Harry as possible boyfriends because they were close friends and therefore safe. But she had also dismissed them because her objective review of them as possible suitors hadn't been a positive one; Ron was a lazy student who shared very little in common with her although he had a kind heart, and Harry was smart and sweet but he was also unlikely to look at her that way, and although they did have more in common (muggle raised and only children), their interests were different. No, a different boy to be a boyfriend should one come along was the way to go. However, things had changed since she had made her decision at the beginning of the Summer.

Harry had changed.

And so had Hermione.

Hermione was now a daughter of the House of Black and it had given her a sense of security and belonging in the wizarding world that she hadn't felt before as a muggleborn. That security had allowed her to ease off her own determination to know everything she could about everything she could. She enjoyed politics but her favourite lessons had been the cultural outings – getting to know the heritage of the world she'd found herself in.

Not only that, but her Mum and Dad regularly visited the wizarding world in a way that would have been unthinkable before. She had gotten up late one day to find Andy in the kitchen with her Mum gossiping away with biscuits and tea. Her Dad had attended the Duelling finals as Sirius's guest and he'd been golfing with her Dad. Hermione was so immensely grateful that her relationship with her parents – a relationship that had been drifting slowly apart – had mended itself back into the strong unit of her childhood.

She had a plan now for what she wanted to do: she wanted to be a Healer and combine muggle and magical medicine. She planned to build a medical research laboratory that would work on cures for rare magical illnesses such as lycanthropy and Neville's parents' condition, and some muggle – she wanted to cure cancer! She knew it would be hard work – she'd have to catch up her muggle education and do a medical degree as well as train for her Healer Mastery but she was convinced she could do it. And she would have the backing of the House of Potter, the House of Black and the House of Longbottom.

It all led to a more confident and more settled Hermione – one whose best friend Harry was also more confident and settled himself. He had matured over the Summer with the advent of his House responsibilities, the additional time he had spent in the Valley clinic and the healing he had received. He had become a Harry who Hermione could wistfully see would make a great boyfriend.
And he had been so very attentive to her. Maybe, maybe, maybe…

It was all leading her thoughts in dangerous directions, Hermione told herself briskly as baby Jason crawled across the grass to Harry. Harry absently handed her his glass and she took it so he could stoop down and pick up the wriggling infant patting his feet. Jason made a grab for Harry's gold-framed glasses.

"Seeker," declared Harry as he avoided the grab with the skills of one. His hand caught Jason's fist and he calmly adjusted his hold.

"Glad to see you're training your replacement already, Harry." Professor McGonagall said dryly as she joined them.

Harry grinned at her. "You know that's not a bad idea. Ron's always going on about how the professional teams have reserves."

Professor McGonagall hummed but Hermione could see the idea ticking over in her head.

"You seem very practiced there with a baby, Harry." Tonks said as she arrived to join the group. "Is there anything you want to tell us?" She teased.

"Only that a couple of the neighbours used to bring over their babies for the coffee morning gossip sessions." Harry explained, jiggling the baby. "My Aunt always had me baby-sit them so she and the others could enjoy a baby-free environment." He rolled his eyes expressively.

"Where's Draco?" asked Narcissa worriedly, looking around the garden.

Tonks gestured towards the house where Draco could be seen talking with his father, Simeon and Sirius by the door. "Uncle Lucy collected him for a man-talk."

"Nymphadora," Andy said briskly although Narcissa looked amused rather than angry, "try to be respectful."

Harry concentrated on the baby but Hermione could see his smirk. He pulled a face and made Jason gurgle with delight. Hermione could see how the amusement faded from Harry's face to be replaced by something sad and contemplative.

And suddenly, time seemed to slow down as a gold and silver mist appeared from nowhere, rushing around the assembly of women, Harry and the baby…

The family totems formed either side of Harry.

Each woman reached out and placed a hand on Harry. Hermione watched as her own glass fell from her hand and bounced across the grass as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

Anna was the only exception; instead of touching Harry she delicately bit the thumb of her free hand and drew the protective rune they had used in the blessing ritual across her son Jason's forehead in blood without saying a word, her expression dazed.

The snake hissed something at Harry who nodded shakily and in the next moment, the totems dissolved into the mist, swirling around the assembly briefly before disappearing again.

Hermione gasped as she came back to herself.

Anna shook her head and reached anxiously for her child, shooting Harry a suspicious look. "What
"Good question!" panted Sirius as he ran up. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder as Harry handed the baby over. "Everyone alright?"

Hermione nodded quickly along with everyone else.

"Harry, what happened?" prompted Sirius when he remained silent.

Harry sighed with a chagrined look at Jason. "I was just thinking about…" his eyes flickered to the Malfoys lurking just behind Simeon, who had placed a comforting arm around his wife, "about the blessing ritual we did."

Hermione got the message immediately and she could see Sirius knew exactly what Harry was referring to as well; Lily's protection that kept Harry safe.

"I was thinking I wasn't much older than Jason when…" Harry's eyes grew pained and Hermione's own heart clenched painfully in her chest, "you know, and I was thinking it was a shame that I couldn't extend the blessing to Jason especially as he's in the line of succession for the Black Lordship if something happens to us both so…"

"So the family magic jumped to do your bidding." Sirius completed, amused.

Harry nodded and glanced apologetically at Anna. "I'm sorry if it scared you but the blessing ritual we did for me now extends to Jason. The House totem confirmed it."

Sirius held up a hand as Simeon went to ask a question. "I'll explain later, Simeon, but suffice to say, your little critter is now blessed under the protection of the family magics in a very special way."

"This family magic stuff is very unnerving," Anna said her accent strident in her distress, "it felt like I wasn't in control."

"I'm really very sorry," Harry apologised again, "it recognises you as a daughter of the House after the oaths this morning and…" he motioned vaguely with his hand, "apparently it can direct those under oath?" He looked over at Sirius questioningly; it was Remus who answered.

"There are some stories about family magics taking control of those under oath if there was a compelling reason to do so – usually for protective purposes." Remus motioned at Jason who was grasping his mother's necklace and attempting to suck on it. "It would seem the family magics deemed your desire to protect Jason as falling under that premise."

"No harm, no foul." Simeon said before Anna could reply. "I look forward to hearing exactly what this blessing means." He added, glancing at Sirius before turning back to his wife. "We should probably get this one cleaned up and settled so we can enjoy dinner."

Anna nodded and they walked away back to the house. The adults all dispersed leaving Hermione and Harry alone with Draco.

"I guess family meetings will never be boring with you around, Potter." Draco sneered, pushing his hands deep into the pockets of his robes.

Harry stiffened. "It's not like I plan it, Malfoy."

"You never do," Draco sniffed haughtily.
"We're supposed to be civil towards each other, Malfoy." Hermione reminded him tartly. "Or have you forgotten already?"

He glared at Hermione and she glared right back at him.

Draco rounded on Harry. "I see you've already run and told your little entourage secret family business."

Harry drew himself up smartly. "I haven't said anything, Malfoy. What was agreed between your family and Lord Black has remained secret but Hermione is intelligent to work it out for herself that we supposed to have a civil relationship when dealing with each other."

Hermione wondered, not for the first time, exactly what had happened when Sirius had faced off with the Malfoys.

"So you say." Draco said although he seemed a tad more subdued.

"Look, between the Quidditch World Cup and the family stuff, we're going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next week and then there's Hogwarts. We have to get along so why don't we agree a truce?" Harry thrust his hand out.

Draco looked at it blankly for a long moment but slowly he withdrew one hand from a pocket and shook it quickly with only a faint air of disgust evident in his pointed features. They both dropped their hands quickly.

"Harry!" Remus called out from the open door and Harry sighed.

"I should go see what that's about." Harry looked at Hermione uncertainly and the brief flicker of his eyes to Draco gave away his discomfort at leaving her alone with their Slytherin nemesis.

"Don't worry, Harry, I'll be fine." Hermione assured him, despite an internal tug of doubt.

Harry nodded slowly. "Malfoy." His parting word was a warning to behave and Hermione felt a flush of pleasure at Harry's protectiveness.

Draco sneered at Harry's back.

"He was telling the truth you know," Hermione said casually, "he really hasn't told us anything."

"He hasn't even told the Wea…I mean, Weasley?" Draco said sceptically, one pale blond eyebrow arching.

"No, he hasn't." Hermione said sharply. "Harry takes the House business very seriously."

Draco gave a snort. "I'm sure." He snapped. "But you'll forgive me if I don't believe Weasley won't take advantage of the situation."

Hermione frowned, remembering how Ron had laughed at the idea of civility between Harry and Draco during their last etiquette lesson and his assurance that even if Harry had to be civil, Ron didn't. But she also remembered Harry's reply.

"Actually, Harry's already informed Ron that if Ron starts something with you, Harry will have to take your side as a matter of upholding the House of Black honour so it would be better if he didn't. He's also assured Ron though that if you start something with him, then he's also honour bound by the alliance between the Houses of Potter and Weasley to stand with him, and as he's the Heir to the
House of Black, he can punish you for your behaviour." She took a breath. "Since the family magic really does love him, I would be careful not to upset him, Malfoy."

Draco had paled at her last statement.

"And I would rethink getting your friends to do your dirty work – Harry will see through that in an instant." Hermione continued.

"You think you know everything, don't you, Granger?" Draco replied snippily. "For your information, I haven't been allowed to see my friends this Summer and have been forced to spend time with Nott and Zabini."

Hermione's eyebrows rose a tad at that admission. It made sense that Lucius Malfoy would want his son socialising with those who would have alliances with the House of Black even if Nott's was one of mutual non-aggression and Zabini's was still being negotiated since Sirius had refused the initial pitch of a marriage alliance between himself and the Widow Zabini. "And I'm sure the only reason you dislike spending time with Nott and Zabini rather than Crabbe and Goyle is because Nott and Zabini can think for themselves and won't immediately do your bidding."

Draco flushed red and she knew she'd scored a point.

"Honestly, Malfoy," she continued, "I would have thought a Slytherin would appreciate being encouraged to build alliances with strong and intelligent allies rather than simply putting up with… with minions."

"Like I said," Draco retorted finally, "you don't know everything." His chin went up. "Crabbe and Goyle are my friends."

As well as minions.

The unspoken words hung in the air between them.

Hermione nodded slowly assessing that he was sincere. "Maybe I don't know everything but I know Harry's changed a lot this Summer and he's very serious about the civility and the truce. I suggest that you and your friends do your part to keep both."

"And you'll do your part?" asked Draco with a sneer that clearly told of his disbelief that the Gryffindors – and most probably, Ron, in particular, would keep the truce.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "And yes, we'll do our part."

Draco stared at her as though assessing her sincerity, Hermione realised with amusement.

"Draco, Hermione!" Andy called out suddenly. "Come in and get washed up for dinner."

Draco turned back to her, his expression smoothed over. "I might have shaken Potter's hand, but I refuse to shake yours." He warned her.

Hermione gave him a smirk she thought Sirius would have been proud of. "If I ever offer you my hand, Malfoy, I don't expect you to shake it," she started towards the house and left him behind, "I expect you to follow etiquette and kiss it!"

o-O-o

Severus swirled the amber liquid in the crystal glass around and stared at the parchment in front of
He had neatly divided the parchment into quadrants: in the top left the initials of all the tagged Death Eaters who were alive were listed; in the bottom left, the initials of all of the Death Eaters who were incarcerated in Azkaban. On the right side, the top section held the initials D.L and P.P, referring to the Dark Lord and Pettigrew, while the bottom section held the initials of all the Death Eaters who were missing or dead.

He frowned.

He wasn't exactly sure what he was doing. Ever since he had heard of the note Potter had received on his birthday, something had been nagging at the back of his mind…something. The meditation exercises that he had done for Occlumency hadn't helped bring anything to the surface of his mind though and he had hoped that the list would prompt whatever bit of buried information that was irritating him like a stone in a shoe to appear.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem to be working.

What he really needed was a sounding board. He missed Lily in that regard. He had few friends to confide problems to and thus had become intensely self-sufficient. Perhaps a colleague could be used, but given the sensitive nature of what he was considering he couldn't simply approach one of them even if he inclined, which he was not. He had a distant if professional relationship with the other staff and he preferred it that way. There were two exceptions but Albus was out, meeting with an old friend, and Minerva might have been an acceptable substitute in a pinch, but she was out once again at dinner with Potter and Black.

Severus's lip curled up in disgust.

He set the glass down, the beverage untouched. Maybe a walk would clear his head and provide some order to his thoughts. He set off from his quarters and made for the entrance hall. The corridors were filled with elves preparing the castle for the upcoming school year.

It wouldn't be long, Severus thought morosely, and he would have to deal with the students again; his peace and quiet disturbed.

He hated teaching.

Loathed it.

He hadn't become a Potions Master to teach others – well, apprentices, perhaps, but not children. He had wanted to research and invent; to create potions that would help the world. If there had been one blessing of his time within the Dark Lord's ranks it was that he had been given a lot of leeway in that regard, although on the downside he'd had to brew many potions on the order of the Dark Lord.

His tenure at Hogwarts had begun because of an order of the Dark Lord and it had continued beyond his defeat because Severus had needed a safe place once the news of his spying had reached the ears of his fellow Death Eaters. He was a target for their anger and resentment since Potter had been squirreled away and Black was in Azkaban. However, he had managed to fix things, reaching out to Lucius who eventually let it be known that Severus was a double agent with the Dark Lord's knowledge. Five years before, finally comfortable that he wouldn't be killed if he were to strike out on his own, Severus had tried to resign for the first time.

Albus had carefully deconstructed his argument over the next year; there was no successor lined up – surely Severus would stay until Albus could find a replacement; Severus himself had no position to
go to, the castle provided an income and accommodation as well as safety…and finally when Severus had insisted that he must resign; Harry…would Severus not find it easier to keep Lily's son safe if he were to remain as a teacher in the place where Harry would one day be educated?

He had given in.

Severus huffed out a breath as he made his way across the grounds to the lake. He was barely aware of the weakening sun, the breeze that hardly disturbed his hair, and the hush of rustling leaves in nearby trees. He started out moodily into the expanse of silver water.

It was probably unfair but Severus blamed Potter for the fact that Severus was stuck teaching.

A part of him – the part that sounded remarkably like Lily – whispered in his head that it was completely unfair of him to blame Potter. It had been the Dark Lord's order that had brought Severus to Hogwarts in the first place; it had been Severus's choice to serve the Dark Lord; it had been Albus's manipulations that had entangled him into remaining; and, it had been his choice to stay.

Possibly, Severus conceded, he found it a fitting penance for his crimes. Hogwarts was his prison, a place where he was reminded daily of Lily and the mistakes he had made. She was dead; he didn't deserve a profession he enjoyed and a life free of irritating children who shouldn't be allowed near a cauldron.

Of course, he wasn't the only one who had been consigned to a hellish prison since Lily's death.

His fists clenched as he remembered the Ministry report that he had read about Potter's home with the Dursleys. He snorted suddenly.

What home?

That house had been nothing but a place to live at best, and at worst, yes; a prison. Potter had received only minimal care and upon reading the lack of love and nurturing in the boy's upbringing, Severus had been unwillingly outraged that Petunia had dared treat Lily's child that way. Albus had constantly assured him that Harry was well-cared for. It was why he had assumed that Potter was spoiled just as his father had been when he had attended Hogwarts. He should have known better; he should have known Petunia would never set aside her petty jealousy of Lily.

He had even felt some regret that he had continued their pattern of verbal abuse himself at Hogwarts; belittling and berating the boy for the smallest of infractions; being unfair to Potter just because he was Potter by asking him questions that only someone who had studied months ahead would be able to answer, by marking his essays harshly and grading his potions the same – if he bothered to grade them and didn't declare perfectly acceptable potions a waste.

Severus closed his eyes angrily and made a huff of denial. His behaviour was not comparable or equal to the years of abuse the muggles had heaped on the Potter; it was not. He had a role to play, and someone needed to keep the boy's ego in check.

But he was finding it harder to justify to himself why he had been so insistent on treating Potter with scorn. Lily would have been furious with Severus for treating any child that way least of all her son. And she would have chosen his side, Severus considered bitterly. After all, she had died to save her son, it followed that she would have wanted to protect him from the smaller hurts of stern treatment at the hands of a teacher.

If she had lived, she would have marched into the school and taken him to task and…Severus wouldn't have blamed her. He wondered if the fact that he had tried his best to ensure her son's safety
would have mitigated the rest of his behaviour. He feared not. Truthfully, he hadn't done a great deal to help keep him safe beyond watching Quirrell, and while he had managed to counter the hex on the broom enough that Potter hadn't fallen, he had failed to keep Quirrell from Potter in the end. The enormous basilisk corpse was another reminder of his failure. Not that Potter made keeping him safe easy; the brat seemed to have no sense of self-preservation.

Why would he, Severus reminded himself. The report had made it clear that the Dursleys had raised a child who would have little sense of self-worth. Mix in Albus's manipulations and the wizarding world's expectations of their hero and it was no wonder that the result was a child that constantly risked his life without regard for his own safety. He had no doubt that the need to instil some self-esteem in Potter would be at the heart of the discussion when the staff met to discuss the at-risk children at Hogwarts.

Well, Albus had ordered him to be civil to Potter and he would be.

He would not, however, be civil to Black.

He shook his head. How Albus had thought springing a meeting between the two of them the day of the basilisk recovery was a good idea was beyond his understanding. Black was as hateful as always and Severus would not stand for it. He might have to work with the cretin to defeat the Dark Lord but he refused to pretend that their relationship would ever be anything other than it was: a mutual hatred.

Severus cast thoughts of Black away as he was reminded why he had walked out to the lake in the first place. He breathed in deeply.

The scent of gillyflowers filled his nostrils; the gillyweed would soon be ready for harvesting. He let his mind wander, letting the irritation and frustration flow out of him until his body relaxed and his thoughts were of nothing but the scenic view that filled his vision.

His ears caught the faint crunch of the grass behind him and he shot a look over his shoulder. There was nothing visible. Still, his senses were on full alert and he could faintly smell sweat, soap and damp clothing; someone was disillusioned.

An intruder on Hogwarts grounds would be unusual, especially as Alastor Moody had improved the security since he'd come to stay in the school in mid-July. The holes in the wards had been identified and patched; the weaknesses of the surrounding secret passageways eliminated, and additional security had been added in key areas including the Infirmary and the Potion Stores.

Severus drew his wand. "Show yourself!"

Moody appeared in a waterfall of magic as the disillusionment spell ended. "Snape."

"Moody." Severus replied tersely. He and the former Auror did not get along well although since Moody's arrival at Hogwarts they had formed something of a détente by the simple means of ignoring each other.

For a long tense moment they glared at each other, wands drawn and ready.

Finally, Severus holstered his wand again and bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Your stealth skills need some work."

"You have very good ears and a good nose, Snape." Moody responded gruffly, his magical eye whirling. "I still got close enough to you before you realised I was there that I could have decapitated you. You should be more vigilant!"
Severus sneered at him but it was actually good advice with the Dark Lord on the path to regaining a form and his fellow Death Eaters back in business. He had become too comfortable within the grounds; too complacent. "You may have a point." He conceded grudgingly.

Moody grunted. "Why are you out here anyway?"

One eyebrow arched at the insinuation. "Am I to assume from that statement that the staff are subject to some kind of curfew now?"

"Actually that isn't a bad idea." Moody said before he broke into guffaws of laughter at Severus's horrified expression.

Severus huffed out an exasperated snort.

Moody sobered but he gestured out towards the lake. "The question was purely a casual one, Snape. Albus has lectured me on the necessity of maintaining positive and friendly working relationships with my colleagues."

Severus could probably have recited the lecture that Moody had received; he received it yearly himself from Albus. "My advice is to ignore it. I do."

"So I can see." Moody said evenly. "Well, I should get back inside. Nobody on the grounds but us Professors, and Hagrid's menagerie."

"Give it another couple of weeks and it'll be overrun with little monsters." Severus retorted, deciding to head back in himself. His plan had failed. He was no further forward on finding out what it was that was bothering him about the death threat.

"I know," Moody grimaced, his scarred face twisting, "I have no idea what I was thinking when I agreed to this. In fact, I'm almost certain that Albus confunded me."

"I have often felt that way myself after speaking with him." Severus agreed and almost flinched as he realised they had managed a civil exchange.

They settled into a surprisingly comfortable silence as they walked back and Severus found himself politely altering his stride to keep pace with the limping ex-Auror rather than striding ahead. His mind darted back to his thoughts before he had left his quarters; he had wanted a sounding board. Moody was a former Auror who knew the Death Eaters very well because he had hunted them. Perhaps…

"The reason why I was at the lake was because I was considering Potter's death threat." Severus said cautiously.

"Oh?" Moody looked at him suspiciously.

"An alternate point of view may be appreciated in reviewing my thoughts on the matter." Severus said smoothly as though he had no hesitation in asking Moody for his help.

Moody nodded slowly. "The staff room?"

It was a good suggestion; neutral ground for both of them.

"I will need to recover something from my quarters." Severus said stiffly. "I will meet you there."

As soon as Moody acquiesced, Severus whirled away, heading to the dungeons where he grabbed
the parchment he had prepared earlier. He arrived at the staff room to find Moody already sat in one of the seating arrangements that gave him a good view of the room and importantly the exits; Severus usually sat in the same chair. He made his way over and sat down, pulling his black robes close to him.

Moody waved his wand to place a privacy bubble and lifted his flask. "Ogden's."

Severus was about to refuse when he decided that sharing a drink with the man might make their discussion more convivial. He gave a sharp nod.

Moody conjured two glasses and poured the drink. They saluted each other silently before they knocked the drinks back.

"So," Moody said, "what's this about?"

"Since I spoke with Albus about the specifics of the death threat, I have been unable to get the feeling that I should recall something, something useful, but despite my efforts my memory refuses to give up the information." Severus confessed. "I prepared this list hoping it would prompt something." He handed it to Moody.

The grizzled wizard scanned it, his good eye taking on a calculating look as he registered the initials and put names to them. He frowned as he neared the end of the parchment. "Why've you got dead Death Eaters on the list?"

"What I am trying to remember is something in my past, I therefore thought it prudent to have them all listed." Severus answered obediently and his eyes widened before they narrowed on Moody. He picked up his discarded glass and sniffed. "Veritaserum?"

"A variant." Moody replied after a long moment.

Severus's eyes widened again. "You dosed us both." He had poured them drinks from the same flask.

Moody nodded. "Mild dose. Just enough to suggest you should tell the truth rather than to compel you." He scowled at Severus. "Didn't think you'd fall for it but you did."

"And what makes you think I won't just get up and leave?" snarled Severus angrily, stung by the criticism since it was deserved. He had let his guard down and the former Auror had taken advantage of it.

"Because the serum may help provoke your memory into recall." Moody pointed out briskly.

Unfortunately, Moody was right. Severus rubbed his forehead tiredly.

"Do you follow the Dark Lord?" Moody asked bluntly, obviously determined to take full advantage of Severus's stupidity.

"No." Severus said brusquely. "I intend to see him dead."

"Hmpf." Moody said surprised. "Well, I guess that's good enough for me." He gestured. "Tell me about when you found out about the death threat."

Severus wrestled with whether he should just give Moody the finger and leave, but his need to know what was nagging at him overruled his want to tell the other wizard to piss off. "I found out about it in the Prophet," he replied tersely, "and, frankly, the only thing I thought at that time was that the
article reeked of simpering mediocrity."

Moody laughed. "Skeeter does have a turn of phrase." He motioned at Severus. "So, tell me about when you started feeling that it rang bells."

"Albus called me into his office to update me about various matters," Severus said, "one of which was the death threat. He had been able to retrieve a copy from Director Bones. He handed it to me to read and informed me of the results of the magical forensic tests…"

"And bells rang."

"Like now." Severus said dryly.

"What did it remind you of?" Moody asked directly.

Severus felt the tug of something but it failed to reach his lips and his mind remained blank. "I can feel that I know but I cannot say why and what." He frowned in concentration but shook his head.

"Interesting." Moody's magical eye spun. "The only time I've seen a truth serum fail to retrieve memories is when the individual has been a Secret Keeper or when they've been obliviated or some other form of memory spell has been used."

Severus stiffened. He definitely wasn't a Secret Keeper which meant memory charms but his Occlumency should have caught someone playing about with his memory. "I'm a Master Occlumens…" he began.

"So?" Moody challenged. "You had to sort through memories during training and you obviously sort through memories since as a matter of routine, yes. But it only means that the likely timing of your memory issues is during the period when you were training and gave someone access to your head."

"Bellatrix!" Severus growled furiously. His hands clenched into fists again as he attempted to control the surge of magic that erupted through him.

Moody's eyebrows shot up. "You gave that lunatic bitch access to your mind?!"

"I didn't have a choice in the selection of my tutor!" snarled Severus. He took a deep breath trying to get himself back under control. "I stayed for a month at the LeStranges."

"Then, whatever rings your bell about that death threat must have taken place during that month." Moody pointed at him. "A galleon says LeStrange placed a notice-me-not on the memories. Probably convinced you you'd already sorted through them and put them away."

"Yes." Severus said stiffly; he had already come to that conclusion himself. But it was a major step forward from his previously frustrated efforts to remember. "Now I am aware of the problem, I shall address the issue in my next Occlumency session."

"Also explains why you listed the dead Death Eaters." Moody mused out loud. "Your subconscious was trying to give you a clue."

Severus nodded. It was not an entirely stupid conclusion.

"Does anything spring to mind now you know?"

"No," Severus shook his head, "I can vaguely recall staying in the mansion…" he frowned, "and that Rasbastan often had a male guest but I cannot recollect who."
"Probably Crouch Junior." Moody said. "It might explain the notice-me-not. Crouch was obviously being kept under wraps, wasn't he?"

Severus nodded slowly. Barty Crouch Junior had been a well-kept secret from the other side and within the Death Eater ranks. It had certainly surprised Severus when Crouch had been arrested along with the LeStranges at the Longbottoms. Moody was probably right about the reason behind his memory issue. But even if that had been the reason why Bellatrix had played with his memories, the thing he needed to remember was somewhere in them and he didn't think the thing was Crouch's romance with Rabastan.

The staff door opened and Albus walked in, colourfully attired in lime green and bright lemon striped robes. His face brightened at the sight of Moody and Severus sat together.

Moody glanced at him and silently they both agreed their discussion was over. Moody quickly took down the privacy charm. "Albus."

"Alastor! And Severus!" He beamed at them. "How delightful to see you both here! Together!"

Oh Merlin, Severus realised; Albus thought they had been bonding! His eyes caught Moody's and they exchanged identical looks of horror. And then identical looks of consternation that they had exchanged looks at all and that perhaps Albus had been right.

Severus did the sensible thing.

"If you'll excuse me..." he said, and fled to his quarters.

o-O-o

Sirius was grumpy.

Sundays were usually reserved for father-son time with Harry but because of Simeon's visit that wasn't possible. Added to that was Sirius's consternation that at the dinner the night before Remus had mentioned the Black country estate and the rest of the family had enthusiastically decided a visit to the property was in order.

He sighed as he exited the floo into the entry hall. He personally had no wish to visit the estate; he'd avoided it since he'd regained the Lordship despite Remus's nagging. But he'd been helpless against the combined efforts of Remus, Harry and Andy who had unfairly in his opinion ganged up on him.

He stepped aside to allow the rest of the visitors to enter. In no time at all, the hall was crowded with various factions of the House of Black. His gaze immediately sought out Harry. His son was with Remus apparently listening intently along with Hermione to Remus's history lesson about the old manor house, (and Remus was in full teacher mode with waving arms and all).

Sirius snorted under his breath at how close Hermione and Harry were; the two teenagers were never far from each other's side and he had a bet with Remus that they'd get together at the end of their fourth year. They had a wager of five galleons riding on it. Despite his amusement though, Sirius did worry occasionally about it. Teenage romances rarely lasted the distance and he was concerned that if the pair did get together but then broke up acrimoniously that it would impact their friendship and Hermione's comfortable inclusion in the House of Black.

Sirius's eyes widened as Draco asked Remus a question and joined the small group.

"I'm glad to see he's attempting to integrate." Andromeda's dry tone had Sirius turning around to see that she was just behind him. "I was worried he was going to spend the entire day clinging to Cissy's
skirts since Lucy declined to come along and my daughter is on duty today."

Sirius harrumphed. Harry had told him that he and Draco had agreed some form of truce the day before but Sirius would believe Draco meant it only when he had undeniable evidence.

"I haven't been here for years." Andromeda said, looking around, nostalgia coating her words thickly.

He glanced around the familiar walls and sighed. "Me either."

"You remember the week-long Summer gatherings your grandfather would insist we attend?" Andromeda sighed. "Of course, in retrospect, they must have been family meetings."

"They were."

Andromeda looked at him sharply before nodded in understanding. "You always disappeared during the day and we thought you were being bratty and avoiding us, but you weren't, were you?"

"I was the Heir from the age of eight, Andy, so; no," Sirius said, "I wasn't avoiding you all so much as sitting and watching Grandfather keep the family in line." He shivered. He had hated the Black family meetings although he could better understand his grandfather's ruthlessness and iron-clad control now more than he ever had before.

The sound of a throat being cleared interrupted Sirius's memories and he turned gratefully to Remus who gestured at the gathered group around him; Simeon and his family, Narcissa and Draco, Ted, Harry, and Hermione.

"I thought I'd give everyone a tour while you sort the study out." Remus said firmly.

In other words, Sirius thought with resigned amusement; go and sort the study out.

He nodded. "Good plan."

"I'll come with you, Remus," Andromeda offered, "I'm sure Cissy and I can tell some stories about this place."

Narcissa smiled at her sister, a hint of mischief breaking through her placid demeanour. "I'm sure we can such as the time you convinced us all to drink Firewhiskey."

Andromeda winced before she rallied. "Yes, well, there is the time that you decided you wanted to look like Aunt Cass and dressed up in…"

"Perhaps Harry would find tales of Sirius more interesting?" Narcissa smoothly interrupted.

"That'd be brilliant." Harry declared.

Sirius shot him a look. "Traitor!"

Harry grinned as Remus led them away; his son gave a small wave goodbye. Interestingly, Anna fell into step beside Harry and Sirius breathed a small sigh of relief as the muggleborn witch made the effort to fix the hurt she'd caused Harry the night before with her cool distance after Harry had blessed Jason.

In some ways, he could appreciate she had a point; Harry had performed magic on her child without her consent, magic which had compelled her to participate in a way not dissimilar to an Imperius curse. She hadn't been raised with the same magical traditions and viewed the family magic and
therefore Harry's use of it with high suspicion. Worse still was that they had been unable to immediately tell her the specifics of the gift that Harry had given her because of the presence of the Malfoys – regardless of the vows, Sirius didn't want them to know exactly the nature of Harry's protection.

But Harry had apologised and Anna's attitude had made the dinner particularly uncomfortable for Harry as she'd all but ignored him. Simeon had tried to make up for it by being jovial with Harry himself but the damage had been done; Harry had tried not to be affected but he was hurt and Sirius could see the shadows of the Dursleys' criticisms of him flickering once more in Harry's eyes. He could have cheerfully throttled Anna for that.

After dinner, Harry had requested to return to Griffin House and Sirius had let him go sending Remus along to comfort and reassure him. Sirius had sat down with Anna and Simeon and informed them exactly what kind of priceless protection against evil Harry had bestowed upon their son (protection created through the sacrifice of his own mother's life) and Anna had been somewhat abashed.

At breakfast that morning, she had apologised wholeheartedly to Harry for her standoffishness and thanked him for his gift and it was good to see her continue to work past the initial misunderstanding and conflict by spending time with Harry on the tour. He still wanted to throttle her for ever hurting his son and he suddenly had more sympathy with Molly's treatment of him earlier in the Summer.

It occurred to Sirius that he was effectively loitering in the hall procrastinating and he sighed heavily. He made his way through the manor to the large study on the ground floor.

The study door had been locked when Remus had gained entry to the estate and it wouldn't open for him. Remus believed that it would only open for the Head of the House of Black and Sirius couldn't argue with him. What he had argued was the need for the room to be opened at all.

His reluctance surprised even himself. It wasn't as though he had particularly bad memories of his grandfather. Arcturus had been a ruthless bastard, a political shark and a hard task-master but he had been proud of Sirius during his childhood, surprisingly encouraging of his mischievous streak (probably because it was a sign that he had some Slytherin cunning) and, in hindsight, he had done a great deal to mitigate the cruelty of Sirius's mother.

But unlocking the study that belonged to his grandfather was something that Sirius didn't want to do. Perhaps, he mused as he stared at the dark wood, he was grieving for the old buzzard in an odd way; perhaps he didn't want to go inside the study because that would be acknowledging his grandfather was actually dead.

Sirius shook his head, trying to dislodge the thoughts because he didn't want to grieve for his grandfather who had so embraced the pureblood agenda and bigotry that had led to Voldemort and the war and the loss of his friends, his real family…

He took a deep breath and placed his hand on the handle. The ward recognised him and the lock clicked open allowing him entry.

The door swung open.
Pronglet's World Cup:2

His grandfather's study looked exactly as it had the last time Sirius had entered it.

There was a roaring fire in the hearth to his right. A wide cherry desk filled the top right hand corner of the room; a matching table ran the length of the right wall and had an old pensieve as the central ornament. A tall cherry cabinet filled half the wall space floor to ceiling to his left; it would be locked but the secrets within might be valuable containing blackmail material and intelligence on a number of individuals and families. Apart from the cabinet and two tall windows on the right wall, the rest of the walls were floor to ceiling bookshelves stacked tightly with books.

Remus was going to have a cow when he saw the books, Sirius thought fondly.

He finally stepped across the threshold and closed the door behind him. He made his way over to the desk and was surprised to see it was clean, devoid of dust and debris. There was an empty inkpot, a gleaming silver letter opener and a single envelope addressed to him.

Sirius felt his heart leap in confusion and astonishment. His grandfather had to have known about his imprisonment – there was no way that he could have assumed that Sirius would be the next Head of the House…

He approached with trepidation and sat down in the worn leather chair. He picked up the letter and opened it.

"My Dear Grandson,

You will have many questions and I request that you bear with me through this my last letter for I am not long for this Earth and I know I will not see you again.

On November 2nd 1981 I visited the Ministry where Bagnold took great delight in telling me that you had been imprisoned in Azkaban on executive order for high treason, the murders of James and Lily Potter, the murders of some muggles and Peter Pettigrew. I left Bagnold determined that I would see justice done; the House of Black's reputation had taken a hit with the defeat of the Dark Lord and the triumph of the Light over the pureblood agenda, but I knew I could probably prevail on Albus Dumbledore to at least get you a proper trial where I was sure the truth would out. I know you, Sirius; I never believed you were guilty.

I also planned to lend my support (although in a very discreet way) to the Longbottoms who I knew were to have custody of the last of the Potters (I refuse to use the appalling appellation that our world has called him). I could guess at why Albus had made the decision to leave him with his blood relatives but a child of his power has no place with muggles.

Why then, you may ask, did I leave you both all this time in such wretched hells?

Why indeed, thought Sirius darkly.

"When I arrived home that day, I found an old friend of mine on the doorstep; a true Seer by the name of Oona O'Neil. She and I had been in Slytherin together. Over tea, she explained that she had the night before dreamed two possible futures.

In the first, I continued with my original plan and fought for your trial. Unfortunately, in such a future, our world was doomed by my doing so. You refused your role in the House of Black and only credited Albus with helping you achieve your freedom. Although the WOO awarded you custody
once you produced the will (the Longbottoms' fate was not revealed only that they were not able to take Harry), Albus convinced you that Harry was safest with his muggle relatives. While you were eventually reunited, your relationship was irreparably damaged by your insistence that he remain living with them. He didn't trust you, and ultimately the war faltered on this breach of trust allowing the Dark Lord to win. Eventually, the Dark Lord's indiscriminate killing attracted the muggles' attention and the wizarding world was eliminated through one of their weapons (while I initially scoffed at this, my research since has upheld the truth that the muggle world holds weapons capable of such a feat).

In the second possible future that Oona dreamed, I discontinued my efforts and retreated. You remained locked away in Azkaban and Harry in the muggle world until his Hogwarts education began. Then, you escaped from Azkaban. The rest was unclear to Oona with multiple paths possible but in one you became Lord Black and rescued Harry, obtaining custody of him and taking him away from the muggles. Your relationship was built on a foundation of trust that strengthened those that would oppose the Dark Lord. And there was, Oona said, the possibility and hope that the Dark Lord would not win."

"Dear Merlin's wrinkly arse!" Sirius sagged in his seat, wrenching his eyes away from the letter to stare unseeingly at a distant corner of the room. He couldn't quite comprehend his grandfather's words. He had met Oona once at some gathering for his grandfather's, he was sure of it; a mature Irish lady with black hair and laughing blue eyes who had told him that he would become a dog with the heart of a lion. He hadn't understood – he'd been eight, nine? – but in hindsight her words had been prophetic correctly predicting his school House allegiance and his animagus form.

The two versions of the future written out in black and white sent shivers down his spine. The first because he could so easily see that if he had been freed within weeks of being put into Azkaban, he would have angrily denied his grandfather any credit or gratitude. He had been so naïve and stupidly righteous in his faith in Albus in his youth and so it would have been easy for Albus to have convinced him that the greater debt was owed to him; that Harry would be happy and safe in the muggle world under the blood protection. And Albus would have had years to manipulate Sirius, and probably Remus too had they reconciled (although that wasn't guaranteed), into blindly following him, and thus not acting in Harry's best interests but to further Albus's agenda for Harry.

Just the thought of it had his skin crawling.

But the second version of the future also disturbed him because there was only the possibility of hope and winning not a guarantee. It was, he mused, better than an apocalypse but he would have preferred some indication of success other than vague hints.

His eyes drifted back to the parchment he held.

"It must be patently apparent which path I chose to take.

I would apologise for your suffering but I won't ask for a forgiveness that I do not deserve. An apology wouldn't lessen or excuse my culpability in your wrongful imprisonment or in Harry's situation since his life with the muggles has not been easy according to my investigations. As much as I despise Albus Dumbledore, I agree with him that sometimes sacrifices are required to save the world, but unlike him, I believe it is only right to take responsibility for the hurt caused and our role in causing it."

Sirius was torn between anger that his grandfather hadn't tried to find another way and a strange kind of pride that his grandfather hadn't tried to dismiss just how much hurt had been caused by his decision. His grandfather had been a ruthless bastard but he had always owned the decisions he had made. And…
He sighed heavily.

He wasn't entirely certain he wouldn't have made the same decision in his grandfather's shoes; years of misery but eventual rescue versus guaranteed doom? Indeed, if he'd been told he had to stay in Azkaban for thirteen years to prevent an apocalypse he might have agreed to it. But to make a decision that would mean Harry would suffer...no. There had to have been a third option, Sirius told himself briskly, even if his grandfather had never tried to find it.

"I wish I could have explained this in person but Oona informed me that either path would evolve without me; I would live for less than ten years more. Once she had left, I called my personal Healer and he confirmed that I had the early symptoms of the degenerative wasting disease Oona had predicted. My body would waste away (and it has, I am bedridden these days) but my mind would remain as it always was until the end.

I was coming to terms with the news about my health when the arrest of your cousin, her husband and his idiot brother combined with your situation left the House of Black's reputation in tatters. (I would have made reparations to Augusta but I feel she is more likely to accept them from you – if you haven't already offered her a formal apology, I would encourage you to do so. She was the power behind her husband and will make a formidable ally.)

I had a choice then; I could remain in public for as long as I could and try to rebuild the House of Black or I could spend the years in isolation doing as much as I could to ensure that you would have the resources you and Harry needed to defeat the Dark Lord when you finally escaped.

Again, it must be patently apparent which path I chose to follow."

What?!

Sirius blinked heavily and reread the last part of the letter. Why? Why would his grandfather have made such a choice? Nothing had been more important to him than his reputation and the House of Black...

And it still was, Sirius answered his own question with a surge of cynical surety. His grandfather must have known that rebuilding in the wake of the LeStranges and his own incarceration would take years – probably years he didn't have physically. No, option two would mean his grandfather could convince himself he was doing the right thing while hiding his disease from everyone.

"Self-serving old..." Sirius muttered under his breath.

"There are many things to tell you but where to start?

Firstly, I would talk about the House of Black. You will have realised I left you as Heir and hopefully assumed your rightful place as the Head of the House. I'm certain you will have adopted Harry and made him your Heir but if you haven't, you should. Do what you wish with Bella and her husband.

Lucius Malfoy has already wormed his way out of trouble but he was Marked and quite frankly has illusions of grandeur. He has consolidated some power among the old Black alliance by the time you read this. He will do anything to save his own skin. You may find some of the information gathered on him useful to keep him in line. Narcissa wasn't Marked and could be useful to you; she has a head for politics. Their child, according to my sources is a spoiled brat; I leave his fate to you.

The rest of the minor lines I have ignored to date given my belief their squib blood or undesirable matches weaken the overall strength of the House of Black."

Sirius snorted. That right there was a major political difference between himself and his grandfather.
Well, he didn't care about those things; family was family.

"However, my acquaintance with Lily Potter changed my mind about the latter so I leave it up to you to determine their inclusion or exclusion.

Speaking of which, my next topic is Harry."

Wait. What?! Sirius frowned heavily. When had his grandfather and Lily become acquainted? And he suddenly remembered Bertie's memory of his grandfather seeing Lily when Sirius had been captured; of promising Harry the family magic.

"Sirius, you should get Harry's health checked out as soon as you can. I had a wizard private investigator track down Harry in the muggle world once he was of school age and to say his report was alarming would be an understatement. The muggles have badly neglected him. The man I hired was so incensed about the state of the boy when he returned to deliver his findings to me that I had to obliviate him so he wouldn't do something rash and bring Albus's attention to my interest in Harry. I did have the situation reported anonymously to the muggle authorities but they failed to do anything of substance.

Secondly, he is a powerful wizard and will need training. I have left memories in the bottom drawer of the desk that you need to see. If you do nothing else, Sirius, please watch these memories."

Sirius paused in his reading once again and unlocked the drawer. He withdrew what looked to be a custom made box filled with vials of silvery memories. He sighed and set it on the desk top. He picked up the letter again.

"In the middle drawer of the desk is all my research about family magic – you will understand the importance of this when you have watched the memories."

His grandfather had researched family magic? Of course, he had seen Harry's affinity for himself. He unlocked the middle drawer and drew out three journals filled with notes; two rare books and a thick folder of parchment.

Remus was going to drool, Sirius thought bemused.

"Lastly, the top drawer contains all the information I could gather about the Dark Lord – his real identity, likely bolt-holes, his secrets. I fear he retains an existence thanks to making a horcrux – Regulus asked me about them before he disappeared. I have included all my research on these foul things in his file.

I hope I have provided enough for you to win against the bastard."

Sirius scrambled for the top drawer and once again found a veritable stack of paper. Clearly, his grandfather had used his isolation well. He returned once more to the letter.

"You were always my favourite, Sirius. You are an intelligent, powerful wizard with strong values and ideals. Beyond the bloodline it was the reason why you were always my Heir. I failed to rein in your mother – I had thought formally making you Heir would be enough to curtail her insanity – and I regret that more than I can say. If you had come to me that night rather than the Potters, Sirius, I would have chosen you, protected you.

You have a weighty responsibility with young Harry. He will need you and I know you will not falter in caring for him and guiding him.

Know that I have been and always will be very proud of you, my Grandson."
May Merlin and Morgana bless you both.

Your Grandfather, Arcturus Sirius Black."

His eyes were stinging with unwanted tears by the time he finished and Sirius dropped the letter back on the desk while he brought himself under control.

A knock had him surreptitiously swiping at his eyes before he called for his visitor to enter. It was Remus.

His friend's eyes narrowed on him immediately. "Are you OK?"

"Fine." Sirius answered brightly.

"Uh-huh," Remus said knowingly, "I believe I've heard that 'fine' before when you got ambushed by your brother and friends, and almost ended up in the infirmary for a month because you ignored the fact that one of your ribs was broken."

"None of my ribs are broken now." Sirius said irritably. He waved Remus over to the desk and pointed at the stack of information. "My grandfather's research on family magic."

As he predicted, Remus was happily distracted.

"Merlin!" He exclaimed, picking up one of the books reverently. "This is incredible! Minerva, Bertie and I have been searching high and low for a copy of this book." His head snapped around to Sirius. "Why would your grandfather have it?"

"Probably because one of these memories," Sirius tapped the box he'd unearthed, "will be the one Bertie played for me in the pensieve."

Remus nodded slowly. "I wouldn't mind seeing that memory." He frowned. "There's more?"

"Here." Sirius handed Remus his grandfather's letter and moved away, ostensibly to examine the books but really to hide.

Eventually, he heard Remus clear his throat. "We should probably see if this Irish Seer of his is still alive."

"Yes."

"Sirius…"

"Don't, Remus." Sirius ordered briskly. He shook himself and turned back, avoiding the sympathetic eyes of his old friend. "Where are Harry and the others?"

"Out in the garden in the old Summer pavilion." Remus said. "The house elves brought elevenses. Do you want to join us?"

Sirius shook his head and retook the seat behind the desk. "I should go through the memories."

Remus nodded, understanding without Sirius saying anything that he wasn't in the mood to rejoin the family and act as though nothing was wrong. "Right, well you set up the pensieve and I'll go and tell Andy to take over the tour. I'll be right back." He started for the door.

"Remus, I can go through the memories myself and…"
"Don't be stupid, Padfoot." Remus cut him off and caught his eyes firmly. "You're not going through them alone."

Sirius didn't really want to argue; wasn't sure he could with the lump in his throat so he settled for a sharp, brief nod. Remus hurried out and Sirius went about setting up the pensieve, losing himself cleaning the bowl and ensuring the runes were good to prevent himself from thinking about his grandfather's letter.

"If you had come to me that night rather than the Potters, Sirius, I would have chosen you, protected you."

He hadn't even thought about going to his grandfather in his flight from Grimmauld Place. He had taken the Knight Bus to the Potters' place, hiding his injuries as best he could. He had walked up the long driveway with nothing but the robes on his back and his wand. He had managed to ring the doorbell and then he had collapsed. He'd regained consciousness, sobbed his heart out on Charlus Potter's shoulder, been ushered into bed where a Healer had taken care of the worst of the damage and Dorea had fussed over him before a sleeping potion had been poured down his neck. He'd woken the next day with James sprawled on the bed next to him, snoring away. Three days after that, Charlus had brought him his possessions from Grimmauld and told Sirius that it was official; his grandfather had agreed that Sirius would stay with the Potters. Charlus had sent them to the French chateau for the Summer.

Sirius took a shaky breath. He had later learned from his brother that his grandfather had confined their mother to Grimmauld Place for her actions. He had assumed at the time that his grandfather had only punished her because she'd gone after the Heir not because she'd gone after Sirius. Maybe he had been wrong about that.

"Ready?" asked Remus gently, startling Sirius out of the past and back into the present.

"Yes," Sirius said before he sighed, "no."

"We don't have to do this now." Remus pointed out in the same gentle tone.

"Yes, we do." Sirius countered. He squared his shoulders and opened the box of memories. The vials were set out neatly in holders and numbered. He picked up the one marked '1' and poured it into the pensieve.

Remus nodded at him and they entered at the same time.

The memory was the same as the one Bertie had shown him on the day of Harry's adoption and blessing – only the viewpoint differed. Sirius watched amused as Remus clutched at his arm as Harry took over Lily, as he took control of the family magic. As Sirius arrived back and his grandfather swooped over to tend to him, the memory faded and they were pushed back out into the study.

"Merlin!" said Remus awestruck. "You told me and I believed you but to see it!"

"I know!" Sirius agreed. It was his second viewing but he was still blown away.

"Yes," Remus continued, "that right hook of Lily's was just miraculous!"

Sirius's head whipped around to Remus's mischievous 'gotcha' face so fast that Sirius felt a rush of dizziness. He did the only thing he could do; he burst out laughing. If the giggles at the end edged hysteria, neither he nor Remus commented about it.

"Thank you, Moony," Sirius said eventually, as he straightened up and brushed away the tears of
laughter that had eked out the corners of his eyes, "I needed that."

"Shall we take a gander at number two?" Remus gestured at the box and a moment later Sirius had emptied the pensieve of the first memory and they were diving into the second.

They landed in a St Mungo's waiting room. Sirius's grandfather sat on one uncomfortable chair by the door while on the other side of the room, Bertie, Albus, Bagnold and Crouch conferred in low voices. It took a moment for Sirius to figure out that Charlus and James would probably be with Lily who must have been taken off to a Healer after Harry's impromptu take-over. The four officials seemed embroiled in a heated discussion with Bertie on one side and the rest on the other. A shiver of foreboding ran down Sirius's spine.

"May I sit with you?" Lily's sweet voice yanked his grandfather's attention away from the group and he rose to his feet automatically, his wand already out and transfiguring the seat next to him into something more comfortable even as he gestured for her to take it.

"You are recovered?" Arcturus asked politely as they sat down.

Lily nodded, a faint hint of a blush on her cheeks. "Thank you for your understanding about my son borrowing your family magic."

"It is his family magic too." Arcturus said mildly.

"You've," Lily unusually stumbled over her words and had to start again, "you've made him your Heir?"

"Sirius is my Heir but he will be Sirius's." Arcturus informed her as though the matter was a fait accompli.

"Even though he carries my blood?" challenged Lily in a way that Sirius remembered well.

Arcturus made a vague hand wave. "The only blood he carries that matters for the family magic is Black."

Lily rubbed her protruding abdomen. "Then why all the fuss about purity of blood?"

"Those of us in magical families with generations dating back years who have created and maintained the traditions of our society wish to protect them." Arcturus explained with more patience and less vitriol than Sirius had expected. "Marrying someone who shares the same history and culture helps in that protection. New magical people tend to want to challenge the status quo."

"If the status quo isn't challenged occasionally, how will society move forward? Grow?" Lily argued passionately. "Traditions and culture are important but a society will stagnate if it clings so furiously to the past that it doesn't allow for a future."

"And there is the crux of the political argument at the heart of the wizarding world." Arcturus tapped his cane lightly on the floor.

"So you agree with Voldemort's position that all muggleborns should be killed?" Lily asked pointedly.

Arcturus tilted his head in her direction. "The Dark Lord wishes to kill us all, Madame Potter, not simply the muggleborn."

"Call me Lily," she said absently, continuing to soothe the stirring baby within her, "and if you know
that, why do you support him?"

"I neither support nor oppose him." Arcturus replied sternly. "Do not confuse the House of Black with the antics of those that have taken the Mark."

"Ouch," whispered Remus, "I'd forgotten just how sharp a tongue your grandfather had at times."

Sirius nodded. Lily was embarrassed; her cheeks aflame.

"My apologies, Lord Black." Lily inclined her head, her red hair cascading forward.

Arcturus huffed but nodded. "Accepted." He sighed as though disgruntled. "I cannot blame you for your confusion when most of the younger generation have lined up under the Dark Lord's banner and embarrassed the House." He cast a look towards the door and the rest of the hospital outside. "All except my Heir, of course."

Pride was evident in Arcturus's voice.

Lily smiled. "Sirius is one of the most stubborn men I know." Her smile fell away. "Charlus and James went for news."

Apparently Arcturus picked up on her evident worry as much as Sirius did. "Sirius is a survivor. He will recover."

"He'll be staying with us."

There was another faint hint of a challenge in her voice but Arcturus bowed his head in agreement.

Lily's eyes flickered to the group on the other side of the room. "They're talking about my son, aren't they?"

"I'm afraid so." Arcturus said. He played idly with his cane – a sure sign that he was internally agitated. "The boy will be a very powerful wizard. They will wish to use him for their own gain, even Albus Dumbledore, and they all are refusing to acknowledge Bertie's authority to restrict their knowledge of the event." He cocked his head. "Bertie has been arguing that it is too dangerous in these times for them to retain the knowledge especially when the child is not yet born."

Lily paled. "I wish I could obliviate them but I couldn't take on three by myself, and Albus; he's another four wizards just on his own."

Arcturus glanced over at her sharply. "You agree they shouldn't remember at all?"

Her green eyes met his determinedly. "Protecting my son is more important than their memory of the event."

Sirius wondered whether Lily had known of the prophecy at that point.

"You're a father," Lily continued, "would you not do everything you could do to protect your child?"

Arcturus was about to respond when Charlus and James entered. Their faces showed a modicum of surprise at seeing Lily seated with Arcturus and they both walked over quickly.

"Sirius?" asked Arcturus immediately.

"In a healing coma." Charlus said succinctly. "He was tortured badly and he will need extensive therapy to walk again but he'll be fine in the long term."
"That's a relief." Lily leaned into James who had sat beside her, placing his arm around her shoulders.

"A word, Charlus?" Arcturus motioned to an empty corner of the room.

Charlus nodded briefly, bemused.

Arcturus erected a privacy ward. "Lily has expressed concerns that the Ministry will seek to use her son and not comply with Bertie."

Any hint of Charlus's usual good humour disappeared and his brown eyes hardened. "Your observation?"

"Confirms her fears may be valid," Arcturus said without turning toward the group. "They have been in a huddle since we arrived and Bertie is quite clearly the only one arguing that they should restrict the knowledge."

"Bastards!" muttered Charlus. "So we're obliviating them?"

"We'll need to use the family magic," Arcturus said quietly, "Albus is too powerful."

Charlus nodded.

In a move that surprised Sirius never mind the collective in the waiting room, Charlus and Arcturus turned as one, his grandfather taking down the privacy ward at the same time as they both called their family magic forth.

"Familius magicus protectus!"

The snake and griffin erupted into being, shocking the life of the room's other occupants.

"Dad, what are you…"

"Leave them, James!" Lily restrained James as he made to stand up.

Charlus and Arcturus pointed their wands in unison. "Bind them."

Sirius could see the alarm enter Albus's eyes, the movement to bring his wand to bear…

But it was too late.

The snake surged forward to bind the three that had been selected.

"Obliviate them! You will remember instead that Sirius was found by the family magic as called by Arcturus and myself." Charlus ordered.

The griffin flew at the three bound, blinding them with a fierce light. A moment later, it was over.

Albus blinked. "I'm sorry, I can't seem to recall…"

"I was just saying Sirius will be fine, Albus." Charlus said soothingly. "Thank you for your concern though but if you need to get back to Hogwarts, we understand."

"And I should return to the Ministry." Bagnold said officiously. "Crouch, we should get back to work rather than lollygagging around here."
Bertie remained behind as the others took their leave and departed. He had kept silent but looked over at them suspiciously. "Am I to be obliviated too?"

"Only if you intend to use the boy for your own purposes." Arcturus replied.

"You have my word that I won't." Bertie sighed heavily. "The others... they will need watching once the boy's powers are known."

"And we shall watch them." Charlus said. "We'd like to count on your support."

"You have it." Bertie said simply. "I should head back before they begin to question why I remained with you."

Arcturus lifted his cane. "I shall walk with you."

Charlus cleared his throat. "You could stay, Arcturus. Sirius will wake by morning."

"And he will not want to see me." Arcturus said simply.

"Lord Black..." Lily rose from her chair awkwardly but offered her hand. "Thank you." Her gratitude for his action in protecting her son shone from her expressive eyes.

"Yes, thank you." James added stiffly.

Arcturus nodded an acknowledgement at James but he took Lily's hand and kissed her knuckles. He straightened as he let go and smiled at her. "My dear Lily, since your son will be Lord Black one day, you should call me Arcturus."

The memory ended; Remus and Sirius fell out of the pensieve.

Sirius thrust a hand through his hair and tried to gather his fragmented thoughts. "He told Lily to call him Arcturus."

"I know you said Bertie told you they ganged up but to see it..."

"He told Lily to call him Arcturus." Sirius repeated.

"And it wasn't the first time the two of them worked together," Remus added, "you could tell that they'd done it before but when and where and to whom?"

"He told Lily to call him Arcturus."

Remus scowled at him. "Merlin, Sirius, there are more important..."

"We already knew what the memory showed us," Sirius shot back, and there were personal aspects of the memory that he didn't want to think about too closely (that his grandfather had waited for news, that he'd been concerned, that he'd clearly understood Voldemort's agenda better than anyone else at the time), "but the fact that my grandfather asked Lily to call him Arcturus is important!"

"Why?" asked Remus confused.

"Because it means he considered her family bar the oath." Sirius said agitatedly.

"And that's bad because..."

"Not bad so much as... unbelievable!" Sirius whirled away to pace the room. "All my life, my
grandfather told me that he would never accept a muggleborn into the House of Black! Andy was disowned by him because of Ted, for Merlin's sake!"

"You have to admit, Padfoot, that he hinted as much about his opinion of Lily in his letter." Remus tried to soothe him and failed.

"Why?" The word burst from Sirius without thought. "Why didn't he ever tell me he'd changed his mind when he was alive and I wasn't locked up? He could have told me!"

"And would you have listened back then?" asked Remus pointedly.

Sirius opened his mouth to argue and shut it again as he shook his head. "He was right, you know. If he'd stayed until I was awake, I wouldn't have wanted him."

Remus nodded slowly. "Why don't we look at another memory?"

Sirius acquiesced because it was better than having to deal with his relationship with his grandfather. The third memory dumped them into the same study but sitting across the desk from Arcturus was Charlus.

"I brought a photo." Charlus said proudly, handing over a wizarding photo that showed Lily propped up in bed with baby Harry in her arms, James sat beside her, and both of their attentions captivated by their sleeping child.

"What have they named him?" asked Arcturus, his eyes never leaving the small features of the babe in the picture.

"Harry James Potter." Charlus said with a smile.

"She really insisted on going through with that muggle name?" Arcturus complained as he made to pass the photo back.

"You can keep the photo," Charlus said, taking a sip of his tea, "and Harry is a family name – it's the name of Lily's favourite grandfather so it is in keeping with our tradition of naming sons after favoured forefathers. It's better than Pronglet which James insists on calling him." He set his cup down. "Sirius will be named godfather."

"He'll make a good godfather." Arcturus said proudly. "He all but raised Regulus until he went to school."

Yes, thought Sirius darkly, and then his mother had gotten her claws into his younger brother and things had never been the same between them.

Charlus sighed. "I wish you would reconcile with him, Arcturus."

"I agreed that he would stay in your care years ago, Charlus. I am content." Arcturus said firmly. "His recovery goes well?"

"He's not back at work and he's still walking with a cane but yes, he's doing well." Charlus informed him. "He was questioned closely about the deaths of the ten Death Eaters found at the place where they think he was held by Crouch and Bagnold. Albus was unsurprisingly disapproving about the loss of life."

Arcturus snorted. "I fail to understand how he thinks the Light will win if he's not prepared to fight back."
"You know Albus." Charlus said almost absently.

"You're worried about something." Arcturus said, straightening his robes.

Charlus sighed heavily. "James and Lily aren't telling me something, but I think they've joined Albus's not-so-secret Order although they haven't explicitly said so to me."

"You think Albus is meddling in their decisions?" asked Arcturus bluntly.

Charlus raised both his eyebrows in a silent 'seriously?' query. "When isn't Albus meddling, Arcturus?" He shifted suddenly and gestured at the photo. "Let's forget about Albus's machinations. My grandson is much more interesting. You can't tell from the photo but he has Lily's eyes…"

The memory faded.

Sirius dumped the next memory into the pensieve and took a deep breath before he and Remus tackled it. Both Remus and Sirius tensed as they realised they were in the front parlour of Potter House during the Yule holiday of nineteen-eighty.

Lily sat on one overstuffed armchair; Harry was asleep in his bassinet beside her. Arcturus sat across from her. Green and red tinsel decorated the mantel; a tree laden with glittering and sparkly ornaments took up a whole corner, and there were already presents wrapped in shiny red and gold paper under it.

"Thank you for allowing me to visit, Lily," Arcturus said, "and to offer my condolences for Charlus's death in person. We didn't get a chance to talk at the funeral."

"James needed me." Lily said simply. Her hand crept to Harry and she smoothed his blanket.

"How is James?" asked Arcturus politely.

Lily sighed. "He's taken Charlus's death very hard but he's distracting himself with Yule; he wants Harry to have a good first Christmas even if Harry's too young to remember any of it." She grimaced as she reached for the mug of cocoa next to her on the coffee table. "He's also resigned as a Hit Wizard since the estates will take up all of his time. He and Sirius went off to Gringotts this morning to sort everything out."

"And how is Sirius?"

"About the same as James truthfully." Lily said bluntly, sipping her drink before placing it back on the table. "Sirius considered Charlus the father he would have chosen for himself and Charlus… Charlus was happy to play that role for him."

Arcturus nodded. "And you?"

Lily's eyes shone with tears. "I miss him."

He offered her a clean handkerchief and Lily took it dabbing at her eyes so her mascara wouldn't run.

"Lily…" Arcturus began gently. "I'm not sure if you were aware but Charlus and I met regularly after the events where Sirius was rescued from the Death Eaters."

Lily nodded and gave a watery smile. "Who do you think made sure he had the photos?"

"Thank you for those," Arcturus said softly, "I had the one of Sirius and Harry framed."
"Harry loves him already," Lily's smile lit up her face, "did you know Sirius was the only one home when I went into labour? He ended up being the one in the labour room with me."

Arcturus shuddered delicately. "It was the practice when I was a young man to be far from the actual birth as it was possible to get."

"I couldn't have done it without Sirius supporting me through it." Lily said simply.

Sirius felt his own eyes prickle again with tears. Remus placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"Lily, Charlus was worried that the obliviation had failed with Albus; that he was taking an unusual interest in Harry...what are your thoughts?" Arcturus got to the point of his visit.

"He visits Harry once a week but I know from Alice he does the same with Neville." She gestured with the handkerchief. "We joke that he's picked the pair of them as substitute grandchildren as he's not likely to have his own."

Arcturus nodded slowly. "Well, if you're comfortable with his interest..."

Lily shrugged and a small frown flitted across her face for a moment. "In hindsight, I'm not sure we had to obliviate him. James and I...we've spent a great deal of time with him recently. He's a good man, Arcturus."

"Even good men have their own agendas, Lily." Arcturus advised her and held up a hand when she made to disagree. "I will say no more except this: the House of Black will always recognise the House of Potter as extended family. If you ever have need of help, I hope you'll consider coming to me."

Lily smiled. "Thank you, Arcturus."

Sirius exited the memory and found Remus looking as disconcerted as he felt. Sirius silently handled replacing the last memory with a new one.

They were back in Arcturus's study only it was Lily in a dark cloak sat opposite Arcturus. She looked pale and Arcturus poured her a glass of Firewhiskey, pushing it across his desk. Sirius realised with a start that a framed photo of a young Sirius holding a baby Harry took pride of place on his desk.

Lily drank down the liquor and pointed at the photo. "I'm surprised you have it displayed so openly."

"To anyone who isn't me, you or your husband, the photo appears to be that of my late wife." Arcturus corrected her, surprisingly gently.

"Oh." Lily looked lost.

Sirius's heart clenched with fear for her; why did she look so upset? And why had she gone to his grandfather rather than James?

"Did you know my parents died two weeks ago?" Lily asked, her eyes on the empty glass she held.

"I had heard a rumour to that effect." Arcturus replied. "My condolences on your loss."

"It was a house-fire. It's been ruled accidental in the muggle world but a spy informed Albus that it was Death Eaters." Lily stated bluntly, slamming the glass down on the desk and wrapping her
cloak more tightly around herself. "Bastards!"

"What do you need from me?" asked Arcturus.

"I need a way to protect my sister and her family." Lily said, finally raising her head, her green eyes ablaze with anger and determination. "Albus says there is nothing that can be done because they're muggles but I want to place wards around her home and I know the Black wards are considered the best."

Arcturus looked at her for a long moment. He got up and retrieved a book from a shelf on the far side of the room. He handed it to her. "The blood wards described within will keep your sister safe but they are considered borderline illegal these days. The House of Black is fortunate that most of ours were lain down before the Ministry started to object to blood magic. You shouldn't be discovered in placing them since the Ministry only monitors wand magic in muggle areas."

Lily clutched the book to her. "Thank you." She sighed heavily, obviously hesitating over saying something else; indecision written across her delicate features. Finally she heaved a sigh. "Arcturus, do you believe in prophecies?"

"To some extent," Arcturus allowed, "I have a friend who is a Seer and she is usually very accurate about her dreaming. Other than that..." he did a half-shrug in a dismissive gesture.

"There is a prophecy that might concern my son." Lily said quietly. "Albus saw fit to tell James and I about it the night he informed me of the truth concerning my parents' deaths. He believes that our families are being eliminated to get to us, that we should go into hiding."

"I would be happy to offer my home to you, Lily." Arcturus said.

Lily smiled and it alleviated the pained look she wore. "Thank you, Arcturus, but nothing's decided and if you took us in, it would mean declaring your side once and for all; you would find yourself a target for the creepy bastard."

"I can handle Albus." Arcturus said dryly.

Lily laughed at that before she sobered again. "I'm so scared for Harry. We probably will go into hiding but...I just don't think it's going to be enough. Call it maternal instinct but I can't help feel that I need to do more to protect my son."

For the second time, Arcturus rose and raided a bookshelf, pulling down three old books which were handed to Lily.

"My wife followed the Old Religion and these contain witches' magic; spells that can only be cast by a mother or a woman." Arcturus said. "Perhaps you will find what you need in them."

Lily's face brightened. "Thank you." She sighed and got to her feet. "I should get back before Harry turns Sirius's hair pink again."

The memory ended. Sirius and Remus were cast out of the pensieve again.

"Your grandfather gave Lily the spell that saved Harry!" Remus said sinking down into one of the nearby visitor chairs.

Sirius sank into a chair beside him. "I can't believe she came here! What was she thinking?"

"They clearly had a very civil relationship, Sirius." Remus said absently. "Do you think James
knew?"

Sirius shook his head. "He would have told me if he had, and he certainly would have told Lily to have stayed away from my grandfather. So it's just as well he didn't know, isn't it?" He said. "The books my grandfather gave her helped her keep Harry safe." There was a note of wonder mixed in with a touch of bitterness in his words.

Remus ran a hand over his face. "Are there any more memories?"

"One."

"Do you want to stop and join the others for some lunch or continue?" asked Remus.

"Continue." Sirius muttered.

The last memory was the most shocking. It was clear that at the time of the memory Arcturus was bed-ridden; he was propped up in a large four poster shakily drinking tea as a house elf showed his visitor into the room.

_Ollivander, the wand maker, greeted Arcturus happily and took the seat Arcturus pointed toward. He agreed to refreshment and another elf arrived with a freshly brewed pot of tea._

"Thank you for coming, Master Ollivander."

"You have been secluded for many years and your letter asked for my knowledge, Lord Black." Ollivander smiled at Arcturus, his silver eyes glittering. "I admit to some curiosity."

"What do you know of the Tale of Three Brothers?" Arcturus asked.

_Ollivander's bushy white eyebrows lifted half-way up his forehead. "The child's tale?" His expression became slightly mischievous. "I take it you wish to quiz me about the Elder wand?" He settled back in his chair. "And if I tell you what I know?"

"You will receive the copy of Alrac's Wand making Lore from my family library." Arcturus offered smoothly.

"And if I were to tell you that it will not aid you in recovering your health?" Ollivander posed the question quite seriously.

"My research is to benefit the last of the Peverells not myself." Arcturus replied.

"The Potter boy?" Ollivander's eyes gleamed with curiosity. "Interesting. But then it would explain the photo by your bedside."

_Sirius glanced to where Ollivander's gaze had darted and found the photo of himself with baby Harry on his grandfather's bedside table._

_Arcturus chose to stare the wand maker down rather than answer._

_Ollivander's lips twitched. "I accept your terms."_

_Arcturus inclined his head._

"_The Elder Wand is also known as the Deathstick. It is said to have been crafted by Antioch Peverell._" Ollivander began, enthusiastically. "_It is purported to be a wand wrapped in a wand wrapped in a wand. The root of the Elder tree was the inner core soaked in Peverell's blood and_"
covered with runes of power. The bark of the Elder tree was wrapped around the core, covered with more runes that conveyed accuracy and balance. Finally, this was placed within the hollowed out core of an Elder branch and fashioned into a wand. Only one mark was made on the outer wood; the invention mark of the Peverells."

"There was no other magical core?" inquired Arcturus.

"It is all supposition as nobody knows for certain. Because of the tale that has Death gifting the wand there are those that believe the rumour that the inner core was a thestral hair but I consider that a story." Ollivander's thin hand waved in the air. "If it is made entirely of wood, it would make the wand very unique. The other main difference is that normal wands choose the wizard or witch who has the best affinity with the magical element at its core, but their allegiance can be borrowed or stolen if they are a near match to someone else, or if there is a close relationship between the two users. It's why families that struggle financially will often reuse their ancestors' wands, for instance. But the Elder wand's true allegiance is said to be only with the line of Peverell." 

"But in the tale, the wand transfers its allegiance to someone more powerful once Antioch used it to kill someone and boasted of it?" quizzed Arcturus thoughtfully.

"Pish and tosh nonsense." Ollivander dismissed with another wave. "Antioch was killed in his sleep and the wand taken; it isn't sentient. It couldn't have known the danger, woken Antioch up and killed the thief all by itself. It is a powerful wand, a most unusual and unique wand, but it is only a wand."

"Do you know where it is?" Arcturus asked.

"The last rumour that was told to me that I believed had any kind of veracity was that Gregorovitch had it." Ollivander smiled. "He's always been fascinated by the topic. He's tried on four separate occasions to replicate a non-core wand and hasn't been able to achieve any success."

Arcturus smiled at Ollivander. "And where do you suspect it actually is now?"

Ollivander smiled back, recognising that Arcturus had seen his evasion and hadn't fallen for it. "If you want to find a powerful wand, you need to find a powerful wizard. And if you want to find this powerful wand, it is wise to look at the last time two powerful wizards came to blows. The history of the wand is drenched in bloodshed."

His gaze sharpened on Ollivander suddenly. "Dumbledore? He won the wand from Grindelwald?"

Sirius's mouth dropped open. Albus? Albus had the Elder wand? Well, that explained his position on searching it out when the Resurrection Stone had been found.

Ollivander spread his hands out in a 'I don't know' gesture. "My theory only although I believe it is the reason Albus never personally challenged You-Know-Who in a one-to-one battle."

"He didn't want to take the risk of losing its allegiance to the Dark Lord." Arcturus said.

"Exactly." Ollivander replied. He blinked, his silver eyes shifting to see something in his own mind. "I suspect the wand will make its way to the Peverell child in good time."

"What about the other Hallows?" Arcturus asked. "Do you know where they are?"

"The other what?" Ollivander asked, seemingly surprised at the question.

"The other Hallows – the cloak and the stone." Arcturus expanded.
"Ah," Ollivander gave another smile, "I'm afraid I can't help you there. They're not wands and I have no interest in them."

"You're not interested in the notion that if all three are reunited, the holder becomes the Master of Death?" Arcturus countered.

Ollivander burst out laughing. "Dear me, Arcturus, the tale is fictional! Death did not gift the artefacts to the Peverells! They created them. Bringing them together creates a powerful arsenal but one to master Death itself? I rather doubt that."

Arcturus huffed but he gestured weakly. "What does the wand lore say about the Elder wand and the Peverell family magic, or family magic in general?"

"Ah, now that is a much more interesting question." Ollivander paused to take a sip of his tea, set it aside again and sat back. "The most credible account that I've come across of the origins of family magic tells of the wizarding world on the brink of collapse as Camelot fell, beset by power-hungry wizards and witches who wished to fill the vacuum and by muggles that feared them. Thus, Merlin invited thirty families with the most powerful wizards and witches among them, and cast a spell of protection; a spell that bound and sacrificed their most powerful member who, instead of dying, transformed into the guardian spirit totems that embody family magic. Merlin was then able to direct all these spirit totems in concert to hide magical folk from the muggle world and eradicate the evil from within the wizarding. Once done, Merlin disappeared – it is said that he died in the effort – and the thirty families formed the Wizarding Council and began the wizarding society that would evolve into our world today."

He paused. "Soon, they each realised that the most powerful wizard in each generation of their family was bound to the sacrifice, able to call upon the family magic with the price being they added their own magic on dying; family magic became insular, each seeking to protect their own pool. And over time the thirty families drifted in politics and values. Yet, the pool of magic available to help protect the wizarding world remains and theoretically the most powerful overall in each generation should be able to call upon not only their family's magic but that of the others."

"What of those families that have died out such as Hufflepuff?" asked Arcturus.

"The magic is still there in the ether to be called upon." Ollivander stated and shrugged. "One presumes the most powerful within the families would be able to call it."

"But no-one knows for certain if this is true?" Arcturus checked, bemused.

"There are many origin stories." Ollivander said. "Who knows which is the truth? My preference is this one."

"And what of the Elder wand and family magic?" Arcturus pressed on.

"The account of the Elder wand that I believe is a very old one that was made by a French wand maker called Lumiere who claimed to have spoken to Ignotus about Antioch's invention personally. It is from this account that the description of the non-magical core originates." Ollivander took a breath. "I admit that I only took a passing interest in the rest but I believe it talks of a Dark Wizard called Severn..."

Arcturus made a noise. "Like the river?"

"Like the river," Ollivander agreed, "and the Peverells created their...artefacts to fight this wizard, calling upon their family magic to assist. Lumiere theorised that the reason why nobody else could
replicate the Elder wand was because its magic was gifted to it by family magic." His lips twitched. "Did you know the Peverell totem was purported to be a Thestral? The totem changed when they took the name of Potter and became a Griffin."

"I see." Arcturus leaned back. "So the defeat of the river in the tale is actually the defeat of the Dark wizard using magical artefacts that are created from their family magic where the totem is symbolic of Death. And thus the tale emerges of the three brothers defeating a river and receiving gifts from Death. Did the account say how the artefacts were used to defeat the Dark wizard?"

"It may have done," Ollivander gave an unconcerned shrug. "I wasn't really interested in that part."

Arcturus nodded. "Thank you, and – I'm sorry." He whipped out his wand. "Oblivate! You came to examine my wand and have found it to be in excellent condition. In future should anyone ask about the Elder wand, you will say only what the Tale of Three Brothers imparts and the rumour that the wand was with Gregorovitch. You will say you do not know anything else about the other Hallows as they have nothing to do with wands."

Ollivander blinked at him.

He dropped his wand. "As I was saying, thank you for coming out, Master Ollivander, but I fear I need to rest now." He motioned an elf popped in ready to escort the wand maker out.

"Of course, Lord Black, I will take my leave." Ollivander was soon gone from the room.

Arcturus picked up the photo and gently smiled at Sirius's happy face as it beamed down on a giggling baby Harry. "I don't have long and I have done all I can. The rest is up to you, my boys."

Sirius stumbled as he exited the pensieve and he groped for a chair. He sat down heavily.

"Well, I can go to Ollivander and ask him about his source for the family magic story." Remus babbled. "And I can get Bertie onto the Lumiere story, I'm sure. Maybe the DOM already has a copy of it. Actually it could be in that stack of paper about the family magic in your grandfather's desk and…"

"Albus has the Elder wand." Sirius interrupted sharply. "He has a Potter family heirloom in his possession and obviously he doesn't intend to give it back!"

Remus sat down with a thump. "Sirius, it's not that simple and…"

"Oh, I get that it's not simple, Remus!" Sirius lurched to his feet and started pacing. "You know, back then, I always thought that Albus didn't confront Voldemort because he was old and was better suited to running things than field action! He certainly corralled enough into the Order to do the fighting for him! And then I found out about the prophecy and I thought maybe that was the reason! But no! He didn't confront him because he has a wand that doesn't even belong to him!"

"Sirius…"

"He could have given James the wand to store in the Potter family vault! Nobody has it then! Nobody uses it! Just like we did with the stone!"

"Sirius…"

"He could do the same now!" Sirius continued. "He doesn't have to use that wand! And it doesn't even belong to him and he knows it!"
"SIRIUS!"

"WHAT?"

Sirius whirled around, breathing heavily. Remus looked calmly back at him and pointed at the chair. Sirius flung himself down into it with a scowl.

"I don't disagree with you in principle." Remus said, rubbing his chin. "Albus has to know what the wand is and its history. He was quick enough to recognise that the stone belonged to Harry so he must know that in principle and certainly from a sentimental viewpoint, Harry is also the rightful owner of the wand. However…"

"The International Law of Conquest, I know." Sirius said quietly. "Albus won the wand in a duel. He was entitled to keep it."

"And he could argue, probably very successfully, that the wand's ownership is entirely subject to that law since it has had many owners and they have changed usually through a duel." Remus sighed. "If you wished to challenge him, the alternate argument is that the wand was stolen from its original rightful owner and is effectively hot property."

Sirius grimaced.

"But since Albus must know all this," Remus stressed, "I believe he probably has a reason for keeping the wand from Harry beyond a desire to keep the wand in his possession."

"No doubt it's to keep the wand from falling into Voldemort's hands," Sirius said, "I can see that! All he had to do rather than lie to me was to say 'I have the wand and you'll agree that until Voldemort is defeated by Harry, it would be best for me to keep it' or some other argument he has up his multi-coloured sleeves! It's just…he's keeping secrets again! Deciding he knows best!" He threw up his hands. "It drives me bonkers!" He noted Remus didn't argue with him.

"Are you going to tell Harry?" Remus asked, eventually.

"I'll show him the memories once Simeon leaves." Sirius couldn't help the tiny flinch at having to face them again.

Between the revelations that his grandfather had cared about him but that his grandfather had also conspired to keep him and Harry in their respective prisons for so long, that he had known and liked Lily and she had known and apparently liked him…well, his mind healer was probably going to earn his salary ten times over in his forthcoming session. And then there was Albus creating problems again.

"Harry can decide whether we confront Albus or not about the Elder wand. At the end of the day, it is Potter property, he needs a say in deciding what we do."

Remus winced.

Sirius sighed because he agreed with him; it was not going to be a fun discussion when Harry realised Albus had kept something from them – from *Harry*; something that was potentially useful if they could work out how all of the three artefacts had been used to defeat the Dark Wizard Severn. Harry had forgiven Albus once; Sirius wasn't sure he'd forgive him again.
Neville waited impatiently at the floo with his Gran. They were hosting an Introduction Party for the Black Regent Apparent. It was the first time that the Longbottom and Black alliance would be on public show instead of the Longbottom and Potter. He knew his Gran was determined that the event would be a smashing success to underline that just how much the House of Longbottom valued its alliance with the House of Black.

He had seen such a change in his Gran over the Summer; it was as though she'd been given another lease of life. He'd always be grateful to Lord Black – Sirius – for that if for no other reason although there were plenty others; convincing his Gran to buy Neville a wand that was matched properly with him; the politics lessons; the estate management lessons; his magic lessons; the outings…but most importantly; his friendship with Harry.

It had been a surprise to him that Harry’s parents had been his godparents but it made sense of why he had only his Gran and a handful of elderly relatives in his life. Since the start of the Summer and that news he'd asked his Gran about his father's friends more and discovered the two men closest to his Dad had been the Prewett twins, Fabian and Gideon. They had died at the hands of the Death Eaters. His mother's closest friend had been Lily Potter and his Gran hadn't known any others beyond noting both women were known and accepted in the social circle of the Potter alliance. Neville wondered why none of them had come forward to help his Gran until he’d realised from an overheard comment that his Gran had pushed most of them away at some point in her grief.

It was a hard thing for Neville not to feel resentful; he loved his Gran but her previous behaviour had turned away people who could have helped him – helped them. He could have adults in his life who didn't despair over his lack of magical ability or who compared him constantly to his father. He could have grown up with friends instead of being isolated in Longbottom Manor. But then, in fairness to his Gran, maybe it wouldn't have made a difference. Maybe he would have still been shy and awkward. Maybe. But he wasn't isolated any longer, Neville assured himself. The Potter alliance was re-established and all of the Heirs were committed to working together. And moreover, he and Harry had both delighted in being godbrothers.

It was a relief to Neville that Harry was just as eager as he was to establish a better friendship. They hadn't been unfriendly at Hogwarts but Neville had never wanted to intrude too much into the territory of 'best mate' that Ron had very clearly marked out for himself (although in hindsight Neville could see that alongside the possessiveness, Ron had truly been protective of Harry who'd been overwhelmed by the attention). In truth Neville had been too insecure about his own worth to force himself upon the Boy Who Lived and later, on the boy he'd come to know as Harry. Somehow though, thanks to their family alliance, Neville had been given the opportunity of forging an unique place with Harry – Harry wanted him to be his godbrother as much as Neville wanted Harry to be his – and Neville had grasped the inner courage that had made the Hat sort him into Gryffindor and grabbed that opportunity with both hands.

He was pleased beyond measure at the result; Harry trusted him and believed in him and Neville had meant every single word of the oath of fealty he had sworn.

So, just like his Gran, he wanted the evening to be a success – for Harry, the Heir of the House of Black and his godbrother.

Neville smoothed down the front of his robes again nervously, his fingers absently tracing over the stitching of the Longbottom crest. His Gran shot him a quick smile and he straightened as he smiled back.
The floo chimed and immediately Sirius stepped through with an elegant precision that his Gran approved of with a smart nod.

"Sirius," his Gran offered her hand which was quickly kissed, "it's wonderful to see you. I hope everything will be to your liking."

"Knowing you, it will be perfect, Augusta." Sirius smiled warmly at her before he clasped Neville's shoulder. "You look very smart, Neville."

The floo flared again and Harry stepped out, sighing with relief when he didn't stumble. He greeted Neville's Gran first before he and Neville shook hands formally; grinning as they both rolled their eyes at the absurdity. Sirius took his place beside Neville's Gran in the line-up and Harry took his beside Neville, nudging Neville's arm and continuing to grin at him.

After that, the House of Black arrived in speedy order; the guests of honour, Simeon and his wife, arriving first before the Tonks arrived with Hermione and lastly, the Malfoys.

Neville took a perverse pleasure in seeing the Malfoys bow (or in Narcissa's case, curtsy) to his Gran. None of his humour showed though as he shook Draco's hand and bid him welcome. He was surprised that Draco managed to keep the sneer of his face.

Simeon took his place in the line-up beside Sirius while everyone else was ushered into the formal parlour where the refreshments had been set out. Neville knew that Andromeda would play hostess in the absence of his Gran.

"Well, gentlemen," his Gran said, "are we ready for the hordes from the Ministry and the Wizengamot to descend?"

"You mean locusts." Sirius commented dryly.

"They can't be that bad!" Simeon protested winking at the two boys.

Neville and Harry looked at each other before they shared a smirk with Sirius. "Worse!" They chorused.

"Really!" His Gran admonished, but her eyes were sparkling. "Some of them are our allies."

"All locusts except for our allies." Sirius agreed. "Got it."

His Gran looked as though she was about to retort but the floo chimed again and for the next hour, Neville was mostly occupied by shaking hands and kissing knuckles before presenting 'his friend and ally, Lord Potter, Head of the House of Potter and Heir to the House of Black.'

Harry's smile grew tighter and more fixed as the hour went on. All of the Wizengamot was in attendance and most of the higher echelon of the Ministry – the Department heads and their wives. Even if their allies knew better than to fawn over Harry or to condescend to him, the rest hadn't a clue how to deal with the Boy Who Lived. Worse still were the families that they knew to be Dark and aligned in the past with Voldemort. But Harry didn't waver or cower in their presence and neither did Neville; a show of strength was needed. The very worst though was when Bartemius Crouch Senior stepped out of the floo.

"Crouch." Sirius practically snarled the other wizard's name and everyone in the receiving line tensed.

"Black." Crouch snapped back.
Neither offered their hand.

"Barty," his Gran stepped forward and presented her hand with a quiet authority that forced Crouch into taking it, "let me introduce you to Simeon Black, the Black Regent Apparent." Crouch shook hands quickly with Simeon who eyed him speculatively. "You remember my grandson, Neville, of course."

Neville shook hands and gave a stiff smile. The older man was rigid in his stance; his grey robes were properly pressed and tailored; his short grey hair neatly parted and his toothbrush moustache trimmed as straight as a ruler.

"May I also present Lord Potter, Heir of the House of Black." His Gran continued.

"So you're the Boy Who Lived?" Crouch sneered.

"And you're the wizard who threw my godfather into prison without a trial." Harry shot back, his green eyes colder than Neville could ever remember seeing them and he felt a shiver go down his spine.

The floo chimed.

"Amelia!"

Neville wasn't imagining the hint of relief in Sirius's voice.

"Bones."

"Crouch." Amelia Bones greeted her former boss evenly but without any fondness as she allowed her hand to be kissed by Sirius.

"Brian! Good to see you!" Sirius grinned at her escort as Amelia moved to curtsy to Neville's Gran and present her hand to Neville and Harry.

"Sirius." Brian smiled at the smirking wizard and sighed, although his face was alight with humour. "Is there any way you're not going to tease me about this?"

"No…"

Amelia shot Sirius a look.

"I mean, yes," Sirius hastily corrected, "I mean, why would I tease you about escorting our lovely Amelia?"

"Nice recovery, my Lord Black." Amelia said dryly. Her eyes landed on Crouch again. "Well, it's good to see that you've recovered from Wizard's flu at last, Barty."

"And just in time to attend the World Cup." Brian pointed out smoothly, offering Amelia his arm. Crouch glared at the solicitor while Harry exchanged furtive smirks with Neville.

"I'm still recovering." Crouch stated coldly.

"Yes," Amelia said, adjusting the skirts of her dress robes, "I did hear talk today that you'd forgotten the name of the Italian Ambassador."

"Memory loss is common after a serious bout of the flu." Crouch defended himself briskly.
"Short term memory loss." Amelia pointed out. "You've been meeting Antonio every month for ten years. How you failed to remember his name is beyond comprehension."

A throat being cleared behind the Director had them all peering at the new arrivals: the Diggorys.

"My apologies, Lady Longbottom, we seem to be holding up the receiving line." Brian stepped in diplomatically. "Bartemius, Amelia; perhaps we should continue this discussion in the parlour."

Amelia smiled at him gratefully as Crouch muttered an agreement. Neville didn't miss the dark look he threw towards Sirius and Harry though as he left.

The Diggorys greeted Sirius, his Gran and Simeon. There was some tension in the air because nobody in the line had voted for Diggory when he'd been nominated to join the Wizengamot. Amos shook hands with Neville but lingered with Harry.

"Good to see you again." Amos said pompously. "Looking forward to returning to school?"

Neville stiffened at the underlying insult; Amos was effectively pointing out Harry's youth and inexperience.

"Yes, Mister Diggory." Harry replied politely.

"It'll be good to get back to Hogwarts." Cedric stepped in to smooth things over and thankfully changing the subject. "Are you going to the World Cup?"

"We are," Harry said, "you?"

"I can't wait to see Krum in action." Cedric said, eagerly. "He's a brilliant Seeker."

Harry nodded and Neville knew that his friend was eager to see the match and pick up some of the Seeker moves.

"So are you, son." Amos interrupted. "You beat young Potter here, didn't you?"

Cedric looked miserably embarrassed once more. "I've told you before, Dad, it wasn't a fair win."

Since Harry had been busy falling off his broom because the field had been invaded by Dementors during the moment Cedric had spotted and caught the Snitch, Neville agreed with Cedric's view.

"Nonsense," Amos blustered, "you won; that's all that matters."

The floo chimed again.

"We should head inside before we make the same faux pas as Amelia and Barty." Peggy Diggory nudged her husband pointedly while shooting an apologetic look in Harry's direction.

"Of course, of course." Amos inclined his head, offered his arm to his wife and set off to the parlour.

Cedric mouthed a 'sorry' and trailed after his parents.

It was a relief that the next group out of the floo were the Weasleys. It was only Arthur, Molly, Ron and Ginny – Bill had arrived escorting Alicia Doge earlier. Harry's tension eased a little and Neville relaxed a bit more himself.

"Oh don't you boys look handsome?!" Molly exclaimed, reaching to hug Harry rather than following etiquette.
Harry smiled at her. "Hello Molly."

"Mrs Weasley." Neville greeted her more formally, knowing his Gran wouldn't let him get away with anything less than the expected behaviour.

"Neville!" Molly smiled at him as he kissed her hand.

Ginny presented her hand with a smirk. Neville rolled his eyes at her but kissed her knuckles. She turned to Harry and went bright red. Neville was torn between amusement at her evident crush and a tug of envy.

Neville hadn't considered Ginny as a potential girlfriend until that Summer. He hadn't failed to notice at the end of his third year that his peers were beginning to date – at least Dean and Seamus; Ron and Harry seemed as equally as unenthusiastic as he was to actually attempt to ask a girl out. But after Sirius and Remus had given him and Harry the Talk (and Neville thought it had been cool they'd thought to work it so Harry's father provided much of it), Neville had given some thought to his own prospects and determined the only girl he knew well enough to ask out was Ginny.

He'd spent quite a bit of time with the youngest Weasley over the past year. They occupied the same position in their relative dorms; friendly with all but not part of a close friendship themselves (although Neville suspected Harry would be more inclusive when they went back to Hogwarts in September). Apparently Ginny had missed out in being part of a group in her first year by isolating herself with a diary when she was scared instead of pushing past the initial fear and confiding in the other girls in her dorm. Neville surmised that there was possibly more to it than Ginny was willing to say since he remembered she'd ended up in the Chamber of Secrets and being rescued by Harry at the end of her first year, but he wasn't about to press her into giving confidences she didn't want to share. Instead, he'd been happy enough to find someone who he could sit with in the Common Room and at meals if they were both without companions.

He liked Ginny; she was compassionate, smart and had a wicked sense of humour. She was also very pretty. Her only major flaw was that she was head over heels in love with the idea of being in love with the Boy Who Lived and turned into a speechless ninny around Harry. And, so regardless of Neville's firm belief that he and Ginny were friends, he doubted Ginny had ever thought about Neville as a prospective suitor.

His newfound confidence also meant that despite Neville's admiration of her, he was beginning to think that maybe he would be better off considering someone else. Hermione was out since it was fairly clear to Neville that she and Harry both liked each other; they'd sneak glances when the other wasn't looking and there was a real genuine affection between them. It was just a question of when they would both realise that they liked each other. Besides, Hermione – as nice as she was – was a little too intimidating for Neville; a little too much like his Gran if he was being completely honest.

But Susan and Hannah were both friendly and nice. They weren't bossy or intimidating. He liked them both although he thought Hannah was prettier with her blonde hair and calm blue eyes. Maybe he should give up on the idea of Ginny.

He watched wistfully as Harry gently prompted Ginny with a remarkable amount of patience for her hand; as Ginny offered her hand shyly and ducked her head when Harry's lips brushed over her skin.

Ron beamed at them and Neville realised belatedly that Ron obviously had decided that Harry was the perfect boyfriend for Ginny – someone who Ron trusted and wouldn't mind being a part of his family. Harry, on the other hand, let go of Ginny's hand quickly and didn't protest when Molly ushered her children away.
"Well, that was the last of the guests." His Gran declared.

Harry let out a heavy sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. "Thank Merlin."

"Now, we just have to mingle for the next couple of hours." Sirius said with mock cheerfulness, placing his hands on Harry's shoulders and squeezing them sympathetically as they began the walk through the manor.

"Fantastic." Harry said wearily.

Sirius took pity on him. "Why don't you take a break? I'll come get you when we need you."

Harry's smile could have lit up the Manor.

Neville poked him in the arm. "Come on, let's grab a butterbeer and find Hermione."

A brief glance around the room quickly identified that Hermione was happily ensconced in a corner by the refreshment table with Susan, Hannah, Daphne Greengrass, Michael Corner and Anthony Goldstein. Ron and Ginny were with their parents talking with the Diggorys and the Inglebees. The Malfoys had set up shop near to them and Draco was flanked by Zabini and Nott.

Harry and Neville made a quick stop to pick up a drink and joined Hermione's group.

"Harry!" Hermione greeted him happily. "We were just talking about the Runes test. Daphne and Anthony are going to be sitting for the fifth year class same as us."

"Hermione was just explaining that you were the one responsible for them offering us the chance to skip a year. We should probably thank you." Anthony said brightly. The dark haired Ravenclaw smiled at Harry.

Harry shrugged self-consciously.

"Don't worry, Potter," Daphne advised dryly, "I'm not going to thank you since that would be to confirm that I owed you something."

Neville was about to say something but the hint of amusement in Daphne's blue eyes stopped him as he realised she was teasing.

"Which you do." Anthony argued.

"No, I don't," Daphne said, "I was the one who achieved an Outstanding and got the opportunity to sit the fourth year exam early. All Potter did was fail to realise that he wasn't just sitting the third year exam."

"Harsh, Daffers." Anthony chided her.

Harry shrugged again. "I don't mind and she's right; you earned the right to sit the exam yourselves."

"I didn't." Michael complained. "Exceeds Expectation." He sighed. "I'm going to be left behind."

"There are plenty of people who didn't qualify to skip." Anthony assured him. "Padma, Ernie and Sally are all still going to be in fourth year Runes."

"I'm stuck in Divination." Neville said regretting his choice of electives even more. He'd eschewed Runes and Arithmancy for the easier subjects against his Gran's advice (his father had taken Arithmancy) as a single act of rebellion, pointing out that neither would help in his chosen profession
of Herbology.

"Me too." Hannah sighed.

"You could do what Harry did and swap." Hermione suggested. "We'd help you. You could drop Divination and study Runes independently – aim to take the third year exam this year and do your OWL in sixth."

Neville shook his head. "Someone has to keep Ron company."

"And someone has to keep Neville company." Hannah added.

Neville felt his cheeks heat and inwardly cursed but he appreciated the thought and smiled at her shyly.

"Divination is such a waste of time." Michael said. "If you don't have the Sight, it's useless."

"You know who does have the Sight?" Anthony asked with a hint of 'I know something you don't."

"Not Trelawney that's for sure." Daphne stated firmly. "The only Spirit that woman sees is called Harvey's Bristol Cream."

Hermione choked on her drink and had to be rescued by Harry who offered her a white cotton handkerchief to mop up her chin.

"So you guys don't believe in prophecies then?" asked Harry.

There was something about the way he asked that made Neville's Harry Alert flare up. From the way Hermione started chewing her lip, he wasn't the only one who had read something more into the seemingly innocent question.

"I don't believe in them." Michael said firmly. "There is absolutely no proof that one single prophecy has been correct."

"That's not true!" Hannah claimed. "There are plenty of examples; the Oracle at Delphi, Cassandra…"

"But everyone looks at the prophecies and bends them to fit!" Michael argued. "Take the prophecy that "a young boy who is important to the moon will die at day-break!" Well, somewhere in the world there's probably a werewolf boy who dies at day-break or a boy who was born under a moon or a boy called Moon! People see what they want to see."

"I agree with Corner." Daphne said raising her own glass. "It's a load of dragon dung."

"Me too," agreed Hermione, "and Trelawney is a complete fraud!"

"Ah, but as I was saying earlier," Anthony asserted, "there are true Seers and I know one!"

Harry looked at Anthony curiously. "Who?"

"A second year – well, soon to be third year Ravenclaw called Luna Lovegood." Anthony said. "Her Dad owns The Quibbler."

"Looney?" Michael gaped at him.

Harry's face hardened. "What did you call her?"
Hermione glared at Michael, silently backing up Harry. Neville shifted closer.

"Not me!" Michael hastened to defend himself. "The girls call her that!"

"She is odd." Daphne said brusquely. "Half the time she wanders around without shoes."

Neville threw her a disgusted look. "Out of choice or because someone stole them?"

Daphne's eyebrows rose a tad as she considered it. "Good question."

"I really hate bullies." Harry said with a sigh. He rubbed his forehead. "Is she here?"

"The Lovegoods aren't here as they lost their seat ages ago." Neville commented to Harry. But he knew from the determined look on Harry's face that Luna was now on his radar and if she was being bullied, Harry was going to step in. And Neville would be there to support him all the way.

"We're off topic," Michael pointed out, "whether Loo…" he caught sight of Harry's hard stare, "uh, Luna is a Seer or not is not the point."

"Well, it is in one way," Hermione countered, "if there are true Seers then by definition there must be true prophecies."

Harry winced. "Maybe." He suddenly smiled. "Anyone want to make a prediction about the World Cup?"

And just like that the topic was changed with Hermione berating Harry and the others about being obsessed with Quidditch.

Neville kept out of the debate over Ireland and Bulgaria. He wasn't that interested in Quidditch and he mainly watched the games at Hogwarts out of House loyalty. He contemplated Harry's questioning over whether prophecies were real or not. Why was he so interested if he was dropping Divination, Neville wondered. He puzzled over it for a long moment until the obvious answer struck him: Harry must have heard some kind of prophecy involving him. Not surprising, Neville thought, thinking of all the scrapes Harry had gotten into it and the very strange words the spirit of Morgana had said during the blessing ritual – something about betwixt the light and dark, and perishing or mastering Death?

Sirius cleared his throat behind Neville causing him to jump slightly. He shot a look over his shoulder and Sirius grinned back at him unrepentant. "Sorry, Nev. Simeon and I need to borrow Harry."

Harry sighed but went willingly as Sirius and Simeon hauled him away for a tour of the room and the waiting mass of people wanting to talk to them.

"Poor bloke." Michael commiserated.

Neville saw his Gran approaching and he sighed. "I have to go mingle too."

Hermione gave him a sympathetic smile. "Good luck!"

Hannah reached out a little hesitantly and patted his arm. Neville smiled at her warmly before falling into step beside his Gran.

They began on the opposite side of the room to Sirius and Harry. Unfortunately that meant they began with the Malfoys who had congregated with the Notts, and the Wilkes. Blaise Zabini stood
next to Draco but his mother was thankfully nowhere in sight. Probably stalking Sirius, Neville thought with amusement as his Gran started the overtures of small talk.

"Longbottom." Draco sneered.

"Malfoy." Neville gave him a cautious nod.

"Longbottom Manor is great," Theodore Nott said, "I didn't realise it was so big."

Neville nodded. "All my ancestors added to it except for my Dad."

Draco shifted vaguely uncomfortable with the reference to Neville's parentage, which given his aunt and uncle had been the one to confine Neville's father to a long term treatment ward was understandable. "My father says the grounds here are very extensive."

"We have a good spread." Neville said. "Most of it is farmland; we have a small forest and some deer. There's a freshwater stream and lake with trout – my Uncle Algie likes to fish. And then we have the formal gardens and the greenhouses."

"I had no idea you had so much land." Blaise commented.

Neville shrugged. "We also have a holiday cottage in Cornwall, an agricultural farm in the Peak district and a hunting cabin in Scotland. And that's just the property in the UK. We have more abroad."

Nott and Zabini looked suitably impressed.

"Well, they do say land rich and magic poor." Draco said snootily.

Neville smiled benignly. Draco was just skirting the edges of acceptable commentary; it would be easy for Neville to take insult. "I think you'll find that's not entirely accurate, Malfoy. I've been using my father's wand but I've gotten my own now and my magic is much easier."

"How did you get around the underage restriction?" asked Blaise.

"Lord Black arranged an exemption with the Ministry." Neville explained.

"My Dad does the same every year on the grounds that I'm the last of the Nott line and need to be able to protect myself." Nott commented easily. "Most purebloods can get exemptions, Zabini. Hasn't your Mum applied for you?"

"That would mean her acknowledging my existence." Blaise said dryly.

Neville suppressed the frown. That didn't sound like Blaise had a good home life and Neville's compassion stirred. "Are you going to the World Cup?" He asked Blaise directly.

"He's attending with the House of Black." Draco snapped.

Blaise rolled his eyes at Draco's behaviour. "Draco's father invited myself and Nott to keep Draco company so he wouldn't be surrounded by Gryffindors."

The insult to Draco (for not being able to deal with Gryffindors on his own) and to Neville (that he was a Gryffindor) was carefully hidden by his moderate breezy tone. Very Slytherin, Neville thought with more amusement than he probably should have had for the comment.

"Well, I'll see you then as my Gran and I will also be attending as guests of the Houses of Black and
Neville replied, peripherally aware that his Gran was about to move onto the next grouping. Three groupings later, they happened upon the Weasleys, the Inglebees, and the Diggorys.

"Oh, hi, Neville," Ginny barely looked at him as she peered around him clearly searching for someone else, "where's Harry?"

"Doing the other side of the room with Simeon and Sirius." Neville pointed at the trio and winced as he realised they were surrounded by Lord Selwyn and Lord Gibbon.

"Do you think he'll get here soon?" asked Lydia, flicking her hair. Her twin brother Matthew sighed and rolled his eyes at Neville in silent apology.

"Probably not for a while." Neville said, wondering whether Ginny or Lydia had any idea how close their behaviour was to insulting him from an etiquette perspective.

Cedric seemed to clue in because he cleared his throat and drew Neville's attention. "It's a shame you and Harry have to do the rounds."

Neville shrugged. "Part of the job." He gestured over to where Hermione stood with Susan and Hannah, the others having been gathered back to their families. "At least we had a mini-break."

"Sorry, Nev. We would have come over but Mum wanted us to stay together as a family." Ron added, a pink tone to his cheeks bringing out his freckles.

"Understandable," Neville said, "you didn't miss much, we were just talking predictions for the World Cup."

"Ireland has the best Chasers; Bulgaria's got the best Seeker." Ron commented with enthusiastic authority. "I'd say Ireland will win but Krum will get the Snitch."

"You're probably right." Cedric agreed. "Krum has a reputation for ending things if the game isn't going their way. I can't wait for Thursday. I really want to learn some new Seeker moves for the Quidditch season."

"Are you thinking of trying out professionally, Ced?" Matthew asked, his face alive with genuine interest and curiosity.

Cedric grimaced a little. "I'd like to but I know my Dad wants me settled into a job at the Ministry."

"My oldest brother Bill says you have to do a job you want to do for yourself rather than what someone else wants you to do," Ron said sagely, "I'm hoping to try out for Keeper this year, get on the team, try out for a professional team and hopefully go into management."

Neville suppressed a smile at Ron's serious tone.

"Wow," Cedric said with a grin, "you have it all worked out! I guess I should do some thinking. I have to admit I love Quidditch but I'm not sure I'm good enough for a professional career."

"I'm going to try out for Chaser." Ginny jumped into the conversation. "Maybe I won't get onto the team for a couple of years but I still want to try out."

"You could try out for Seeker." Cedric suggested. "You have the right build for it."

Ginny blushed. "That's Harry's spot. I want to play on the team with him not challenge him for his position."
Lydia snorted. "Like you could. Harry's the best Seeker we have at Hogwarts."

Cedric cleared his throat. "Well, that certainly put me in my place."

Matthew shot his sister an exasperated look. "Apologies, Ced, she's a tad Potter obsessed." He avoided the slap aimed in his direction.

"It's OK." Cedric said cheerfully. "Harry's great competition."

Neville felt the nudge his Gran gave him and said his goodbyes moving on. He definitely should look elsewhere other than Ginny, he mused. She was so caught up with Harry that she couldn't see anyone else. It was a shame.

He was in the middle of talking to Bill and the Doges about the plans he and Harry had for supplying Wolfsbane ingredients when it happened.

A scream sounded from the outer hallway where the powder room designated for the ladies' use was located.

Neville unholstered his wand immediately. He noticed that Harry had done the same across the room, although Sirius and Simeon immediately flanked their Heir.

His Gran raised her wand and shot off a small bang that gained everyone's attention even as she started walking. "Please remain in the room while we investigate. It may simply be a spider has surprised one of our more fearful ladies. Sirius, Simeon; if you could see to everyone?"

Sirius nodded immediately. "Of course, Augusta."

"Amelia, if you would accompany me?" His Gran was already half-way to the door.

Amelia was already in motion and fell quickly into step, as did the Head of the Aurors, Rufus Scrimgeour, and Albus Dumbledore.

"I'm coming with you too, Gran." Neville said.

He could see his Gran wanted to argue but she nodded swiftly. The corridor was a crowd of men hovering outside the door obviously torn between entering and not since it was a ladies' bathroom.

"Men!" His Gran said under her breath. "If everyone could take a step back, please!"

"I think it's my Hilary!" Douglas Vane said, whirling around in a panic.

"We shall see what the matter is." Amelia said stepping in quickly. "Rufus, with me!" She shot Dumbledore a look that told him to remain behind.

"Reminds me of the old days, eh, Director?" Rufus gave a rakish grin which Amelia returned.

They knocked on the bathroom door and Amelia entered swiftly, wand out and poised.

"We need a Healer!" Amelia shouted.

"Someone get Ted Tonks!" Augusta ordered smartly.

Terry Stebbins nodded at Neville and set off to the reception room at a run.

Neville craned his head and peeked in through the open door. Hilary Vane was flat out on the floor.
Amelia was casting diagnostic spells over the woman but Rufus's attention was on the mirror. Neville glanced in and froze in shock at the blood red writing on the mirror.

"Tick-tock, Harry Potter. Your time to die draws closer."

Ted pushed past him and Amelia stood up to let him get to his patient.

"She's fainted." Amelia said briskly. "If you could revive her, Ted, and we'll move her to another room."

"The writing's singing with house elf magic." Rufus stated firmly. "I suggest we got a forensic team down here and see what else we can find."

Amelia nodded. "Lord Black should see this."

Dumbledore had somehow squirmed his way inside the bathroom. "Harry will need to leave immediately, Augusta."

"Yes. Neville, can you go and request Sirius comes immediately; you escort Harry home." His Gran's mouth tightened in a way Neville knew well; she was furious. Someone had come into the Manor, threatened one of her guests and disrupted an important gathering for the House of Black whom they were hosting.

Hilary Vane stirred as Neville nodded and made his way back to the reception room. He made a beeline straight for Sirius who hovered protectively near to Harry and Hermione who had evidently joined them in the wake of the scream.

"Lord Black, my apologies, my Grandmother has requested your presence." Neville said authoritatively. "Professor Dumbledore has advised Harry leaves immediately and my Grandmother concurs; I will accompany him to Black Manor."

Sirius's grey eyes widened but he nodded sharply. "I would appreciate that, Neville. Hermione and Andy, can you both go with them?"

"Of course." Andromeda said smoothly. She curtsied, Hermione following her example while Harry and Neville both bowed their heads.

Neville led the way to the floo; Hermione went first, then Harry, then Neville with Andromeda following on behind.

"Why don't you kids head for the kitchen and get Kreacher to make you some hot chocolate?" Andromeda said briskly. "I'll go find Penny and the baby."

They all trooped obediently to the kitchen. Kreacher sniffed at them but provided the hot chocolate.

"OK, Neville, what's going on?" Harry asked as soon as they were settled with mugs of Honeydukes' best cocoa liberally sprinkled with marshmallows.

"Another death threat." Neville said succinctly. He repeated the message and sighed. "They said it was house elf magic again. Mrs Vane just walked in on it, I think, panicked and fainted."

Harry slumped in his chair. "Perfect."

"Sorry, Harry." Neville said softly. "But it looks like the same prat who sent you the message on your birthday."
"The house elf magic would suggest that," Hermione agreed, a faint touch of her old 'know-it-all' tone colouring her words, "but the fact that they got into the party means we can narrow the field down to the Wizengamot and Ministry officials who were there."

"Which doesn't eliminate a great deal of people, Hermione," Harry pointed out calmly, "since most of the old pureblood alliance used to bow down to Tom."

"It eliminates some," Hermione insisted, "and if you also eliminate those who don't have a house elf…it eliminates some more."

"Maybe on the Ministry side," Neville said, "but most of the Wizengamot pureblood families have elves."

"Of course they do!" Hermione snapped. "They all have slaves! Why am I not surprised?!"

Neville exchanged a quick alarmed look with Harry before mutually and silently agreeing to change the subject; Hermione and the subject of house elves was just a danger area complete with flashing lights and alarms.

Harry gave a sudden groan. "Bugger! I'm probably not going to be able to go to the World Cup now!"

"Language, Harry!" Hermione remonstrated with him furiously. "And there are more important things than Quidditch, no matter what Ronald Weasley might say about it! Your life is more important! Didn't you learn anything from the Firebolt incident! Oh, you are so…infuriating! Don't you care someone wants to kill you!" she got up, her chair scraping over the floor with a loud screech as she rushed out leaving two wide-eyed boys behind her.

Neville and Harry both looked at the swinging kitchen door and back at each other. They shrugged in unison.

Girls.

The man who could ever explain how their thought processes worked would make a bloody fortune, Neville considered wryly.

Harry shifted in his seat and took a gulp of his chocolate.

"I don't think Sirius will stop you from going," Neville began a little hesitantly, "he didn't cancel the Wizengamot session after the death threat on your birthday."

"But that was business and this is…fun." Harry had perked up though and he smiled gratefully at Neville. "Thanks for coming back with me. Your Gran is going to go nuts."

"She's furious." Neville said. "She was so wanting this to be a success for the House of Black."

Harry nodded understandingly. "It was a success, Neville. The care and attention she gave to the guests and to the details – Sirius knows she honoured the House of Black tonight and that can't have been easy after everything in the past."

Neville nodded, uncomfortable with the reference to his parents and what had happened with the LeStranges despite knowing Harry already knew and in many ways understood. He had a sudden epiphany and swore.

"Language, Neville!" Harry said in an almost perfect mimic of Hermione.
"They both burst out laughing.

"What's up enough that it got you to swear?" asked Harry, gesturing with his mug.

"I was just thinking that Gran's going to be fairly disturbed at something so dreadful hitting so close to home again. If it was a Death Eater or someone in league with Voldemort than that means they managed to land a blow – even a small one – within Longbottom Manor." Neville sighed. "Gran's going to hate that since it's the first time since…well, you know. If you think Sirius is bad…he has nothing on my Gran. Cancelling the World Cup will be the least of it."

Harry winced visibly. "I'm really sorry, Nev."

"It's not your fault that some Dark Nutter is after you, Harry," Neville said, "and even if it wasn't a matter of House honour, we'd stand with you anyway."

"Same here." Harry said quietly. "I just wish he wasn't after me." His expression fell into grave contemplation.

Neville bit his lip and gathered his courage. "Harry, did you have a reason for asking if everyone believed in prophecies?"

He could almost see Harry debating it internally, weighing up the pros and cons of confiding in Neville. It no longer surprised Neville to see Harry take the time to think. Having gotten to know him quite well over the Summer, Neville knew Harry wasn't quite the reckless, charge-in-with-no-thought Gryffindor archetype that most people took him to be. Yes, he had moments when he personified that archetype – usually when his temper was up – but generally, Harry was much more considering of his behaviour and actions than people gave him credit for.

Harry shifted in his seat again before he drew his wand and sketched a privacy bubble. Neville had seen Professor Flitwick teach Harry the charm the week before but he hadn't expected Harry to use it any time in the near future. That Harry had underscored that whatever he was about to reveal was very important.

"You can't tell anyone else about this, Neville," Harry began, "well, maybe your Gran because I think she knows some of it but no-one else, OK?"

Neville nodded. "Of course."

Harry fidgeted with his mug for a moment before his green eyes flashed up and met Neville's, shining with determination. "Have you ever wondered why I have the Dark Nutter after me?"

And suddenly it all fell into place.

Neville's eyes widened. "Oh Merlin!" He breathed. "A prophecy?"

Harry nodded unhappily. "Actually, I've been debating whether to tell you since I heard it because…well, the other person it might have referred to was, uh, you."

"Me?!" Neville squeaked.

"The beginning goes something like 'the one to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born as the seventh month dies, born to those who have thrice defied him…" Harry gestured towards Neville, "both you and I met the criteria. Some Death Eater overheard it and told Tom so he…"

"He targeted us, our families." Neville stated quietly. He gazed at Harry in wonderment. "It could
"The next part of it talks about him marking whoever it was as an equal." Harry's finger lifted and traced his scar. "He chose to come after me so…"

"Merlin, Harry." Neville said, trying to gather his composure. He finally blurted out the only thing running through his head. "Can I just say I'm really glad it's not me? Oh, bugger! That sounds terrible but it's not…I don't want it to be you either and…"

Harry started laughing and after a moment of stunned shock Neville followed him.

"'S OK." Harry waved at him. "Just…I understand. There's a part of me that kind of wishes it was you even though I wouldn't actually wish having this target on your forehead on anyone."

Neville gave a nod of understanding. "Do you believe the prophecy?"

"Sirius said, and I agree with him, that it doesn't matter if I do or not," Harry said, "since although we think Tom didn't believe it at first since he waited so long to actually come after me, he obviously does believe it now so…I'm a target whether I like it or not."

"Merlin." Neville breathed out sharply.

"I know Sirius is trying to do everything he can so I don't have to fight him but…" Harry shrugged and wrapped his hands around the mug, "it just feels like it's inevitable? Like at some point it is going to just come down to him and me."

"Well," began Neville not really knowing what to say, "we'll be beside you until it does."

It was apparently the right thing to say.

Harry brightened. "At least I'm being trained now."

"If there is a prophecy it kind of begs the question why you weren't being trained before." Neville said thoughtfully.

"Dumbledore mumbled something about giving me a childhood when I asked him in one of the lessons he gave me." Harry explained. "Personally, I think that's a load of rubbish but…well, he is helping now so…” he paused and his eyes darted up from his mug to meet Neville's again. "I don't trust him anymore since I found out he was the one to leave me with the Dursleys. I mean, I've forgiven him but…" he sighed, "I can't forget it."

"I don't blame you." Neville said firmly.

He didn't know too much about what had happened with Harry's previous guardians but from what little he had observed of Harry at Hogwarts (the awful muggle clothes, how scrawny Harry was and how he disliked the attention and the Boy Who Lived thing), what he had verified that Summer (the lack of Harry's knowledge about the wizarding world and his heritage), and from what little he could guess (neglect and emotional abuse), he could understand some of Harry's resentment of the Headmaster. In some ways, it probably mirrored his own resentment of his Gran.

He loved his Gran and knew that she loved him but she'd also spent every year of his life prior to that Summer comparing him to his father; looking at him with a faint air of disappointment every time her eyes fell upon him; allowing his Uncle to put him through dangerous tests to see if he had any magic; never once telling him she was proud of him for what he was good at…the Summer had changed things for the better and she'd finally started to see him as Neville, to treat him with respect and open
affection, but Neville could understand Harry's resentment of things past even if things had changed.

There was a noise outside the kitchen door and Harry took down the bubble quickly. The door opened to reveal Remus.

"Sirius sent me a patronus message." Remus explained succinctly. "How are you boys doing?"

Neville mumbled a 'fine' at the same time as Harry.

"What happened exactly?" asked Remus, sitting down beside Harry.

Neville explained as Kreacher popped in and organised a mug of hot chocolate for Remus. Remus looked worried when he'd finished and the older wizard reached over and gave Harry a one-armed hug.

"Whoever it is just narrowed the list of suspects." Remus said comfortingly. "We'll be able to cross a few people off just because they weren't attending."

"Hermione said something similar." Harry admitted.

"Where is Hermione anyway?" asked Remus, glancing around the kitchen as though Hermione had gotten lost in a cupboard.

"She, uh, got cross with me when I complained that I might not be able to go to the World Cup anymore and stormed out." Harry said sheepishly.

Remus's eyes widened. "Ah."

"Sorry for ruining your evening." Harry rushed out.

"I was just at the DOM doing some research on the papers Sirius found in his grandfather's study." Remus said. "So the evening is hardly ruined. How was the party before the excitement?"

"It was going well, I think." Harry said. "People were enjoying themselves and everyone was polite to Simeon and Anna."

"Good…"

Another set of voices outside the kitchen door had Remus rising, his wand in his hand.

Andromeda walked in, Hermione trailing behind her. Hermione looked as though she'd been crying and Harry's eyes widened in surprise before filling with guilt.

"Remus, good; you're here. I'm going to take Hermione home." Andromeda said crisply.

Harry got up and approached his best friend warily. "Hermione, before you go, I just want to say I'm sorry about before…"

Hermione waved him off. "It's OK. It's just…I worry about you, Harry." She sprang forward before Harry could do anything and hugged him. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you!"

She mumbled low enough that Neville had to strain to hear her. She let him go as abruptly as she'd hugged him and moved back to Andromeda's side. "Andy's going to take me home. It could be a while before Sirius and Simeon get back and I don't think we're going to be allowed to go back to the party anyway."

Andromeda placed an arm around Hermione. "Nope, you're definitely not going back."
It went unsaid that whoever had gotten their house elf to leave the threat was there; Longbottom Manor wasn't safe.

"I'll see you soon, Harry; Neville." Hermione said her goodbyes and left with Andromeda.

Harry sat down heavily in his chair, an unhappy frown screwing up his lips.

"Don't worry, Harry. It looks like she's already forgiven you." Remus said.

"I made her cry." Harry said, pushing a hand through her hair.

"I think the stress of the situation made her cry." Remus contradicted him gently. "I'm going to the library – I brought some books back with me. Why don't you boys get something to eat and then come and join me?" He departed the room before they could reply.

Harry called Kreacher and a few minutes later they were both eating fried egg sandwiches, Neville's drenched in brown sauce while Harry had his plain.

"Remus is right." Neville said in between mouthfuls of runny yolk and spicy sauce. "Hermione overreacted to what you said. It wasn't you just…everything, I guess." He swallowed hastily. "How much does she know?"

Harry took a moment to erect the privacy bubble again.

"I haven't told her about the prophecy." Harry said. "You're the only person outside of Sirius, Remus and Bertie Croaker who knows I know all about it. Dumbledore knows I know there is a prophecy but not that I know what it says."

Neville was stunned. He was in awe that he was the first to be trusted.

Harry changed position and motioned with a piece of the bacon. "I figured if anyone deserved to know about the prophecy, it was you. After all…"

"It could have been me." Neville concluded, picking up another sandwich. "Are you going to tell Hermione and Ron?"

Harry shook his head. "You saw how she was and this is me getting threats anyway."

"She'll go nuts when she finds out and you didn't tell her though." Neville pointed out. "What about Ron?"

"I don't know," Harry said, "I want to tell them, and I know they'd back me up no question, but the more people who know about the prophecy, the more likely it is that the entire thing gets back to Tom so…probably no?"

"Thank you for telling me." Neville said, understanding just what a risk Harry was taking. He finished his second sandwich and coaxed Harry to eat his. "Shall we go over the business plan again?"

Harry nodded his agreement and once their sandwiches were finished they headed to the library. Remus was using Penny's desk and there were scrolls and books spread around him like an obstacle course. They settled into two comfy armchairs in a corner and started discussing the potions supply. The trick was going to be getting good quality harvests of all the ingredients at the right time.

Between Neville's knowledge of Herbology and Harry's knowledge of Magical Creatures they
managed to get a workable plan drafted and it was with some surprise when Sirius arrived, that Neville realised they'd been immersed in the plan for hours.

"Padfoot!" Harry leaped to his feet and surged across the room to be gathered up in a hug by his father.

A wave of longing ran through Neville. He wished...he wished...but it was never going to happen for him. His father was never going to hug him like that and with his godfather deceased he couldn't expect someone else to do the honours either.

He sighed and felt a hand land on his shoulder. Remus smiled at him sympathetically.

"Sirius?" queried Remus.

"Sorry it took us so long." Sirius said. "Simeon and Anna said goodnight – they've gone straight up to bed."

"What happened after we left?" Harry asked impatiently.

"Not much in all honesty." Sirius explained, urging them all into seats. "The Aurors arrived and took some shots of the mirror where the threat was written, performed some forensic stuff which effectively told them that yes, it is a house elf, which we already knew. Hilary said she'd walked into the bathroom, saw the writing and passed out in fear. She was pretty much hysterical; Douglas had to take her to St Mungo's for a calming draught and a sleeping potion." He gestured tiredly. "Other than that, the Aurors questioned everybody but nobody admitted to seeing anyone in the bathroom before Hilary; nobody saw anything suspicious; nobody confessed so..."

"We're still none the wiser." Remus finished.

Sirius nodded. "Lucius made the point of telling me the whole thing was very Gryffindorish which I think was his way of saying it wasn't the former Death Eater crowd since you know most of them were Slytherins."

Remus gaped at him. "You don't think he was suggesting it was Peter?"

"No, just someone else." Sirius said. "Although thinking about it, the risk that whoever it was took tonight is a characteristic more suited for a lion than a snake." He raised a hand to stop the questions. "It's late. Neville, Amelia is staying over at the Manor and your Grandmother said you can stay with us tonight if that's OK with you."

Neville nodded, pleased that his Gran wasn't on her own so he didn't feel obligated to go back.

"In that case we have to give you this." Remus smiled wickedly and pulled a piece of parchment from a drawer. He handed it over to Neville.

"Messrs Padfoot, Moony and Pronglet all invite Neville Longbottom to Griffin House, Potter Lane."

Harry grinned at him. "Brilliant! Come on! Let's go home!"

Neville followed an excited Harry out to the floo. He kept the address in his head as he flooed through after Harry and Sirius. Harry welcomed him into the house and Sirius ushered them off to bed.

Harry pulled Neville up the stairs quickly giving him a snappy tour of the upper floors and Harry's own room before taking him to a room on the floor below. Harry snapped on the light switch and the
room was flooded with yellow light.

Neville looked around the cosy bedroom with a smile. There were Gryffindor red and gold accents in the linen and chair upholstery but the rest was a warm chocolate brown. There was a dresser, a wardrobe and a desk; a picture of a lion on the wall above the bed and a warm red woollen rug covering the hardwood floor. An open door led to an en-suite. A bookcase under the window was stacked with books – some muggle fiction but a lot of books on Herbology. Neville looked at Harry questioningly.

Harry gave him a tentative smile. "I thought this could be your room when you come over?"

He couldn't help it; Neville beamed at Harry. "Really?" His heart warmed with the gesture. "Thanks, Harry."

Harry grinned back at him. "'Night, Neville. Just call Dobby if you need anything."

Neville wandered into the bathroom and found toiletries and fresh towels all laid out ready for his use. He went through his nightly rituals and by the time he'd made it back to the bedroom, a pair of pyjamas was on the bed waiting for him and a glass of water sat on the nightstand. He quickly stripped and redressed in the night-wear before dousing the lights and clambering into bed.

For a moment he stared up at the ceiling, the words of the prophecy whirling in his head. It could have been him. And Merlin, poor Harry that it was him! But it was good that it was Harry too in a way, Neville mused. Harry was a hero; a powerful wizard, a leader (a reluctant one maybe but a leader nevertheless), and, for all that, a nice guy. He might not have been the Boy Who Lived the wizarding world had expected when he'd turned up at Hogwarts but he was a very acceptable version; someone who saved people, risked himself for others, and stood up against the bullies.

Yet, he knew for all that Harry would have preferred to have slipped into the shadows and resided in obscurity. He hated the attention and the stares. Harry had his insecurities and his foibles; he was naturally a little shy and a lot reserved.

A lot like Neville.

So many similarities and differences, Neville thought with wonder. How easy it would have been for Voldemort to have chosen the Longbottoms and not the Potters to attack…and then what? Would Neville have been the Boy Who Lived? Would Harry have still had his parents or perhaps it would have been the Potters who would have ended up at St Mungo's?

Neville bit his lip.

The Boy Who Lived thing was already hell of a burden for Harry to carry; that he had defeated Voldemort once meant that people would automatically look for him to do it again. Worse still if people knew the full truth and the prophecy was revealed…

Well, Sirius had the right of it, Neville determined firmly. Prophecy be damned; Harry did not have to do it alone. Neville might not be the Boy Who Lived but his magic was improving thanks to the new wand and the patient coaching of the tutors he'd had over the Summer. He had sworn his wand to Harry's service and by Merlin Harry would have it. He was Harry's friend and his godbrother.

Harry would not stand alone.

With the matter settled as far as Neville was concerned, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.
Draco was only mildly surprised when he walked into the dining room and saw Nott eating breakfast with Draco's mother.

Bugger, he thought, irritated. He was sick to death of being forced into the company of the other boy. All he'd wanted to do was have a nice normal breakfast but no; he had to put up with Nott. He walked over to the table, nodded at his mother and sat down in his usual seat.

"Nott."

"Malfoy."

Draco turned cool grey eyes on his mother. "Are we expecting Zabini to join us as well?"

She raised her eyebrows at his biting tone. "Your father and Lord Nott are hosting a business breakfast with some of our allies. Our guests will be gone by lunchtime but you will host Theo until then."

"Of course, Mother." Draco replied automatically, noting the words held a steely command. Since the Black family meeting in July his mother had been asserting more and more authority within the house. His father had hardly spent any time with him and instead had deferred to his mother. It was she who had decided Crabbe and Goyle couldn't visit and that Draco should spend time with the spawn of those toadying to Black.

It wasn't fair, Draco thought moodily. And it was all Potter's fault.

His mother placed her napkin on the table and rose from the table gracefully, sweeping out of the dining room without another word.

Draco decided ignoring Nott was the best move and so helped himself to bacon, eggs and sausage. He left the baked beans, tomatoes and mushrooms. Fried bread was added to the plate.

Nott snorted. "You won't stay skinny if you continue to eat like that!"

"I have a fast metabolism like my father." Draco snapped back.

"Your father had a poached egg on a slice of wholemeal toast and a grapefruit." Nott said mildly. "He certainly didn't eat like you!"

Draco glared at him. "You don't understand!"

"I understand that you don't want me here," Nott replied swiftly, "and I understand that I don't want to be here either. Our fathers may be allies but we're not. However, our fathers are allies and they want us to get along so perhaps you could stop being an arse and at least be civil."

"I was being civil," Draco sneered, "you were the one who insulted me!"

"Merlin, Malfoy," Nott said exasperated, "I commented on the amount of fried food on your plate! I didn't call you a prat."

*Even if you are one.*

Draco heard the unspoken words and glowered at the boy. He threw down his napkin his food
almost untouched. "I seem to have lost my appetite."

Nott raised one eyebrow mockingly. "Now you're being a drama queen." He paused. "For the record that was an insult."

Anger surged through Draco. "You should show some respect, Nott, otherwise…"

"Otherwise what?" Nott commented without raising his voice. "You'll run to Daddy?"

Draco scraped his chair back and raised his wand. "You take that back or…"

"How you got into Slytherin I don't know." Nott said calmly, picking up his pumpkin juice and sitting back as though Draco wasn't threatening him at all. "You don't seem to have realised that things have changed, Draco. Your father has just spent every waking hour of the last month convincing the old Black alliance that he still has the power to lead them despite the fact that the basis of his power – that you were the Black heir – has been completely smashed to pieces. He's held on only by virtue of the fact that Lord Black himself has no interest in the old Black alliances except inasmuch as he doesn't want us supporting the Dark Lord, and your father is handy in arranging deals of neutrality with Black."

Draco was speechless at Nott's words but he couldn't deny them.

"And yet," Nott continued, "you want to risk all that by attacking the heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Nott – a House that outranks the House of Malfoy – and with whom you have an alliance of mutual aid and support. And let's not forget, the Ancient and Noble House of Black which retains primacy over your Minor House has a détente alliance with us meaning no raising of wands." He looked insouciantly at Draco. "You want to hex me? Go ahead. I'll be sure to ask Lord Black to use Judgement on you for breaking oath."

Each point Nott scathingly made hit Draco like a bludger. The last though had him paling before flushing with frustrated anger. He had no wish to end up without his magic.

He yanked his wand down and stormed out.

He headed automatically for the music room on the third floor of the Manor. His mother had forced him into piano lessons when he was little but his father had dismissed them when he'd taken more of an interest in Draco's education. Draco had at the time adored his father even more for stopping the torture of practising scales and finger movements. But the music room had the best view in the house; a small balcony looked out onto the beautiful manicured gardens of Malfoy Manor and Draco loved it there. When he was a child he had pretended he was a King, gazing out over his kingdom. He'd stopped pretending, of course, but it was a favourite thinking spot.

Once he reached the balcony, he collapsed into the wrought iron chair and stared out into the thin morning sunlight. He breathed in deeply, the sight and perfume of the gardens settling him as the initial rush of adrenaline that had made him storm out of the dining room subsided. His stomach rumbled.

"Kobly!" Draco called quietly.

The house elf popped in, his large ears twitching. "Yes, Little Master Draco?"

"Bring me a bacon sandwich and a pot of tea." Draco ordered imperiously. He suddenly remembered what Nott had said about his diet and waved a hand. "Oh, and a grapefruit."

Kobly popped away and almost immediately the food appeared on the small wrought iron table
beside Draco.

He picked up the sandwich and began eating, methodically and precisely. The act of eating, the scenery and the stillness of the morning finally drained away the last of Draco's anger. Instead he was left with a lingering sense of frustration, irritation and a sense of unfairness.

He drank his tea and stared at the untouched grapefruit.

The problem was Nott was right, Draco mused with resentment. Everything had changed and Draco hated it.

He started to worry over Nott's comments in his head. Well, not the comment about Slytherin because Draco had been born and raised to be in Slytherin although he knew his father would have preferred to have sent him to Durmstrang and avoided Hogwarts altogether; it had been at his mother's insistence that he had gone to Hogwarts. Still, Slytherin was for the ambitious and cunning; Draco had been raised to be both. So a pox on Nott for his stupidity in suggesting Draco should have gone somewhere other than Slytherin. And Draco knew he ruled in Slytherin…at least he had until that Summer. He shifted position uncomfortable with the thought, a frown on his pointed face.

Truthfully, he had always known that he held his place in Slytherin because of his father; the Malfoy name, status and wealth kept most of his contemporaries in line, and the upper years would ignore him rather than risk upsetting him and provoking consequences for their families' businesses or political dealings. What was beginning to sink in was that it hadn't been the Malfoy name, status and wealth so much as the Black.

Draco had been told, of course, that he was the Black Heir and would complete the inheritance rituals when he was seventeen and of age. His father had talked about a family fortune from his mother's side that would add to the prestige of the House of Malfoy. What he hadn't told Draco was that other candidates for the position were still alive nor that his Great-Uncle Arcturus hadn't actually named him as Heir despite being alive until just before Draco entered Hogwarts. In hindsight, he'd simply naively accepted his father's word.

He'd accepted a lot of what his father had told him as truth and he was beginning to understand that some of it wasn't truth at all.

It wasn't truth that he'd been the Black Heir and once Sirius Black had claimed his rightful position by law, blood and magic, any claim Draco had to inherit the House of Black was gone especially as Black had made Potter his Heir. Perhaps Draco could have been Black's Heir in another life where Black had done the right thing and sorted to Slytherin and hated the Potters but the likelihood of him ever ditching Potter and naming Draco instead was very remote and most likely would involve a compulsion spell of some kind.

Potter.

It was all his fault, Draco thought furiously. How dare he swoop in and take what was rightfully his?! He should show Potter that nobody messed with a Malfoy and…

His magic tingled and Draco recognised the warning signs of the magical Vow he had taken. Negative and angry thoughts about Potter apparently set off the alarms in his magic that he was coming close to breaking his vow.

Balls, Draco thought morosely. He couldn't even have a good mental rant about Potter! On the other hand, he was quite grateful for the internal warning system that magic had come up with whenever he strayed into thinking of Potter with murder or harm in mind. He liked his magic too much to want
it stripped from him.

And if he was being completely honest, it wasn't Potter's fault. He wasn't responsible for Draco being led to believe he would be the Black Heir when all was said and done. No, that had been his father – and his mother to a lesser extent; leading Draco into believing one thing when the truth was far different.

Like the Dark Mark his father had branded into his forearm. From everything Black had said at the meeting and his mother had said in their lessons that Summer, the Mark was the equivalent of a brand of slavery; a subjugation of will and freedom to the Dark Lord's whims. His father had once proudly displayed the faint outline and told Draco that he wore it as a badge of pride.

His father, who had been stupid enough to brand himself a slave and follow a Dark Lord who wasn't even a pureblood; his father who had actually killed someone; had tortured people.

Draco shuddered. He poured himself another cup of tea to distract himself from the thought. He had known in the abstract that the followers of the Dark Lord had been intent on killing muggles and muggleborn; on eliminating the blood traitors who had stood in opposition to the pureblood agenda that the Dark Lord espoused. But for all that he had known those facts he had never put it together that his father had been one of those followers and therefore had killed and tortured and eliminated…

Personally, Draco didn't want to kill anyone.

Well, maybe Potter…and there was that tingle again.

He sighed.

He wasn't stupid; he knew himself well. He knew he had a cruel streak a mile wide; he wasn't a kind person. His father had taught him that kindness was a weakness. If someone got hurt, he didn't necessarily care and he might even revel a little in their pain. Draco had happily used to kick their old house elf when he was in rage for no other reason than the house elf being there.

But the occasional violent temper tantrum aside, he'd always believed he, as a Malfoy, was the brains and others were the brawn. Others might be the ones to get blood on their hands and he might direct it but he wouldn't actually do it himself. He'd be in the Wizengamot leading others. He wouldn't be actually killing people. And in truth, he had never seen the need to kill people. Why kill when muggleborns could be shopkeepers and farmers? Why interact with muggles at all? Why not legally restrict muggleborns and halfbloods and ensure the ruling elite would always be pureblood?

No, Draco had never envisaged killing in his future. Immersing himself in politics, being Minister of Magic, walking the corridors of power, and using others to threaten violence and cajole; yes. Premeditated murder, torturing for just to create pain, and killing someone in cold blood – even Potter, no.

He didn't want that in his future.

And he certainly had no wish to bow down to or brand himself with the Mark of a son of a muggle even if that son of a muggle was a descendent of Slytherin.

Draco sipped his tea.

It was all his father's fault that Draco's world had turned out to be nothing but a lie (as his mother had been subtly telling him all Summer). For years Lucius Malfoy had been feeding Draco dragon dung, spoonful after spoonful that Draco had swallowed down because he believed his father hung the moon. Well, no more.
Serving the Dark Lord wasn't an honour, it was slavery.

The Dark Lord might be the Heir of Slytherin but he was sired by a muggle. He wasn't a pureblood.

The House of Malfoy might be superior in many ways and be a leader of sorts in the wizarding world but it was outranked by the House of Black; always had been and always would be.

These were the truths of the matter. His father had lied to him and Draco was thoroughly disillusioned. There was a pained ache in his chest that Draco rubbed absently.

Still there was no doubt that his father was a powerful wizard; respected and influential, that the Malfoys had money (even if it was controlled right at that moment by Black and the stupid werewolf who'd had the temerity to restrict Draco's allowance) and status. But there was also no doubt that none of that mattered when Lord Black was more powerful, respected and influential; when Black had more money and status. There was no doubt that others, like Nott, saw the difference and would take advantage of the gap.

Nott was unfortunately right; Draco had to accept the new reality somehow.

Resentment stampeded through him again.

He shouldn't have to accept the new reality, damn it! He wanted everything back the way it was. He wanted, wanted…something he couldn't have.

Draco sighed heavily. He tapped his fingers restlessly against the fine china mug he held. Truthfully, he had allowed his childhood lessons on negotiation and political analysis to slide from his memory, secure in the knowledge that his Malfoy name was enough to get what he wanted. But it wasn't anymore and he found himself dredging his head for the skills that his father had made him learn.

So, first question: who had power? Answer: Black was the House that everyone feared above and beyond the Malfoys. Then, there was the Dark Lord. And finally, perhaps, Dumbledore – not that the old fool ever used it.

To gain power then…since Draco couldn't hope to fight either Dumbledore or the Dark Lord and win, the obvious answer was to remove the House of Black and have the House of Malfoy take its place. Yet Draco had sworn oaths to support and be loyal to the House, the Head of the House and deal neutrally with its Heir so he couldn't conspire to harm the House of Black in any way, although believing his actions (including those that may damage the House) were for the good of the House of Black might give him some small wriggle room. Was it worth the risk of losing his magic though? Not to mention the House of Black seemed to be the only one capable of standing against either the Dark Lord or Dumbledore.

Draco frowned.

If removal of the House of Black was not possible then the other option was to work with the House of Black and become a key figure in its power dynamic – gain power that way.

Clearly that was the decision his father had made.

Lucius Malfoy was supporting the House of Black in the Wizengamot, arranging deals between the House of Black and the old pureblood alliance, and maintaining a public impression of family solidarity with the House of Black regardless of how much his father hated Sirius Black and Potter. His father in a rare moment with Draco had admitted that since he now knew the truth about the Dark Lord, following the madman wasn't an option and supporting the House of Black to get rid of the threat as they had vowed really was the new plan. He was using the Malfoy connection to the
House of Black to maintain his authority with their allies but to also consolidate a new political position. He was turning what had appeared to be a negative into a positive for the House of Malfoy.

His mother had been telling Draco all Summer that he was going to have to adjust his attitude, that he should follow his father's example of making the best of their situation and she was right; Draco needed to do the same as his father.

Part of him didn't want to because he had learned his father had lied to him most of his life and he didn't want to be like his father anymore (and there was that ache again).

He snorted and drank his tea wincing at how cold the drink had gone in his musing. He set it aside. Maybe it wasn't going to be a problem appearing to throw his lot in with the House of Black. His father had made it clear that while he knew they had to bow to the expectation of acknowledging primacy, in private they could keep their own opinion that the Malfoys were better than the Blacks; the Malfoys continued to uphold the purity of blood whereas the current Lord was intent on damaging the House with muggleborns, halfbloods and half-breeds. Draco could at least agree with his father on that.

So, alright, Draco decided, he would need to pretend to maintain a façade of acceptance to the primacy in front of Black and others. That wasn't too much of a problem as his father would understand the need as would his mother as she had been quite fervent about ensuring his compliance all Summer. And Draco mused, actually being part of the House of Black wasn't a bad thing.

His mother had informed him of the Black family history, their power and ancestry. They were a formidable House, distinguished and, until Potter's acceptance as Heir, pureblooded, but it seemed Potter was a strong wizard (he still couldn't quite get his head around the blessing ritual he'd witnessed where Potter had called forth the spirit of Morgana Le Fey but it indicated that Potter was very powerful regardless of what Draco had observed at Hogwarts) and undoubtedly that was why the family magic had accepted him. It would help make the House of Black a formidable magical opponent.

And while he still believed purebloods were superior to all other wizards, he had to admit that he quite liked his muggleborn Uncle Ted. He'd been forced into various interactions thanks to his mother's thrice damned etiquette lessons. But...there was something solid and reassuring about Theodore Tonks; a warmth that was missing from Draco's own father and Draco had often found himself tempted to confide in Ted although he was horrified at the impulse. He could see why his Aunt Andromeda had married him. She was witty, intelligent and very much a lady for all she had eschewed the politics of her upbringing; he could secretly admit if only to himself that he admired her. She also made his mother smile more. Their daughter on the other hand…Nymphadora was too spiky and barbed; too clumsy and graceless for Draco to approve of her.

He couldn't approve of Granger either; she was too brash and shrewish. Although, Draco mused, if they had to sponsor a muggleborn, sponsoring the most intelligent in their year was probably acceptable. And it seemed from his last interactions with her that Granger had learned some manners from Andromeda. Simeon's wife Anna though was, like his Uncle Ted, decent enough for a muggleborn; a little too Hufflepuffish but she was attractive and also well-mannered. Simeon's manners were perfect. Evidently Marius Black had taught his son well even if Marius had himself been a squib. Simeon moved with a contained power not unlike Sirius.

A shiver ran down Draco's spine at the thought of the Head of the House of Black. Sirius Black was every bit as menacing as the Daily Prophet had made him out to be. His power was only just contained; it shimmered on his skin. Draco remembered what his mother had said when he had
questioned her about him…

"Sirius was the best and the worst of us." His mother picked up the tea-cup and blew on it gently before taking a sip. Her blue eyes took on a far-away gaze, directed at the past and her memory. "I remember the Summer before Sirius started Hogwarts, we had a Summer Ball at the country estate and Bella ruined my dress robes to get me into trouble with my mother – they never believed Bella was anything but innocent because she was their favourite. Sirius found me in tears and…and he took the blame for it. My father hit him and would have beaten him further, but Lord Arcturus stepped in and said that he would punish Sirius. Sirius protected us all that way."

She took another sip of tea.

"That protection though when you crossed someone he loved especially Regulus…" his mother sighed, "Bella was often bored. One day, she pushed Regulus down a few steps. He was eight years old and mostly he was bruised with a grazed elbow at the end of it. Andy patched him up but he clung to Sirius afterwards. The next day, Sirius taunted Bella at the top of the main stairs and when she sprang for him…he waited until the last moment and suddenly moved. She fell down the stairs badly. We all rushed down after her. She was lying there, blood around her head and both her arms were all twisted, her leg broken, and I remember instead of helping her like he'd immediately done with Regulus, Sirius stooped and whispered in her ear that the next time she hurt Regulus he would kill her. Our parents came and Sirius as a cool as a cucumber said Bella had slipped. She was in St Mungo's for a week."

Draco swallowed hard.

"It's hard to imagine that Regulus ended up betraying Sirius but he did. He attacked Sirius once at Hogwarts just before Sirius graduated trying to impress the Dark Lord, maybe trying to prove that his mother was right and he was the new Black Heir since Sirius had left home. Sirius put down four of Regulus's little friends before James Potter arrived to help him. Only Sirius and James were standing at the end of it with Regulus out cold on the ground. Regulus told me Sirius visited him in the infirmary in the middle of the night and told him that he'd gone easy on him because he was his brother, but the next time Regulus tried to kill him, Sirius wouldn't be so merciful."

His mother finally looked at him. "So you see, it would be best not to anger Lord Black. If you hurt one hair on Potter's head…well, I doubt you'll have hair left when he's finished with you. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded.

A loud peacock cry from the grounds snapped Draco's attention back to the present. Yes, he didn't want to anger Lord Black or have his attention. It had been bad enough during the family meeting. He flushed remembering the biting tone and derisive eyes that had dismissed Draco as unimportant and lacking. No, he feared and respected Sirius Black. He was a powerful wizard; a true Lord Black – worthy of the title. Draco didn't wish to cross him.

There were material benefits in being in the House of the Black, Draco considered thoughtfully: Sirius had promised him rewards for good behaviour and he'd already had the awful arrangement with Pansy dismissed. He and Pansy had been friendly since they were children but he wasn't attracted to her and couldn't see himself marrying her. She was smarter than she was pretty; opinionated rather than biddable; fawning instead of truly affectionate…no, Pansy wasn't the wife he had in mind. He wanted someone who really liked him for himself not because he was Draco Malfoy and they wanted to use him as a step up the social ladder. Pansy would be a good practice girlfriend but something more? Well, he didn't have to worry about that anymore because the House of Black would let him choose his own wife.
The key was his relationship with Potter. His father had made himself indispensable to Black by being the liaison between the House of Black and the rest of the pureblood Houses. He could provide the same service to Potter.

The problem was building a relationship with someone he hated. He frowned heavily. Hate was a strong word but it worked. He had hated Potter since he'd refused Draco's hand on the Hogwarts Express because of a Weasley. Just the memory of it had the power to make his blood boil. He had never been so humiliated or rejected; he was a Malfoy – nobody refused him.

Except Potter.

Draco took a deep breath and forced himself to view his enmity with Potter logically, objectively, dispassionately.

There was the initial rejection; Potter had been defending his friend. Draco rolled his eyes. He could understand why even if he didn't see that Weasley was worth defending. If he and Weasley had swapped roles in the train, Draco would have been horrified if Potter had taken Weasley's hand. So...so maybe he understood why Potter had rejected him.

Then there had just been an endless stream of confrontations, although in hindsight Draco could acknowledge that he had provoked most of them, Weasley the rest, and Potter was mostly just there. He glared out into the gardens. Why had he confronted Potter so much?

He'd wanted to prove he was better than Potter. He'd wanted to get the other boy in trouble as revenge for not accepting him as a friend, for being a Gryffindor, for being the Golden Boy. He'd wanted Potter's attention.

Draco stared moodily out into the gardens.

Just before going to Hogwarts, his father had pulled him into his study...

"I am reliably informed that the Boy Who Lived will be on the train to Hogwarts." His father eyed him speculatively across the desk. "I trust that you will not fall into the adoring masses like so many of your school friends."

"Of course not, Father." Draco replied promptly. The thought of being a sycophantic fan horrified him.

"There is, however, some benefit in cultivating a relationship." His father mused, leaning back in his chair. "This boy will wield a lot of power in our society in years to come not only the Boy Who Lived nonsense but he is the last Potter. He has been away from the wizarding world for many years hidden away by Dumbledore. He will have need of guidance; you may wish to provide it."

"I understand." Draco said eagerly.

"His father smiled coldly. "It is likely that he will be sorted to Gryffindor, Draco, but try not to let that alter your course." He paused, his expression turning contemplative. "He may also be warned against us due to my past association with the Dark Lord. If that is the case, I will not be disappointed should you fail to gain his regard."

And obviously Draco had failed spectacularly and on his own account. But he'd used the excuse his father had given him when he had written and told him Potter had refused his hand. He hadn't wanted to admit his failure; hadn't wanted to disappoint his father.

But perhaps there was an opportunity now to correct the mistakes of his past... Potter had declared a
truce on the basis of upholding family honour. Granger had even told Draco that Potter took it seriously enough he'd warned the Weasel off provoking Draco. With his own vow of neutrality, Draco was prevented from the type of confrontations he'd made in the past anyway. Potter and Granger had even been surprisingly good company at the country estate especially since they didn't have the Weasel hanging around them.

So, a clean slate.

Draco could take advantage of that. He could talk with Potter at Simeon's farewell meal on Friday and discuss how Draco could help him with the Slytherin students. He nodded slowly, acceptance finally creeping in and stealing over him. In a way it was a good thing he was part of the House of Black. Maybe he wasn't the Heir but he had Black blood and that counted even if his name was Malfoy. It would certainly help him see off any pretenders like Nott trying to usurp his place…

But he was going to have to work with Nott that was clear. The House of Black was allied and Nott clearly had intentions on making himself useful to Potter. Draco bit his lip and thought hard about how he could sway Nott, how he could keep him under control…

"Well, that was a bloody waste of time!" The sound of Lord Wilkes's voice booming out from the open window below the balcony had Draco almost jumping out of his seat as his heartbeat accelerated alarmingly.

He'd forgotten his father's study was directly below the music room.

He sat still and silent, keenly listening.

"I hate to agree with Norman, but he's right, Lucius," Nott Senior's voice said quietly, "that was a waste of time."

"Not a complete waste of time," Lucius argued calmly, "we did discover from Yaxley that whoever it is making these death threats owns a house elf."

"We already knew that!" Wilkes barked. "We knew that from the first death threat!"

"No, we knew they had used one to send a letter the first time," Lucius said, "which meant it could have been any guest staying with someone who had a house elf. This tells us that whoever it was had the ability to call a house elf themselves although I'm surprised Augusta doesn't have wards preventing any but her own elves from entry."

"Everyone who owns a house elf in our group has denied doing the deed!" Wilkes snapped back.

"And nobody in our group would stoop to lying?" questioned Lucius mildly.

Draco almost snorted but he stopped himself, knowing if he gave away his position his father would be furious – more so that he'd been caught than that he was eavesdropping.

"I don't think anyone is lying," Nott said with quiet authority, "everyone knows not to draw unwanted attention to us especially now."

"Travers is fuming because someone is stealing his limelight." Lucius commented dryly. "You should read the letter I received."

"Do you think that this idiot, whoever it is, will disrupt the plan for the World Cup?" Wilkes asked
brusquely.

There was a pause before his father responded.

"I am uncertain." Lucius admitted, and Draco could hear the chagrin, "but whoever it is seems to be working against us rather than with us."

"Bloody idiot!" Wilkes snarled. "I'd like to get my hands on them and hex them into next week! Do you know how close I am to securing a détente with Black? Selwyn too?"

"I shouldn't worry about that, Norman." Lucius soothed him. "I have already hinted to Black that it wasn't any of us and I will assure him again when we go to the match tomorrow."

"He's still intending to go to the World Cup?" Nott asked, surprise colouring his tone.

Lucius laughed, low and dark. "Of course. You didn't think a Gryffindor would be deterred by a death threat?"

"He sent the boy home last night." Nott pointed out.

"He could hardly keep him there knowing whoever had sent the death threat had gained entry and was likely in the same room as Potter." Wilkes growled. "But he has balls of brass going to the match in the face of two threats."

"I'm sure he will arrange for some additional security." Lucius said.

A silence fell and Draco's heart raced as he assimilated the information.

"Do you think it's Him?" Wilkes asked suddenly. "Or Pettigrew?"

"The Dark Lord had no serving house elves and neither did Pettigrew." Lucius replied immediately. "I'm not certain these threats originate with the Dark Lord."

"Then who?"

"Another party, obviously." Nott surmised. "Either another follower of the Dark Lord's we did not know or someone else who has a grudge against Potter."

"The latter is more likely surely?" Wilkes asked.

Lucius cleared his throat. "Pettigrew. Need we say more?"

"So, the Dark Lord had Pettigrew as a secret spy! That doesn't mean he had a dozen of them!" Wilkes retorted.

"There were also many associates of his followers that were kept secret but known to the Dark Lord," Nott countered, "the Carrows had that vampire they kept secret until they went off to live with him after the war. The LeStranges had Crouch Junior living with Rab apparently...and those are the ones I know about now. I suspect Selwyn has someone who was his contact in the werewolf community during those years and Mulciber probably had someone tucked away; he was rarely at home in the final days of the last War."

"You have a point." Lucius said. "Perhaps we should turn our attention to those in Azkaban. There may be connections we have missed. Many of those incarcerated had house elves which may have remained loyal to a secret lover or retainer."
"It's an avenue of investigation." Nott agreed. "You'll take it to Black?"

"Indeed." Lucius said.

Wilkes snorted. "Well, if we're done talking about that, we should discuss the bloody Muggle Affairs Committee, Lucius…"

Draco slumped back in his chair, thinking hard. Someone other than his father's old crowd was sending the death threats? The old followers of the Dark Lord weren't involved? And whoever it was owned a house elf? His head felt stuffed with information.

Silently, he made his way from the balcony and hurried back into the Manor. He wandered down the main stairs and froze at the sight of his mother in the hallway, evidently waiting on him.

"Mother." Draco said cautiously. His mother had always been kind to him, loving in his childhood before he had turned away from her hugs and comfort, but he knew she didn't like to be crossed.

"Tell me, Draco," his mother said softly, "where is your guest?" She was already sketching a privacy bubble around them and Draco blanched as he realised his error.

He had left Nott alone in the dining room – alone and free to roam around the Manor by himself without a Malfoy watching what he saw and what he heard. Not only that but he had disregarded his mother's orders and quite a few more etiquette rules in abandoning a guest in their home.

"My apologies, Mother," Draco said hurriedly, bowing his blond head, "Nott and I argued and I made the mistake of leaving the room to calm myself. I was just on my way to find him and make my apologies."

Her expression didn't soften. "We will speak more of this later, Draco." She promised him. "For now, your guest is in the library."

Draco acknowledged the information with a nod and escaped his mother's presence before she could reprimand him further. The Manor's library had been another of Draco's favourite places as a child. He could remember curling up with his mother in one of the large leather chairs while she taught him how to read; of evenings spent with his father in lessons at the polished oak table in the centre of the room. He rarely entered it any more.

Nott had taken up residence at the very same table. Draco grimaced at how at home the other boy looked, but hurried over and sat down opposite him.

Nott shot him a wary look from guarded dark eyes. "You found me then."

"You're always in some kind of library." Draco said, not admitting that his mother had directed him. He smiled sharply. "How you didn't sort into Ravenclaw I don't know."

Nott actually laughed. "Actually I asked for Ravenclaw and the Hat said it wouldn't suit me at all. Apparently wanting knowledge to achieve your ambitions is ambition not a desire for knowledge."

Draco frowned. Sometimes he regretted that his own sorting had taken seconds not minutes. He hadn't even attempted a conversation with the Hat or any kind of interaction. He had been chanting 'Slytherin, Slytherin, Slytherin' from the moment his name had been called to the instant that the grotty Hat had made the merest contact with his head.

He cleared his throat and swallowed down the snide retort he wanted to make. "I wish to offer you a proposal."
"I'm not interested in you that way, Malfoy." Nott said in a bored tone.

"What?! No! I was…" Draco finally caught sight of the amusement in Nott's eyes and sighed, "very funny, Nott!"

"Oh, a Nott pun!" Nott smirked at him. "Like I haven't heard that one before!"

"Do you want to hear my proposal?" demanded Draco, trying to wrestle his annoyance back.

Nott shrugged and closed the book he was reading. He raised an eyebrow in expectation.

Draco cleared his throat again, unaccountably nervous. He knew his usual 'I'm a Malfoy, you will do as I say' approach would not work and he would have to attempt the politicking his father had once taught him. "I believe that you are going to attempt a coup in Slytherin. Your House is allied to Black albeit in a détente. You intend to make yourself useful to Potter by providing him with a liaison to the other pureblood Heirs at Hogwarts assuming that I will not be that liaison. In this way, you will achieve a position of power and authority."

He leaned back and regarded Nott with what he hoped would appear to be cool equanimity. "I have no intention of allowing you to usurp my place. Perhaps I have been slow to adjust to the new dynamics now the House of Black has been revived but…” he pinned Nott with a frank look of superiority, "you fail to understand that as much as I am a Malfoy, I am also a Black. Potter and I share blood and a family. He takes that seriously. We've already declared a truce. In a wrangling match, who do you honestly think he would choose; a family liaison who has taken an oath of loyalty or a Slytherin liaison who has simply taken an oath not to raise a wand against him?"

Nott's dark eyes simmered with heat before his expression smoothed. "Well, well, well. Finally unearthed your Slytherin, Malfoy." He motioned at him. "My turn. You may have Black blood and you may have agreed a truce but your relationship with Potter has a bad history. He won't trust you very far. My political agenda isn't very far off Potter's but I'd be surprised if you even know what his is. I have allies in the Potter alliance; you don't. And a liaison needs the trust of both sides; some of your peers may follow along after you like a puppy, Malfoy, but not all of them. I think I stand a good chance of gaining Potter's trust no matter your family connection."

Draco let his head incline a touch in acknowledgement even if his blood heated in irritation at Nott's perfectly valid points. "Well, well, well. Finally unearthed your Slytherin, Malfoy." He motioned at him. "My turn. You may have Black blood and you may have agreed a truce but your relationship with Potter has a bad history. He won't trust you very far. My political agenda isn't very far off Potter's but I'd be surprised if you even know what his is. I have allies in the Potter alliance; you don't. And a liaison needs the trust of both sides; some of your peers may follow along after you like a puppy, Malfoy, but not all of them. I think I stand a good chance of gaining Potter's trust no matter your family connection."

"What are you offering?" asked Nott, not disagreeing with Draco's statement.

"I suggest we work together." Draco said. "It is what our parents wish and will have the benefit of underlining our Houses' positions politically. You assist me in retaining my position within Slytherin and I will assist you in gaining power and authority of your own; we work as a team with Potter. My Black blood and position will give us credibility with the Slytherins, and your lack of history with Potter will help create a greater level of trust with him."

"Your idea has some merit." Nott said slowly, thinking it over. "I'll think about it."

Draco nodded. It was as far as he had expected to get in one day. Nott was not impulsive. In the meantime, Draco intended to use the rest of the week and time he had with Potter to his own advantage; to consolidate his new start with the Gryffindor and begin laying down the groundwork for his new liaison position.
"Theodore!" Lord Nott's voice snapped their attention to the doorway of the library. The elder Nott stepped into the room as his son hastened to his father's side.

Draco scrambled to stand and bowed slightly. "Lord Nott."

"Draco. Thank you for hosting my son this morning." Lord Nott said.

A dignified silence was the better part of valour, Draco decided. He inclined his head a touch in acknowledgement of the thanks.

"Yes, thank you." Nott said dryly, but he didn't give away that Draco had all but abandoned him. "I'll see you soon, Malfoy."

Father and son departed and Draco let out a small sigh of relief. He wandered out of the library and decided he'd head out for some practice on his broom. He went up to his suite of rooms to retrieve the Nimbus and change into Quidditch gear.

He was just about to leave when his parents entered his sitting room. He froze in the adjoining doorway of his bedroom surprised to see them together. They rarely acted in partnership for discussions with him and he was unnerved.

"Mother. Father." Draco hovered uncertainly.

His mother chose an armchair and his father stood beside her.

"Come and sit down, Draco." His father ordered.

Draco chose the sofa across from his mother. "If this is about what happened this morning with Nott…"

"No, although I was disappointed to hear from your mother that you allowed an argument to occur, and that you ignored a guest giving them unwarranted freedom in our home." His father said tersely. "However, that is not what this is about." He looked to his wife.

She adjusted her skirts and met Draco's eyes coolly. "Since July your father and I have been discussing the possibility of having another child. We're agreed that a daughter would be a nice addition to our family. We wish to know your thoughts before we make a final determination."

A baby?!

His nose wrinkled automatically. Weren't babies noisy and smelly and…and babies! Why would they want another child? Suddenly doubt assailed him. Why wasn't he enough?

"I always wanted a son and a daughter, Draco." His mother seemed to read his mind. "However, a son was of a greater priority for our first child and after the Dark Lord's defeat in 'eighty-one, it was more important to re-establish our position and status than to have another child."

"I had not realised your mother wished for a daughter quite so much," his father added quietly, "otherwise we would have discussed the matter some years ago."

"I see." Draco worried his lip before he stilled the movement.

This was clearly his mother's desire. His father was apparently going along with it. He cocked his head and glanced at his father's expressionless face. His father was doing this to placate his mother – his mother who was the Black and who had the primacy in their marriage.
Understanding stampeded through Draco and he reined in the urge to smirk at his father. Clearly he had missed a lot in his sulking period, Draco mused. He had failed to consider how the changed circumstance would affect his parents' marriage. So, his mother held the balance of power. His father was aware his mother wanted more children and now she had the power he was giving into her demand – possibly to neutralise her and keep her in his corner with Lord Black.

It also meant that it was more important to please his mother than his father going forward, Draco thought absently. A baby sister perhaps wouldn't be so bad. The age gap was such that there was no possible way that he would be expected to interact with her in a meaningful way or share anything with her – except for his parents and their home. That would be irritating but, on the other hand, she would probably get her own suite of rooms and the Manor was otherwise large enough for them to avoid each other the majority of the time. A sister would be a useful asset in negotiating alliances… arrangements would be out but introductions would be allowed…

"If it pleases you, Mother, then I would be happy to have a sister." Draco said formally.

His mother smiled; a genuine smile that lit up her eyes and made her look infinitely younger. She got up from her chair and moved to hug him briefly. "Thank you, Draco."

"Yes, thank you, Draco." His father drawled. "We shall let you know if your mother falls pregnant while you are away at school but you should be aware it may be some months."

Draco blushed a little at the allusion to his parents' sex life. He didn't really want to think about that. "Thank you, Father."

"Well, we'll leave you to your flying practice." His mother said, squeezing his arm gently. "Be careful."

They swept out in much the same way as they swept in and Draco decided to push the whole thing to the back of his mind. He wanted to fly – fly and think about how he could get Potter to trust him. He had planning to do.

o-O-o

Harry smiled at the baby he was feeding with a strange kind of contentment. Jason's small hands waved at him as he greedily took another spoonful of mashed vegetables.

"He likes you." Anna commented, swooping in to wipe Jason's face with a damp cloth before subsiding into a dining chair beside Harry.

"I like him." Harry said simply. "He's a great kid."

"And you're going to make a great Dad someday." Anna said, smiling warmly at him.

Harry felt himself blush, his cheeks heating under her regard. He thanked Merlin she'd forgiven him for the whole blessing thing on the day she and Simeon had arrived.

"Hopefully not for a long time," Remus cut in, surprising them both with his presence – he was leaning against the doorjamb with crossed legs and arms, a smirk on his face, "I think Sirius would have kittens if Harry made him a Grandfather any time soon."

Anna laughed. "Don't you mean puppies?" She loved Sirius's animagus form to the point where she had joked she'd freeze him as Padfoot and take him back to Aussie as a pet.

"Well, as I don't intend to become a Dad just yet we can all stop worrying about Sirius having any
kind of infant animal." Harry retorted, his cheeks still bright red. Merlin. He didn't want to think about the Talk again no matter how amazing it had been to see his Dad in the memory Sirius had provided.

Remus pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "Sirius is currently laying the law down to the reporters in his study. You're going to be needed soon."

Harry nodded reluctantly, pulling a disgusted face as he got up from the table and handed Anna the spoon. He didn't want to do an interview but he and Sirius had discussed it and arranged it following the press coverage of the Wizengamot session. The theory was that by giving the press a full interview before Hogwarts started, it would reduce the focus on him when the press were there with the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

That was the theory.

They'd discussed cancelling in the wake of the latest death threat but Harry didn't want to give whoever it was that was threatening him the satisfaction of knowing they'd upset any plans. Sirius had also agreed that they'd continue with their plans for the World Cup too on the same basis but he had informed Harry and extracted a promise from him that Harry would stay with Sirius or Remus or another approved adult (and Harry was guessing it would be Bill) the entire time.

Remus gave him a once over and nodded at his open smart forest green robes adorned with the crests of Black and Potter over smart black trousers and a silk shirt in a contrasting shade of green to his robes. Harry's hair had been subjected to Sirius's Potter hair-calming charm and his gold-framed glasses sparkled. The Potter Lord ring and the Black Heir ring were prominently on display on his right hand.

"I take it Sirius picked out the outfit." Remus said, amused.

"He wanted me to wear dragon-hide trousers." Harry complained as he followed him down the corridor to the library. The silk shirt had been the compromise piece because he hadn't really had a problem with the robes.

They both entered and stopped at the sight of a wisp of a girl stood in front one of the bookshelves apparently talking to nothing. Her long blonde hair gleamed under the lights and Harry could see she wore a plain pale blue robe but her wand was tucked behind one ear and she appeared to be wearing a necklace made out of butterbeer caps.

Remus cleared his throat. "Luna, isn't it?"

The young girl turned around, her large silver eyes widening with surprise. "Professor Lupin!" She smiled happily. "It's wonderful to see you again!"

"And you, Luna." Remus said kindly. "This is Harry. Harry, this is Luna Lovegood. I take it you're here with your father, Luna?"

"You're very right, Professor." Luna replied.

"I'm not a Professor anymore, Luna." Remus corrected her gently. "You may call me Remus."

"You will always be a Professor, Professor." Luna answered in the same gentle tone. "Nothing changes what you are and you will always be a Professor no matter what job you may perform." She smiled brightly.

Remus looked gobsmacked and Harry swallowed down a chuckle.
As if she'd heard his thought, Luna's silvery gaze shifted to him. "I see the Lumpy Glumpies have left you, Harry. You look much better."

"Thank you." Harry said politely, wondering what she meant – it was a good description of Vernon and Dudley if that was who she was referring to but how would she know? He recalled the rumour of Luna being a true Seer and shook himself slightly. "You're a Ravenclaw, right?"

"Sometimes," answered Luna vaguely, "and sometimes I'm not. Don't you find being one thing all the time can get a little boring?"

Harry smiled at her. "I guess. I've never really thought about it."

Luna leaned into his space as though to confide something of great importance. "I think being a raven suits you."

"A raven?" Harry asked taken aback. Did she mean he was being more of a Ravenclaw? Well, he was studying more…

"Of course, a raven is both a trickster and a warrior, the one that defends fiercely and brings death, without whom the world would fall…"

Harry shivered as her eyes met his with strange intensity.

"They fly free but they'll play tag with wolves and dogs…"

His eyes widened.

Luna suddenly smiled and broke the tension, "…and are also easily distracted by something shiny…" she head cocked to one side, "like a snitch."

Harry couldn't help the small smile that escaped him. "I like snitches."

"Me too." Luna replied breezily. "But they're not as much fun as Blithering Humdingers."

"I haven't heard of those before," Harry said. He was beginning to realise why her housemates thought her odd and disconcerting. But he liked her – and who wasn't odd at the end of the day?

Luna hummed. "I could tell you about them?" She sounded hesitant.

"I'd like that." Harry replied immediately.

"But right now he has an interview to do." Sirius's voice broke in, rich with amusement.

Harry almost jumped and he shot a glare at Sirius who stood just outside the study with a grin on his face and his eyes sparkling with mirth. Harry blushed knowing that Sirius intended to tease him later about his talking with Luna.

"Don't worry, Harry," Luna advised in a loud whisper, "the fleas will distract him."

Sirius's eyebrow rose up at her words. She smiled serenely back at him. Sirius shook his head and gestured towards the study. "Ready, Harry?"

Harry grimaced. "I guess."

Remus reached over and patted his shoulder. "Rather you than me, Harry."
Harry scowled. "Aren't you supposed to say something cheering like 'good luck' or 'break a leg'?"

"That's Padfoot's job." Remus declared cheerfully.

"Why would he want you to break a leg?" asked Luna.

Sirius snorted and motioned for Harry to get inside the study. Harry straightened his shoulders and made his way over with a muttered goodbye to Luna. He was ushered into the inner sanctum of Sirius's study and briefly registered the occupants. In the cosy seating area, three reporters sat with eager anticipation along with a photographer.

Sirius began the introductions and Harry went through the motions of greeting them while taking in their appearances.

Xeno Lovegood wore a bright yellow set of robes and a manic grin. With his long white hair he reminded Harry of a mad scientist. Rita Skeeter sat next to him on the same stuffed sofa. Her hair was obviously dyed blonde unlike Luna's natural colour and her lipstick was blood red. Her eyes behind her oversize glasses were very calculating. Harry moved on quickly to the final reporter – the representative from the International Press; Kurt Von Toot. The gruff looking wizard with his dark hair and beard reminded Harry of a grizzly bear but he grinned at him warmly and Harry thought smiled back. The photographer was a quiet young woman Sirius had hired for the occasion; Opal Giddy. She had a collection on display at a café near to the Burrow and Sirius had been taken by her work. She'd be taking candid shots while he was questioned rather than a posed picture.

Sirius led Harry to an empty chair opposite the reporters. "Now, to remind you all once again; you will all get to ask Harry three questions – that's nine in total. Harry can refuse to answer any question or I can decide to step in and disallow it, but you can ask an alternative. A clarifying question to Harry's reply is allowed and won't count as one of your three. Is everyone happy to begin?"

Harry noted that Sirius didn't move from his place by Harry's side as the reporters nodded.

"Alright then, as Ms Skeeter won coin toss…she will go first then Kurt then Xeno." Sirius waved a hand at Rita.

Rita smiled and Harry tried not to blanch at the lipstick smeared teeth. "Harry, you were raised in the muggle world for many years before your godfather was cleared of murdering your parents and allowed to have custody of you…"

Her sweet tone contrasted sharply with the nasty phrasing of her words.

"…how do you like the wizarding world?"

"I love it." Harry said truthfully, trying to regroup from the cutting edge of the preamble to the question. "I mean, I always have loved it ever since I found out that I was a wizard and had my first trip to Diagon Alley to buy my school things for first year. But I love living in the wizarding world properly. Sirius and the rest of my family now have shown me a lot of things about my heritage and wizarding culture this Summer and that's been great."

Xeno cleared his throat. "A follow-up question from me then; what do you like best from everything you've seen, Harry?"

"Hmmm, that's a difficult question," Harry said, unsure how to answer, "I'd probably say Quidditch and I'm really looking forward to the World Cup. But I saw Broom Racing and that looked like a lot of fun and the Duelling finals were fantastic."
"You didn't enjoy your time at the Wizengamot?" asked Xeno before Kurt could speak.

"The Wizengamot was very special for a lot of reasons," Harry replied, more certain of his answer as it was something he and Sirius had discussed in preparation for the interview, "it was an honour to sit in my family seat and to take the vows of the Potter alliance. But I'm not ready to take my place there yet and both Sirius and I think it would be good if I did something else before I step fully into the political arena so I get a well-rounded view. At the moment, I'm thinking I might like to do something with Quidditch but I haven't truly decided."

Kurt leaped in before Xeno could ask another 'clarifying' question. "You state you love the wizarding world; what is your view on the muggle world and muggles?"

Harry wet his lips. "I think the muggle world is a different culture but different isn't necessarily bad. Muggles are clever and inventive and have come up with some brilliant things. Their technology does pose a problem for the wizarding world and the Statute of Secrecy but I think if we work with the muggle government more closely as the Muggle Affairs Committee is investigating, we can find a solution that protects both our worlds."

"But you would choose to live in the wizarding world despite being muggle-raised?" Kurt asked quickly, throwing a look at Rita as she went to ask her next question.

"I think it's difficult for muggles to understand children with magic." Harry said honestly. "When my Aunt said goodbye, she said it would best if I was raised by wizards and I think what she meant by that was it was good to be raised by someone who understands magic and what's dangerous and what isn't, and how to fix things when something accidentally goes wrong."

He noticed all three reporters seemed glued to what he was saying as he took a breath.

"Plus, with me, there's a lot of extra knowledge about my family and the politics of our world that I have to learn about so I can do the best I can when I assume the Potter seat which I just didn't get living with my muggle Aunt. But that doesn't mean living in the muggle world is bad; it's just not right for me."

Rita cleared her throat. "Moving on, Harry, tell me about your adoption by Lord Black."

Harry looked at her warily. "Well, what do you want to know?"

"Everything!" declared Rita brightly.

Harry exchanged a wry look with Sirius. "I'm very happy." He said simply. "It was the best moment of my life when Sirius said he wanted to adopt me and he's a great Dad."

Sirius beamed at him.

Xeno also beamed at him. "Why don't you describe a typical day in your life, Harry?"

"Wow, a typical day…" Harry considered his answer carefully. He obviously couldn't say a typical day included searching for objects that kept Voldemort alive and hoping he didn't have to confront him any time soon. "Well, we all have breakfast together – Sirius, Remus, Dobby and me that is – "

Xeno frowned. "I know Remus Lupin is your steward but Dobby?"

"Our house elf." Harry said.

"You have breakfast with your house elf?" asked Rita wide-eyed.
Harry nodded briskly. "He's part of our family – why wouldn't he eat with us? Anyway, we eat breakfast and then we exercise before we get ready. Usually I have lessons during the day such as estate management and etiquette – or an outing somewhere with friends. We generally have dinner with friends but on the nights we stay home, we'll play games or do something else that's fun."

There was a pause while they all scribbled notes.

Kurt looked up at Harry seriously. "Your Ministry failed your godfather quite badly which has damaged its reputation abroad. What are your thoughts?"

"I think your statement isn't quite right," Harry replied honestly, "the current administration did a great deal to correct the miscarriage of justice Sirius suffered. It was due to the investigation of Amelia Bones which was ordered by Minister Fudge that Sirius was cleared. I understand that the war-time administration under Minister Bagnold was under pressure and believing the circumstantial evidence thought they had done the right thing. But I think the situation shows that we can't be complacent about justice. Everyone should receive a fair trial and punishment regardless of whether it's supposedly obvious or not that the person is guilty."

Kurt smiled. "What about Albus Dumbledore? He was Chief Warlock charged with ensuring due process. He continues to hold that position and currently holds a significant position internationally."

"Is that your third question, Kurt?" interjected Sirius before Harry could say anything. "Because that seems like a follow-up rather than a clarifying?"

"Guilty!" Kurt said. "But internationally you must understand the interest?"

"Albus has apologised for his part in what occurred." Sirius replied evenly. "I have accepted it since we're all human and make mistakes – even Albus Dumbledore. Move on."

"My turn then!" Rita said, although her eyes were shining with glee at the previous exchange between Sirius and Kurt. She took a moment to change her expression to one of grave concern. "I'm afraid I can't sit here without asking you about the recent death threats."

Harry looked at her expectantly as she fell silent. Was there a question in there that he had missed? He glanced at Sirius.

"Rita," Sirius said lightly, "if you want to ask about Harry about the recent death threats you may want to frame a question so Harry can answer it or decide he doesn't want to?"

Rita shot him a look but nodded curtly. "My readers will want to know what you think about the recent death threats and being a target, how you feel about them, what is being done to protect you, Harry?"

Harry and Sirius exchanged another wry look at how Rita had packed three different questions into her reframing.

"To be honest, I think the death threats are more upsetting for my friends and family than for me. I'm kind of used to the fact that I'm a target for unwanted attention …"

Harry shifted in his seat, trying to reorganise his thoughts into something understandable without saying that with Voldemort attacking him every year he'd gotten used to having his life under threat.

"Whoever it is I think they're a coward." He said abruptly and didn't have to look at Sirius to know he'd winced at Harry's bluntness. "They're essentially threatening a fourteen year old – how brave is that? In all honesty, it just makes me angry that they're causing distress to other people. I understand
Mrs Vane suffered a huge shock with the last one and they disrupted a party that Madame Longbottom had worked really hard to put together."

"So you're not worried for yourself?" Rita pressed.

"A little worried," Harry admitted, "I mean, it's not nice to think someone wants you dead but… Voldemort tried to kill me when I was one year old so it's not like it's the first time someone has come after me, and I get that some of his supporters may want revenge or want me out of the way. I just…I'm frustrated, I guess. I'd like to have a normal life as much as possible and death threats aren't normal."

"And what is being done to protect you?" Rita asked again.

"I'm sure your readers will understand that we can't say explicitly what additional protections we're putting in place," Sirius intervened before Harry could speak, "what I will say is this; that we're not going to let it dictate what we do but we will take sensible measures to ensure Harry's safety."

"Thank you, Lord Black." Rita said sweetly and sat back, pleased that she'd essentially gotten what she wanted – a statement on record about the death threats.

"Me again," Xeno said cheerfully, "so, Harry, if you could say one thing to or ask one thing of the wizarding world, what would it be?"

Harry pressed his lips together as his mind raced. There were so many things he wanted to say but he knew most weren't politically astute and would cause problems for Sirius so…

"There are lots of things that I would like to say and ask," Harry began, meeting Xeno's gaze, "but if I could only say one thing of the wizarding world right now, I think it would be that my parents are the ones that should be honoured as heroes. Whatever happened, they were the ones that saved me and the wizarding world from Voldemort. So, if I can only ask one thing, it would be that those who see me as…as a hero, as the Boy Who Lived, instead honour my parents. They're the real heroes."

Sirius took hold of his shoulder, a comforting squeeze that let Harry know he was proud of him.

"How do you know though?" asked Xeno softly.

"I…" Harry took a deep breath, "last year when the Dementors were around Hogwarts, they made me remember."

Rita had a quick intake of breath.

"I hear my Dad tell my Mum to take me and run; he gave his life fighting to save us, to try and stop Voldemort from getting to us…" Harry continued, aware that emotion was choking his voice and Sirius's hand tightened on his shoulder, "and I hear my Mum begging Voldemort to leave me alone. She stood in front of me willing to give her own life to save mine. They're my heroes."

There was a poignant silence for a long moment.

Kurt cleared his throat. "Well, I'm afraid I have my final question to ask and it is one of grave international importance," he paused dramatically as they all turned to look at him; his dark eyes met Harry's and Harry saw the hint of a twinkle in them, "who do you believe will win the Quidditch World Cup?"

It broke the tension very successfully; all of them bursting into laughter.
Harry surreptitiously dabbed the corner of his eye where a tear had leaked out and regarded the international reporter with a grateful smile. "My friend Ron Weasley is the Quidditch expert and he believes Ireland will win but Viktor Krum will catch the Snitch and end the game on his own terms." His smile widened. "I've learnt not to argue with Ron in matters of Quidditch or chess so...that's my answer."

Sirius clapped his hands. "And that's the end of the interview, folks!" He ushered the reporters and the photographers out with thanks and reminders that all pieces had to be approved by him before publishing, leaving Harry alone in the study.

Remus poked his head in and grinned. "All OK?"

Harry shrugged. "Who knows?" He would wait and see the finished articles. He got up and stretched. "I don't think I said anything too stupid."

"Excellent! That's the spirit." Remus said brightly. "Come on. Kreacher has dinner ready and then it's an early night."

Dinner was a friendly and warm affair. It was one of the few nights that it was only Simeon, Anna, Sirius, Remus and Harry – Jason had been bathed and put to bed after his meal while Harry did his interview. It was nice to have the chance to speak with Simeon one on one and get to know him better.

Harry could see that Simeon was a lot like Sirius and he wondered briefly whether Sirius might have become more laid back if Sirius had avoided Azkaban. Every so often the effects of the prison showed in Sirius's eyes – less so than the months they had spent in the time bubble but occasionally when something would remind Sirius. It made Harry's heart ache and anger clench in his gut every time he spotted Sirius remembering. He wished he could take away Sirius's hurt but he knew he couldn't any more than Sirius could take away the hurt Harry carried from the Dursleys' treatment of him.

But they were both healing and recovering, Harry thought positively as he wished Simeon and Anna goodnight before he followed Sirius to the floo.

It was weird to think that there was just over a week before he would return to Hogwarts. It seemed like forever since he had left for the Summer – over four months including his healing time – and for the first time he didn't want to go back. He liked the routine of living with Sirius and Remus. He loved Sundays when he and Sirius would spend the day together; the quiet talks with Remus; breakfasts with Dobby; the movie nights when they all gathered around the telly with buttered popcorn and hot chocolate; the lessons where he was allowed and encouraged to show how smart he was...

He loved the quiet affection Remus showed him, ruffling his hair and patting his shoulder. He loved the paternal caring of Padfoot; the way he checked on Harry before he went to bed, how he was always there if Harry had a bad dream, the hugs that made him feel safe and wanted and...and loved.

He didn't want to leave.

He absently said goodnight to Sirius and made his way up to his bedroom, heading into the bathroom to strip and shower. Standing under the water, his thoughts returned to his previous musing.

Harry knew if he said something to Sirius, it was likely that Sirius would quite happily keep him at home. Sirius had only agreed to send Harry back to Hogwarts because Harry said he wanted to go back. Of course that had been at the start of the Summer when Harry had never considered the
possibility of not wanting to go back to Hogwarts.

And in some ways he *did* want to go back. He loved Hogwarts for the most part even if the last three years had disillusioned him as to the safety of the school. It had still been a retreat and escape from the Dursleys. It was still the first place he had considered home.

His friends were going back.

That probably more than anything was the reason why he hadn't said anything to Sirius. He would miss his friends if he stayed since he wouldn't have their presence in his lessons, although he half-suspected that if he pulled out of Hogwarts to be home-schooled, Augusta would pull Neville at the same time but that wouldn't be fair to Neville who was looking forward to going back to Hogwarts.

Neville's confidence had grown leaps and bounds over the Summer and Harry believed he deserved to have a chance to show off his new skill and new attitude at Hogwarts where he had been made to feel like a squib and an outcast. He'd also noted that since the Talk They Never Mentioned, Neville had actually spent a bit more time paying attention to Susan and Hannah – Hannah who seemed to *really* like Neville.

Harry had to admit that between the Talk, he kind of thought that he might want to go out with someone. Maybe. Possibly. But he was rather hampered by all the things he and Hermione had discussed at the beginning of the Summer. He wanted to go out with someone who liked him not the Boy Who Lived or whatever fantasy Harry Potter they'd made up in their heads.

Ginny still fell under that category as far as Harry was concerned although she had started talking to him fairly normally during the dinners at the Weasleys since they'd commiserated over Skele-gro and discussed the possibility of her trying out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Lydia Inglebee also had Fantasy Harry Syndrome. The rest of the girls in the Potter alliance were all too much like acquaintances with perhaps the exception of Susan Bones.

Susan was great. She was kind and compassionate. She hated Potions as much as Harry did and she had a keen mind and sharp tongue that reminded Harry of her Aunt. They had gotten along fine in the lessons, outings and events they’d attended together. But the truth was that although he liked her as a person and thought she might like him as *Harry*, he wasn't attracted to Susan. She was nice enough just...he couldn't see himself wanting to kiss her anytime soon. And since she generally talked about Cedric Diggory in dreamy tones, Harry rather thought she didn't want to kiss Harry anytime soon either.

Which brought him to the one other girl he knew well: Hermione.

He blushed and ducked his head, snapping the water off and getting out of the shower. He concentrated on drying off but his mind wandered back to his female best friend with alacrity.

It wasn't that he hadn't considered Hermione as a potential girlfriend when the topic had arisen at the start of the Summer but she was his friend and it was important to Harry that she stay his friend. He'd never had friends before Ron and Hermione, and he'd almost lost Hermione over the Firebolt thing and that had convinced him that he didn’t want to lose her friendship ever. It was one of the reasons why he’d worked so hard to strengthen their friendship that Summer; to take more of an interest in stuff Hermione was interested in, to pay equal attention to her as he did to Ron. And it had worked thanks in part to Hermione's inclusion in his lessons and her sponsorship under the House of Black.

But all the extra time with her and driven home to him that she was a girl. A girl he might even *like* like; one that he could imagine kissing. And the bonus was that she knew him, the real him.
Harry threw his towel in the laundry fitfully and hurried into his bedroom to pull on his pyjamas and get into bed. He switched the lamp off and snuggled under the duvet.

The problem was while he realised he might like Hermione enough for him to consider her as a potential girlfriend, he really had no idea how she felt about him. He didn't think she thought about Harry as a potential boyfriend. And why would she, Harry thought morosely. Maybe knowing the real him meant knowing he wasn't anything special. Intellectually, he definitely wasn't Hermione's equal although he thought she approved of his new studying habits. Physically, he was small – one of the smallest boys in his year – and although his exercise regime meant that he was muscled, he had a runner's build rather than a boxer's. His appearance had improved with new clothes and glasses, but he still wore glasses and had the disfiguring scar. His hair was always a mess…

He sighed and turned over, pressing his face into the pillow.

Even if Hermione did like him or would consider going out with him, could he afford to have a girlfriend? Merlin, he was getting death threats. And there was the Treasure Hunt…and overshadowing everything was the prophecy and an eventual showdown with Voldemort. If he and Hermione dated, he would be putting her at risk and…

His whole body tensed at the thought of her being in danger because of him.

Well, any more danger since it was dangerous enough being Harry Potter's friend.

He turned over again, restless and sat up abruptly, reaching for the light.

For a long moment, he stared at the wall opposite before he shook himself and decided to practise his animagus meditation. He had read everything about how to achieve the meditative state required to see his potential forms but he hadn't tried it before and his Aunt Minerva had said that it could take weeks or months before it happened. He rearranged his position, shifting into a cross-legged but comfortable pose, using the breathing techniques he'd learned in his Occlumency training to relax and sink into a meditative state…

Slowly his awareness of the room around him disappeared and he found himself floating in a white cloud of endless space; his body weightless as his mind drifted…

There was something flying up ahead.

A dark speck on the horizon and Harry willed himself to follow it, flying freely, the wind blowing through his hair and across his skin. The speck turned into a bird – a raven, Harry realised. They played for a while dipping and diving before the raven flew downwards towards a clearing. It landed on a rock and Harry suddenly found himself on the ground.

"Hello, Raven." Harry said nervously. Was he supposed to talk to his animagus form? Was this his only one? Was it actually one of his forms or just something stuck in his head because of Luna?

The raven cocked its head to one side and peered at him.

A movement beside the rock surprised him and a green mottled snake uncurled, rising, its hood flaring.

"Hi." Harry said to the snake, not wanting to appear rude since he'd already said hello to the raven.

"Hello, Speaker." The snake hissed. "The Seer guided you to Raven and so you found your way. The others will appear soon."
A lion stalked out of the high grass behind the rock and lay down at Harry's feet; a black puppy similar to Sirius's form padded in from the forest side by side with a black wolf cub. And finally, a black stallion walked out of the trees, a white lightning bolt upon its forehead.

"We all represent who you are, Harry James Potter." The snake informed him.

Harry nodded. He was surprised by the number of pack animals, he realised. Lions usually had prides; the stallion would have a herd; the wolf and dog, a pack. The lion and the stallion probably also indicated his leadership potential. He wasn't sure whether the wolf or dog would be an Alpha – and was the dog a Grim like Sirius? Did Grims have packs and Alphas?

He took a deep breath and moved towards the puppy.

It immediately perked up and ambled up to him, rubbing its head against Harry's hand as he tickled it. It seemed openly affectionate, eager, playful and lovable. Harry laughed at the puppy's antics as it left him to chase after a butterfly. He remembered how his Aunt Minerva had talked about him turning into a puppy when he was a baby. That's who the puppy represented, Harry realised; his baby self.

Well, he wasn't a puppy anymore and he moved on despite the aching disappointment of knowing that he wouldn't change into something close to Sirius's form.

The wolf cub slunk closer, suspicious as it sniffed Harry's hand and gradually it relaxed as Harry petted it. He once again recalled his discussions on the forms that might be available to him and how his Aunt Minerva had indicated a wolf was a possibility because of Harry's relationship with Remus; he was part of Remus's pack. But it wasn't just that, Harry thought, as he registered the thin wiry body of the wolf beneath its short black fur; the wolf represented the part of him that wanted family and pack, to belong. It represented the wounded animal he had been at the Dursleys, half-starved for food and affection. Harry hugged the wolf closer but knew he would never change into it. He was part of a pack now; part of a family; he wasn't the lone wolf any longer.

The stallion was the next to approach. Harry rubbed its nose and gazed into its dark eyes. The stallion would protect and defend his herd, yet it retained a wild spirit that embraced freedom and whose spirit wouldn't be broken. The stallion was the representation of the leader Harry hoped to be, Harry realised. Some echo of the stag his father had been yet different enough to make his own mark. But he wasn't there yet; the stallion represented his potential, the man he wanted to become.

The horse delicately snorted and bumped its nose against Harry before it backed away, returning to the trees.

The lion padded over next. It obviously represented his courage and bravery, both the leader of the pride or the nomad outcast, nobility – the latent Gryffindor inside of him.

But he wasn't just a Gryffindor.

His eyes flickered to the snake which no doubt represented his inner Slytherin; the desire to prove himself, the ambition that burned within him to excel and win; the cunning that had enabled him to survive the Dursleys...

But he was neither one nor the other. He was both. He had once chosen to be a Gryffindor but stood in front of both animals he couldn't deny either of them.

The snake hissed lowly and sank back into its coils, its hood lowered.
The raven cawed and drew his attention. Harry held out his hand and the raven flew to him.

"I hoped for a flying form." He told the bird as it looked at him with surprisingly intelligent eyes. What had Luna said to him the raven represented?

A trickster...like the snake.

A warrior...like the lion.

A defender; a bird that flew free, spirit unbroken...like the horse.

A bird that played with...wolves and dogs.

"You represent all of me." Harry realised out loud. "You're my true self. That's what Luna Saw...she Saw you...me..."

The raven spread its wings and everything went black...

"Harry!" Sirius's panicked voice yanked Harry back to consciousness. He blinked hard and was surprised to see Sirius looming over him – he looked huge. And why was Hedwig, who was perched on Sirius's shoulder, so big?

What was going on?

Harry opened his mouth to ask and squawked.

He squawked! Harry moved and immediately lost his balance; he flailed his arms and caught sight of black wings.

Oh Merlin!

He'd turned into his animagus form! Hedwig landed beside him and propped him up.

"Don't panic!" Sirius said hurriedly as Remus entered, his mouth dropping open in shock. "I can fix you!" He drew his wand and shouted a spell.

Harry fought with his animal instinct not to follow Hedwig into flight and flee from the light zooming towards him. He felt the spell hit and cried out as his body began to transform back painfully.

He lay on his bed, panting in the aftermath.

"I'll get some pain relief potion." Remus said, leaving again swiftly.

Sirius ran a hand over Harry's hair. "Sorry, Harry. I know that spell hurts but it was the only way to change you back quickly."

Harry nodded. "I didn't mean to change! I was just meditating and then..."

"And then you found your form." Sirius smiled at him. "You always were a natural. We should have suspected the meditation might lead to this."

Harry nodded. "I saw the puppy."

"You did?" Sirius brightened. "You should have seen your Dad's face! He was more annoyed that you weren't a stag than the fact that you'd managed to transfigure yourself."
"I had the option of a horse – a wild stallion." Harry said quietly. "And a wolf."

"No cat?" asked Sirius teasingly although his grey eyes were wide with shock. "Minnie will be disappointed."

"A lion." Harry said. "There was also a snake."

"So many…" murmured Sirius, his brow lowering in concern.

Harry explained what he thought each animal represented – Remus turned up half-way through and Harry downed the pain relief potion gratefully before he concluded with why he'd gone with the raven form.

"It suits you, Harry." Remus agreed. "I think you probably owe Miss Lovegood a thank you for showing you the way. My only concern really is how you're going to learn to fly as you master your form."

As though she'd heard them, Hedwig barked from her perch across the room.

"Well, there's an offer I don't think you can refuse." Sirius said brightly.

Harry laughed. "Thanks, Hedwig."

Hedwig barked again and stuck her head under her wing.

"And that I think is her hinting we should all get some sleep. Busy day tomorrow with the Quidditch match." Sirius leaned over and kissed Harry's forehead. "No more animagus meditating unless we're in the room with you. Goodnight, Harry."

Remus ruffled his hair. "Goodnight, Harry."

Harry nodded. He watched as they both left, turning the lights out as they went. He'd found his animagus form! He fell asleep with a wide smile on his face and dreamed of flying, free and happy.
Sirius cast a glance towards Minerva across the reception room in Black Manor and sighed.

She looked like a cat which had caught a canary. She had positively glowed since Harry had told her about the night before and his animagus meditation. She also seemed very happy about his form, complimenting him on turning down the more sentimental and likeable forms for that of his raven. She had told him the form was a very practical one with the added bonus that it would give Harry the ability to truly fly. She was as proud as punch and hadn't stopped smiling smugly.

Frankly, Sirius had been completely unnerved by the whole experience and silently apologised to James for having laughed at him when he’d found Harry in the puppy form as a baby. It hadn't helped that it had been Hedwig who had alerted Sirius that there was a problem, flying in through his open study door and dive-bombing him, yanking his robes with her talons to get him up and moving to Harry. His heart had been pounding fast enough to win the Derby by the time he’d made it to Harry's room. Thank Merlin he knew the spell to force an animagus back into human form.

He could admit to a little disappointment that Harry hadn't chosen his puppy form but his explanation of the different representations had made sense. He was sad that Harry was no longer the happy-go-lucky chap who embodied the puppy but he was also happy that Harry was no longer the lonely wolf cub that longed for a pack.

He would need to read up on ravens, thought Sirius. Both he and Remus would need to know how to deal with a young raven. Not to mention they needed to come up with a Marauder name; Pronglet was clearly not applicable since a stag wasn't even an option for Harry but he hated to give up the name since it was the one James had approved of for his son. What could he call a raven? Blackie? Corvus? Wings?

He sighed and cleared his throat as Simeon and Anna finally arrived with Jason bundled into some muggle sling contraption that Simeon wore. Everybody had finally arrived: the Grangers, the Tonks (minus Dora who was on duty), the Longbottoms, Remus, Minerva, and the Blacks. The Malfoys were making their own way to the match as were the Weasleys. Everyone wore comfortable muggle clothing since the match was taking place near muggles; the teenagers wore jeans, t-shirts and light jackets for the most part; the younger adults wore a variation but Minerva and Augusta had stuck with long tweed skirts and blazers teamed with high-necked blouses.

Sirius whistled to get everyone's attention and smiled back at the happy faces in front of him. "OK! Our portkey leaves in five minutes! We have two hours before it begins so plenty of time to browse round the souvenir stalls and meet up with friends. Please stay with your designated buddies! We will convene in the Black box half an hour before the match. After the match, assuming there is time, we will make our way to the Potter Alliance After-Match Party in the designated tent. The portkey home leaves at ten o'clock. Any questions?"

Hermione raised her hand.

Sirius motioned at her. "When are we meeting up with the Weasleys?" asked Hermione politely, lowering her arm.

"I though those interested could head to their tent when we arrive." Sirius said. Despite confiding the intelligence that they knew there would be a Death Eater attack at midnight, Arthur had elected to stay overnight as he had previously planned. He had understood Sirius's decision not to allow Harry
to stay though especially after the death threat at the Longbottoms.

He handed out the rope portkey and carefully checked that everybody had a hand on it. Harry grinned at him from his position next to Sirius, sandwiched between him and Remus. He had been ecstatic that they’d still attend after the second death threat and Sirius hoped he’d made the right decision.

It would be fine, Sirius thought determinedly. The trouble wasn't due to start until midnight and Harry would be safely tucked up in bed at Griffin House by then. But the nagging voice in his head warned him to be careful and reminded him that Lucius had suggested it was someone outside of the old Death Eater circle – someone they couldn't control – someone who might not wait for the midnight hour.

He’d had Bill agree to meet them and guard their arrival at the portkey site just in case.

Sirius kept one hand on Harry's shoulder and Remus moved to do the same as the portkey activated. Harry had gotten used to floo travel, mostly because Andy had made him floo back and forth between Black Manor and Griffin House endlessly for over an hour, but he couldn't keep his feet with portkeys. So it proved as they landed at the portkey site within the World Cup stadium; Harry's feet weren't beneath him and only Remus and Sirius held him up.

Sirius exchanged a nod of 'all clear' with Bill who had his brother Charlie with him.

"Sorry." Harry muttered to Sirius as he regained his balance.

"Not a problem, Pronglet." Sirius frowned as the issue of the name came back to him.

Harry’s face creased in concern. "What's wrong?" He murmured, keeping his voice low so it didn't travel to the others.

"Your animagus form doesn't exactly match-up with Pronglet." Sirius whispered.

"Oh." Harry's expression cleared but there was a hint of worry in his green eyes. "I guess not."

Sirius patted his arm. "Don't worry, Moony and I will come up with something."

"Yeah," drawled Harry with a mischievous quirk to his lips, "I think that's kind of a guarantee for me to worry."

"Hey!" Sirius sniffed. "We came up with…"

"Prongs," supplied Harry, "which I know my Dad hated because it said so in his journal. And while we don't mention the rat…"

Sirius grimaced because Harry was right; Prongs had hated Prongs mainly because Sirius had made up a limerick including Prongs, pongs and thongs which had been funny at the time. Of course, Prongs had changed his mind in their seventh year when everything had been lovely because he'd finally gotten Lily and she had loved the name. Wormtail had argued for days about Wormtail.

Remus cleared his throat and they both looked up to realise that the rest of their party was viewing them with a range of expressions from amusement (Remus) to exasperation (Minerva) to impatience (Hermione).

"Lord Potter, Lord Black; if you and your group could please vacate the portkey area." A polite voice advised them and they turned in unison to see a brightly smiling woman with a clipboard. "The
Minister is waiting to greet you in the antechamber."

Sirius nodded and slung an arm around Harry's shoulders as he marched them to their doom – uh, Cornelius.

"Sirius! Harry!" Cornelius's smile could have lit up the stadium. "Ah, excellent! You're here! May I introduce you to the Irish Minister of Magic, Madame Derry and the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, Mister Oblansk…" he stuttered over the pronunciation and threw his counterpart an apologetic smile, "this is Lord Sirius Black and Lord Harry Potter."

A statuesque brunette in smart muggle clothing of a green suit with a crisp white shirt and an orange silk scarf stuck her hand out with an expression that said kissing her knuckles would lead to him getting them back as a fist.

Sirius shook hands solemnly rather than turning on the charm. "Madame." He was pleased when Harry followed his example after a quick look at Andromeda.

The petite man beside Derry encased in black robes with gold trim and the crest of Bulgaria adorning his right breast held out his hand which Sirius and Harry shook in turn.

"Honour to meet you." Oblansk said politely.

Cornelius's eyebrows shot up. "You know English!"

"Leetle." Oblansk replied gruffly.

Sirius hastily stepped in and offered to introduce the rest of the Black party. Thankfully, Remus greeted the Bulgarian Minister in flawless Bulgarian and translated through the rest of the introductions.

"Are the Malfoys not with you?" asked Cornelius, glancing around.

"They were coming separately as they're hosting Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini." Sirius replied. "We thought we'd have a look around before we head into our box for the game."

"You and Harry are more than welcome to spend the game in the Ministry box, Sirius." Cornelius urged.

Sirius smiled tightly. "Thank you, Cornelius, but given the current situation I'd prefer Harry to remain in a box where I control the wards."

"Of course, of course." Cornelius said smoothly. "Terrible business." He gave Augusta a look of concern. "How are you, Augusta, after the shock?"

"Ready to hex whoever did it bald." Augusta replied sternly.

"A woman after my own heart," Derry said with a sing-sing Irish lilt that contrasted with the fierce expression on her handsome face.

Sirius only just managed not to laugh at Cornelius's taken aback expression.

"Perhaps we should be getting along, Gran. We have to go and say hello to the rest of the alliance."

Neville offered his grandmother his arm and led her out with aplomb.

"We should head out too." Sirius said.
Cornelius motioned for Sirius to step aside a moment and Sirius was pleased when Minerva stepped forward to stand with Harry to talk to Derry since the Bulgarian Minister hadn't stopped talking with Remus.

"May I ask a favour?" asked Cornelius with a touch of desperation. "Crouch forgot to order a translator from the Embassy. Bagman didn't think of it either since Bertha is still AWOL."

"Still?" Sirius shook his head. Trust Jorkins to get lost on vacation – but then, hadn't Remus said that Arthur had mentioned her going missing in July? Surely it was time to think there was foul play or, knowing the young girl Bertha had been, a clumsy accident resulting in a hospital stay…

"Anyway, could we possibly borrow Mister Lupin?" Cornelius said shifting from a hint to outright desperation.

Sirius sighed. "You will owe me, Cornelius." He walked over to Remus and Oblansk or Bogdan as Remus was calling him. "Remus, there's been an administrative snafu and the Minister has been left without a Bulgarian translator. I'd be grateful if you would consent to help the Ministers for the rest of the day?"

"What about Harry?" asked Remus with a frown.

"I can stick with Harry." Bill offered immediately.

"Thanks, Bill." Sirius said. His eyes hopefully conveyed the message that Remus should take the gig; it would help with the Werewolf Legislation and make Cornelius indebted to them.

"In that case, I would be delighted." Remus gave a short bow to Cornelius before translating for Bogdan who broke into a wide and somewhat Marauder-ish grin. Sirius had a feeling that whatever Remus and Bogdan would discuss would be translated as something completely different for Cornelius.

Sirius and Harry said their goodbyes to Remus and the Ministers and Sirius led the rest of the group out of the antechamber and through the stadium out into the surrounding grounds. The Tonks' decided to browse the stalls with Simeon and his wife, leaving the Grangers and Minerva with Sirius and Harry.

"So where is your Dad's tent at, Bill?" Sirius asked, his wand was in his hand, his free hand on Harry's shoulder and he was already assessing the threat of the milling populace around them.

"This way." Bill said with an easy smile. "Charlie, why don't you bring up the rear with Professor McGonagall?"

Charlie nodded easily. "I can do that."

Sirius approved that they all had their wands out and ready. Hermione's parents stayed behind Sirius and Harry but Hermione moved to walk on Harry's other side. She chattered nervously about the crowd and the colourful banners adorning some of the tents as they made their way through a veritable village of the things until they reached a purple and pink monstrosity.

Bill grinned at their faces. "Welcome to Chez Weasley."

"Colourful," commented Sirius straight-faced. "Remind me again…are purple and pink Bulgarian colours or Irish?"

"You guys go on in, Charlie and I will stay out and guard." Bill said after they'd all finished
laughing.

"How are we all going to fit?" asked Miriam worriedly.

"Magic." Bill promised Hermione's Mum with a wink.

Sirius nodded and he exchanged a serious look with the Weasley Heir to convey the gravity of Bill's job guarding them. He sighed as he ushered Harry, the Grangers and Minerva through the open flap.

He couldn't help thinking he'd made a mistake; that they should have stayed home. It was a slow feeling of dread sinking into his bones and putting him on edge.

Can't wrap Harry in cotton wool, Sirius told himself sternly. It was going to be OK.

It was.

o-O-o

Hermione stood speechless in the centre of what appeared to be a living room; her father stood next to her, open-mouthed. Her mother was whirling about like a mad thing.

"Look, it's bigger on the inside than on the outside!" Her mother waggled her eyebrows at Hermione.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Mum, please!"

"Ah, you're here! Lovely to have you all!" Arthur Weasley emerged from the kitchen – the kitchen! – and waved a frying pan at them. "I don't suppose any of you know how to work one of these?"

"Don't look at me!" Sirius held up both hands in supplication. "I could burn the place down."

Harry grinned and gestured at the frying pan. "I'm a dab hand."

Arthur beamed at him and handed him the pan. "Ron's back there too." He held out his hand to Miriam Granger. "Good to see you again."

"Good to see you too, Arthur, or should that be Doctor?"

Hermione quickly followed Harry into the kitchen before her Mum could begin explaining Doctor Who to the wizards.

Ron was poking at the stove in a desultory fashion before he noticed them and smiled, cheering up slightly. "Guys!" He looked at them hopefully. "Do either of you know how to turn this on?"

"Move over, Ron." Harry pushed him out of the way of the appliance and with a few checks quickly had the grill turned on and a burner lit. Sausages went under the grill; bacon into the frying pan.

Ron looked at Hermione who shrugged.

"I'm good with desserts and as a sous chef," offered Hermione, "but I've never made breakfast before." She leaned against the small kitchen table. "Why are you having breakfast now anyway? Didn't your Mum feed you this morning?"

Ron shook his hair, the red catching the artificial light. "Dad thought it was better to come last night and beat the crowds otherwise we'd have had to set out at some horrendously early hour for a portkey. It worked out fine until all of us got up this morning and realised that we don't know how to
cook in this kitchen and Mum didn't come!"

"I thought Ginny helped your Mum out usually." Harry said, handing them the loaf of bread with a muttered instruction to slice it. "Where's Ginny at anyway?"

"Celia Inglebee promised Mum to keep an eye on her. She went off first thing with her and Lydia to do something girly!" Ron sounded totally disgusted but he took the breadknife and carefully started slicing rather thick slices of the homemade bread. "And she said she wasn't cooking just because she was the girl!"

Hermione frowned at him. "She's right; she shouldn't have to cook just because she's female! My Mum and Dad share cooking duty. I would hope anyone I ended up with didn't expect me to be barefoot and pregnant, chained to kitchen sink."

Harry chuckled, handing her knife and pointing her at the mushrooms. "As if you'd ever end up with someone like that."

Ron paused in his slicing. "My Mum stayed at home and brought us all up. There's nothing wrong with it!"

"No, there's nothing wrong with it. It's a perfectly valid choice," Hermione said with a sniff, "it's just not my choice!"

"Are you insulting my mother because…" Ron said heatedly, his redheaded temper igniting because he hadn't listened to her.

"No!" declared Hermione hurriedly. "Of course I'm not insulting your mother!"

"It sounded like you were!" Ron waved the knife at her.

"Hey!" Harry intervened, tapping Ron's hand gently. "No waving sharp implements around! Hermione wasn't insulting your Mum, Ron. Keeping a home and raising kids is an important job and if your Mum wants to do that, then that's good. But can you really see Hermione making that same choice?"

Ron looked at them both slightly bewildered. "But why not?"

And this, thought Hermione with a sigh, was why Ronald Weasley would never be her boyfriend any time soon.

"Hermione wants to be a Healer, Ron, remember?" Harry flicked Ron's forehead.

"Oh! Right!" Ron said, turning back to the bread. "Why didn't you just say so?"

Hermione held her tongue and counted to ten. Ron was short-tempered because he was hungry. If she kept being irritated by everything he said, they'd have a rotten day and she didn't want that. She glanced over at Harry who gestured at the mushrooms.

"They're not going to chop themselves."

Hermione stuck her tongue out as Harry turned deftly back to the stove. A warming plate went under the grill when he took a moment to turn the sausages. He moved again and a second burner was lit and he competently made scrambled eggs.

"By the way, thanks for the shout-out in the article, mate." Ron said happily. "They even spelled my
"Sirius approved it all last night after dinner." Harry stopped cooking for a second to make a disgusted face. "I hated doing the interview."

"All three articles came out really well though, Harry." Hermione assured him, passing him the mushrooms.

"There were three?" inquired Ron, surprised. "We only saw Skeeter's in the Prophet."

"Skeeter took the most…sensationalist approach," she darted a look to Harry who snorted, "it was factually accurate but she led with Harry's comments about his parents and had the picture of him looking…well…"

Skeeter had used one particular photo of Harry clearly holding back tears.

"Wimpish." Ron supplied.

Harry went red and his motions as he transferred the eggs to the warming plate along with the cooked bacon before adding tomatoes and mushrooms to the empty frying pan were stiff and sharp.

"I was going to say upset." Hermione said briskly and decided to move on. "The Quibbler took the most straightforward approach – a nice picture of Harry and Sirius – and a question and answer approach. The International Wizarding Herald was the most political – it's obviously got it in for Professor Dumbledore and the British Ministry."

"So my prediction is in the international press as well?" Ron grinned. "Wicked!"

"Never mind the article," Harry said suddenly, obviously deciding a change of subject was in order which given he hated publicity Hermione wasn't surprised, "something happened last night that I have to tell you guys."

Hermione and Ron immediately inched closer to their friend and exchanged a hopeful look. They knew there were things Harry wasn't telling them both and they understood to some degree, but he'd always told them and it had always been the three of them on their adventures, and it hurt that he was keeping secrets.

He grinned at them. "I tried an animagus meditation last night!"

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "No!"

"Yes!" Harry continued to grin. "And I saw my form!"

"Blimey, Harry!" Ron muttered, slumping back against the table. "I didn't even know you wanted to be an animagus!"

Harry gestured at him. "I convinced Sirius to let me try because I want to be there for Remus and he only agreed if Aunt Minerva agreed so…I've only just started. But I was thinking…" his green eyes met theirs tentatively, "I was thinking we could all do it? I mean, it's a good defence if you do come across a werewolf and it gives you a useful way out if you're in a sticky situation."

"I'd love to!" Hermione said immediately. She was sure her parents would agree especially if Professor McGonagall was on board.

"I don't know," Ron said uncertainly, gesturing with the knife, "I mean, you have to be a powerful
wizard to become an animagus and I don't think I...you know Transfiguration's not exactly my subject."

"Nonsense, Ron!" Hermione said as Harry plucked the knife from Ron's hands and placed it safely on the table, muttering something about it taking an eye out.

"If the rat can do it, you can." Harry said firmly.

Ron brightened, apparently not bothered by the comparison to Pettigrew although Hermione suspected if she'd made the comment, he'd have erupted.

"So, what's your form?" asked Ron eagerly.

"Yes," echoed Hermione, desperate to know, "did you really see your form? What was it?"

Harry took a moment to check the food before turning back to them. "You can't tell anyone ever. Sirius wants me to keep it a secret."

They both nodded in understanding.

He broke into another smile that lit up his whole face. "A raven."

"A raven?" Hermione immediately ran through the attributes of a raven in her head and wondered at how apt a form it was for Harry. "That's wonderful!"

"It is?" Ron asked.

Hermione kicked him and then glared at him for good measure.

"I mean, it is." Ron hastened to say.

"You'll be able to fly!" Hermione said authoritatively. "And ravens are known for their cleverness and problem solving, Harry." She frowned. "I've never understood why the totem for Ravenclaw was an eagle when a raven would have been better."

"But Harry's a lion! A Gryffindor!" Ron protested. He picked up a slice of bread and started munching on it. "Why would he be a raven?"

"Hey, standing right here!" Harry pointed out. He checked on the sausages and turned the mushrooms and tomatoes.

"Sorry, mate." Ron said insincerely. "Just...I get the flying but a raven's not a lion. I want to be something big and powerful."

"And totally useless." Hermione pointed out exasperated with him. "A raven can fly anywhere undetected. It can spy easily. It can get in and out of places quickly. It's a great form!"

"A lion is a better form!" argued Ron. "It can take down a man and scare any attackers!"

"I wanted a flying form." Harry interjected before Hermione could continue the argument. "And I've chosen the form now so that's that. No lion for me, Ron, so you can be the lion."

Ron smiled happily. "Maybe I will, mate."

Hermione refrained from rolling her eyes.
"This is about ready." Harry said, dishing up the tomatoes and mushrooms. "The sausages just need another few minutes."

"I can't believe you found your form so quickly." Hermione praised him, folding her arms. "It's supposed to be quite hard to reach the meditative state required."

"Meditation?" Ron's face dropped. "I'm screwed then."

"Or there's a potion." Hermione informed him crisply. "But you don't get to choose your form with the potion. You turn into your form – whichever one best suits your personality at that point in time. The meditation technique is supposed to give you more options but it is more difficult." She wondered at what the other forms Harry might have had.

Harry shrugged and smiled again softly. "I think I only achieved the meditation thanks to Luna. She kind of showed me the way."

"Luna?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Luna Lovegood." Harry said, moving back to the stove to get the sausages from under the grill.

"You don't mean Looney?" Ron spluttered around a mouthful of bread.

"Oy!" Harry waved a spatula at Ron. "She has a name! Anyway, this is done. Why don't you go get your brothers and your Dad?"

Ron heaved a self-suffering sigh and left the kitchen,

Of course, the Lovegoods owned The Quibbler and Luna must have accompanied her father, Hermione thought slightly miserable at how happy Harry had seemed in mentioning the other girl. She tried to remember what Luna looked like and came up with blonde and pretty but not conventionally pretty, prettier than Hermione since she didn't have awfully big front teeth and bushy uncontrollable hair.

She bit her lip and rubbed her arms.

Hadn't she decided she wasn't going to do this? She wasn't going to crush on Harry or think about him as a potential boyfriend. She wasn't.

Even if Harry would make a great boyfriend.

Even if Harry was very sweet with her.

Even if she might possibly want Harry as a boyfriend.

The plastic kitchen door slapped against the plastic wall and the Weasley twins barrelled in along with Ron.

"Harry, Dad says can you put a plate together for Bill and Charlie and him?" Ron said sitting down at the table.

Hermione scowled. She had a feeling Ron had probably been asked and it was so like him to push the task off onto someone else. She opened her mouth to argue, caught Harry's eye and his silent message not to say anything and subsided with a huff.

"What about Percy?" asked Harry.
"He's off doing Ministry stuff." Ron shrugged unconcerned.

"This is great, Harry." Fred said.

"You'll make someone a lovely wife." George agreed.

Harry whacked George with the back of a wooden spoon.

"Ow!" George exclaimed, rubbing his upper arm where Harry had landed the blow with an exaggerated pout.

"He's got the Mum thing down too!" Fred pointed out and dodged when Harry threatened him with the spoon next.

Hermione couldn't help giggling at the good-natured teasing and Harry's pleasure at the underlying praise.

"You guys took a look around outside?" Harry asked as he put breakfast sandwiches together for Arthur, Bill and Charlie.

"Yeah, it's mad out there!" Fred exclaimed. "You'll never guess who we ran into? Bagman!"

"He was taking bets." George confided.

Hermione frowned at their twin expressions of glee. "Oh, you didn't?"

"Didn't what?" asked Ron, scooping up more mushrooms since Harry had finished with the serving spoon.

"Bet." Hermione said succinctly. She turned to look at the twins. "What would your Mum say?"

"I reckon she'd be talking with the wooden spoon." Fred admitted.

George nodded. "But…she's not here…"

"And we need money…"

"For the joke shop."

It was Harry's turn to frown at them. "I thought Remus said we'd invest if you got your NEWTs."

Fred and George looked to each other before they turned back to Harry.

"We just want…"

"To put in our own share and…"

"Do our bit."

Harry sighed but nodded in the face of their unwavering conviction. He raised the plate he held. "I'd better take this out before it gets cold."

"It's a good thing you wanting to contribute," Hermione began lecturing them as Harry disappeared into the front room, "but really betting?"

"You have to risk something…"
"If you want something." Fred concluded.

"Mum is going to freak." Ron pointed out, stabbing another sausage.

"Which is why nobody…"

"Is going to tell her."

The twins looked hard at their younger brother.

Ron swallowed and gestured at his brothers. "I'm not going to tell her but she'll still know. She's Mum."

Hermione's response was forgotten as Ginny and Lydia Inglebee entered. Their faces were painted in motifs symbolising Ireland; Ginny had gone for a fairly sedate green four leaf clover on her left cheek while Lydia had a sparkling rainbow arching into a small heap of glittering gold galleons. Hermione's eyebrows rose.

"Ooh, breakfast!" Lydia said, hurrying over to the table.

"Oy, get your own!" Ron complained. "Harry made this for us!"

"Harry made this?" Lydia giggled and nudged Ginny. "Isn't he awesome? He can cook!"

"Awesome!" Fred and George parroted, batting their eyelashes in unison as they mocked the girls.

"Behave!" Ginny threatened as she sat down and helped herself to food. "Lydia's our guest."

Hermione rubbed her head. Was she getting a headache?

Harry entered the kitchen and froze at the sight of Lydia and Ginny. Hermione felt a twinge of sympathy. It was probably his worst nightmare – well, beyond the whole thing with Voldemort and even then she wasn't too sure that he wouldn't prefer to have another confrontation with the evil wizard rather than face the two girls with the most obvious crushes on him ganging up together.

"Hi, Harry!" Lydia smiled at him widely.

"Hi, how are you doing, Lydia?" Harry asked politely as he quickly took up a position by Hermione. She suspected he was intending to use her as a human shield.

Lydia shot Hermione a disgruntled look. "I'm good. This food looks amazing."

"I didn't know you could cook, Harry." Ginny followed up, evidently taking courage from Lydia's blatant flirting to actually talk with Harry.

"Hmm, yeah," Harry pulled on Hermione's arm and sent a desperate look to Ron, "we should…"

"Check out the stalls while this lot finish breakfast and do clean-up." Hermione declared briskly. "You're very right, Harry. Let's go get Sirius and my parents. Ron?"

Ron picked up a final slice of bread, swiped it across his plate and pushed the whole thing in his mouth. He made a muffled sound which might have meant 'let's go.'

Hermione shot Harry a look of exasperated fondness at Ron's behaviour and he sent one back warm with affection and gratitude at her getting him away from the awkwardness of Lydia and Ginny. She
felt a thrill of delight and happiness, and ignored the heated looks of jealousy emanating from the girls left behind in the kitchen.

o-O-o

Remus laughed at Bogdan's latest joke about Cornelius and turned to translate something funny but not related to the British Minister to the man in question.

In part he didn't mind the change of plans. Madame Derry – 'call me Kate' – was a lovely astute woman with forthright opinions and the Bulgarian Minister was a very intelligent and witty man. Both had expressed a deep appreciation of Cornelius's political acumen, but disappointment overall in the British foreign policy (which was effectively to ignore the rest of the world and progress elsewhere for fear it might contaminate Britain – Remus was going to have to discuss it with Sirius because politically they too had ignored the international arena for cleaning house at home first and it might be a mistake to ignore it for long). Both had also expressed amusement over Cornelius's attempts to engage Bogdan in conversation through mime and simply talking louder (as though volume would assist in understanding). Bogdan actually spoke reasonable English but a translator helped to avoid the embarrassing errors that neither Minister wanted to make on an international stage.

Remus was content enough – he had good company and the Ministry Box was resplendent. A very comfortable space with leather seats for comfort, as much drink and food as they could possibly want and a great view of the pitch as they were at eye level with the players. Yet he couldn't quite shake his worry about Harry.

He knew Sirius would never have agreed if he hadn't been OK in Remus leaving protection duty for Harry to do something else but still Remus felt that he'd let Sirius and Harry down in agreeing. Or rather his wolf felt he'd let them down. It was fairly screaming at him that he should be with his pack.

Remus sighed and wrestled the wolf back once more with practiced patience. He could understand the wolf's unease.

Harry had received death threats. Not just the one on his birthday but another and the perpetrator remained at large and hiding behind a house elf of all things. They knew it had to be someone on the list of party attendees but nobody was ever going to give permission for the entire Wizengamot and the most senior Ministry officials to be compelled to take veritaserum for questioning.

What was more worrying was that whoever it was seemed to be operating in isolation. Neither Severus nor Lucius nor Bertie's spy had gotten wind of a plot to terrorise Harry – well, beyond the likely ritual they believed Voldemort was planning. But that ritual was to be performed on the eve of the Summer solstice and terrorising Harry now made no sense. Then again, when had anything to do with Voldemort ever made sense?

He rubbed his right temple thoughtfully.

"Is everything OK, my friend?" Bogdan asked concerned in Bulgarian.

"I'm just thinking about my friend's son," Remus said apologetically. "I am anxious given recent events."

"Ah, yes. I read the article in the International Wizarding Herald. It is shocking that someone so young can be targeted so horrifically." Bogdan smiled at him. "If you wish to take a break and check
on young Lord Potter I will cope for a few minutes alone."

"You may but others will not." Remus turned to Cornelius who had started anxiously as the two had exchanged words. "Nothing to worry about, Minister, we were just commenting about the article in the Herald on Harry."

"Kurt is a good reporter." Kate said briskly.

"I'm afraid I didn't get a chance to read the Herald this morning but the article in the Prophet was well done by Rita as always." Cornelius said. "I was thinking perhaps we should have a day of remembrance for the Potters."

"It's a nice thought but I'm not sure it's what Harry had in mind." Remus said diplomatically. "We were actually discussing the death threats."

"A terrible business but I have confidence Amelia will get to the bottom of it." Cornelius said forcefully.

Bogdan nodded. "Eet is good to hear. Child should not be target."

Kate nodded her agreement. "It is a shame for the lad."

Cornelius smiled at them. "I couldn't agree with you more. Unfortunately, Harry's unique status makes him more of a target than I think any of us would wish on the poor boy."

Remus checked his watch. The match was about to start. He glanced over the box and was surprised at the empty seats. He guessed some of the Wizengamot and eligible Ministry staff hadn't taken up their tickets. Crouch was missing too which was a surprise since he had helped secure the World Cup as an event for Britain. Bagman was commentating so that wasn't a surprise.

A sudden sound at the door had them all turning and he wasn't surprised when the Weasleys, excepting Ron and Bill, hurried into the box and took their seats. He noticed Percy frowned at the absent Crouch's seat before taking his own.

Arthur hurried over and was introduced to the foreign Ministers by Cornelius, assisted by Remus.

Kate smiled warmly. "I would be happy to meet with you and discuss how we deal with muggles in Ireland."

Arthur smiled. "I'd like that."

Bogdan turned to Remus and switched back to Bulgarian. "Please inform him that we have a good relationship with our muggle counterparts and we would be happy to share how we have built trust and share information."

Remus translated for Arthur who said he would be delighted to meet them both at the first opportunity. A soft clearing of the throat behind Remus had him turning to look in surprise at Percy.

"I'm sorry, Mister Lupin, I couldn't help noticing you're translating," Percy said, with a frown, "Mister Crouch was insistent that he would translate."

"Well, if Barty wanted to translate he should be here!" Cornelius said sharply. "Mister Lupin has stepped in at short notice after his services were kindly offered by Lord Black. I'm sure I speak for Kate, Bogdan and myself that we are very happy with him."
Remus made a show of translating for the Bulgarian Minister but he had a feeling from the gleam in Bogdan's eye that he understood what had been said.

"Very happy." Bogdan said firmly.

"Mister Lupin has been a welcome addition to our party." Kate stated bluntly.

Percy immediately nodded subserviently. "Of course, my apologies. I was just concerned…"

"And so you should be, young Percy." Amos Diggory interrupted briskly having arrived in the box during Percy's approach. He gestured at Remus. "Cornelius, you are aware that Lupin is a registered werewolf? What are you doing letting such a creature near to any Heads of State?"

Cornelius drew himself up in the face of the criticism. "Amos, that is completely out of line. We are nowhere near the full moon. Remus is here at my request and he has been a complete boon to our discussions all day."

"Registered werewolves cannot be employed in the Ministry." Amos stated firmly, obviously believing the Bulgarian Minister couldn't understand him and apparently unaware that the dark haired lady next to him was the Irish Minister. "You know the law, Cornelius. I should have Lupin arrested but as you and Minister Oblansk are involved, I'll settle for Lupin making himself scarce."

Cornelius gaped in shock.

"Amos!" Arthur snapped. "You do realise you're insulting the Bulgarian Minister, our Minister, and the steward of two Ancient and Noble Houses! Lord Black and Lord Potter could challenge you on what you've said!"

"He's a werewolf!" Amos said firmly.

Remus felt the usual sick feeling in his gut from the immediate rejection and the look of disgust. It had happened to him often enough in his life. His nose scented alcohol on Amos's breath; the man had been drinking.

Amos glowered at Remus. "I don't want this creature in the same box as my son."

Remus sighed. "Perhaps it would be better if I left."

"Nonsense," Cornelius said, pinning Amos with a hard stare, "Mister Lupin isn't being employed by the Ministry and he isn't getting paid; he provided his services at the behest of Lord Black as a personal favour to me. There are no grounds for an arrest and, on the contrary, the only person I see causing a disturbance is you, Amos."

"I agree." Bogdan said gruffly. "You are about to cause an international incident. We do not have the same laws on verevolves and von of my guards is also verevolf." He gestured at the Bulgarian security detail behind him.

Amos paled.

"If you don't feel you can stay in the same box then you are welcome to find seats elsewhere." Kate said sternly. "We also don't have the same laws against werewolves and I am quite happy with Mister Lupin's presence whereas I begin to find yours unacceptable."

"What is going on?" Crouch said, interrupting. He must have entered while Amos had been denigrating him, Remus thought absently.
"Ah, there you are, Barty," Cornelius said, "Amos was just about to apologise to my guests and Mister Lupin for a misunderstanding."

Amos flushed but gave a short nod. "My apologies, Ministers." He said stiffly. "Mister Lupin, my apologies to the Houses of Black and Potter."

Kate simply glowered at Amos but Bogdan nodded an acknowledgement and Remus followed his example. Amos darted away just in time for his wife and son to enter and join him unaware of the hullabaloo he had caused.

"Well, I'm sure there's no harm done." Barty said officiously and pointed to the pitch where the mascots were being announced. "Shall we watch?"

"Would you prefer to take over translation duties?" Remus asked politely, remembering Percy's comment.

Barty shook his head. "If the Ministers don't mind I will leave them in your hands." He wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "I'm afraid I haven't been feeling all that well."

A whiff of something drifted over to Remus. His nose wrinkled and he frowned unable to place the scent because of the overlay of alcohol from Amos that lingered.

"You are still recovering after Vizard flu?" Bogdan frowned.

"You should see a new Healer." Kate advised.

"I quite agree, Barty." Cornelius said. "Or take some more time off. You know we need you in tip top shape for the...the thing at the end of October."

"Thank you all. I may just do that." Barty sat down in his seat and the Ministers took theirs. Remus sat down off to the side with the Bulgarian security detail. He sighed and turned his attention to the antics of the younger men trying to climb over the railings to get to the Bulgarian Veelas. He wondered if Harry was attempting the same...

O-O-o

The Black box was situated at playing level across the field from the Ministry box and it was probably only second to the Ministry box in its interior décor. The colours of the Black family crest of green and black dominated the walls but they were accented by Sirius's preferred Gryffindor red and gold on the comfortable seating – no plastic that made a bum go numb in seconds.

Ron was impressed. He lifted up his brand omniculars (and he fully intended to pay Harry back regardless of Harry's 'consider it your Christmas and birthday gift') and felt himself sway at the sight of the Veelas. He took a step toward the railing...

"Easy there, Ron." Bill grasped his shoulder and pulled him back. "I don't want to have to explain you diving over the edge to Mum and Dad."

Ron shook himself. He watched amused as Lucius Malfoy pulled his son away from the railing, Zabini was holding back Nott. Beside him, Harry had placed a hand on Neville's shoulder and was quietly talking to him seemingly holding him back but Harry himself seemed unaffected.

Hermione nudged Ron. "Harry must have some natural immunity." She sounded unusually pleased.

Jealousy stirred in Ron's gut and he hated it; hated himself for feeling jealous.
Since the Flying Incident and his talk with Bill, Ron had made a conscious effort not to be jealous of Harry. He knew in many respects Harry would have loved to have had Ron's life; two parents, a houseful of siblings and more love than Ron himself sometimes knew what to do with. But he couldn't quite help the envy at Harry's new clothes, the money, the fame, and the lifestyle Harry enjoyed.

Well, didn't so much enjoy as had. Ron knew Harry would have preferred to have dumped the fame and his status entirely if he could. And it wasn't as though Harry had an easy life what with the death threats and the ever present threat of something happening.

The trip to the basilisk had been horrible. Ginny had refused to see the mind healer despite her hysterics during the return visit to the Chamber. Their Dad and Bill had tried and failed to convince her to go and after the one and only session their Dad had dragged Ginny to, kicking and screaming all the way, the mind healer had said that forcing her wouldn't work. Ron himself had tried to talk Ginny into it, pointing out that he'd been scared down in the Chamber himself remembering how Lockhart had almost obliviated him and the horrible, horrible wait for Harry to come back; that if Ginny went to a session, maybe he'd go to one too. She hadn't gone for it. Ron had quietly thought that they should ask Harry to have a word. He was fairly certain only Harry would be able to get her to go.

At least, Ron mused, Ginny hadn't been caught up in the drama of Ron's third year. She'd actually settled into Gryffindor. All of the male Weasleys at Hogwarts had been under strict instructions to watch her and make sure that nothing similar to the Chamber happened again. Ron would be quite happy if nothing similar to the Chamber happened to him either – and he could do without a repeat of being dragged into the Shrieking Shack by a Grim.

Maybe Harry was right about the animagus training. If Ron had been able to turn into a lion, he could have gotten away or scared the pants off Sirius anyway. He would try anyway for Harry. He felt very happy that Harry wanted to include him and Hermione in something like that since there was a lot going on that Harry couldn't talk about — or at least, Ron and Hermione suspected that there was a lot going on that Harry couldn't talk about. They'd both confided their worries about Harry to each other in brief conversations but Ron knew if Harry was keeping quiet it was because Sirius had made him promise and Ron wouldn't try to get Harry into trouble with his new Dad just to satisfy Ron's curiosity.

He smiled at the thought as the leprechauns came out in support of Ireland. They were flinging gold up into the stands and for a long moment Ron was tempted to go and grab some…

"Oooh! It almost looks real, doesn't it?" Hermione said out loud.

And that was a good reason why he shouldn't. Leprechaun gold was nothing but an illusion. Ron's lips firmed. If he wanted money, fame and status he would have to work for it as Bill had said in their discussions.

He felt a rush of happiness at the thought of his oldest brother and he glanced up behind him where Bill stood sentry ensuring Harry couldn't be attacked from the back of the box. His relationship with Bill had changed since their talk in Ron's room. Bill had taken time every couple of days to come over and chat specifically with Ron; sometimes they'd play chess or they'd fly but most times they ended up like the first time — just sat on Ron's bed, talking. Ron had found himself listening to more stories of Bill and Charlie as kids as well as Bill's time at Hogwarts. Instead of switching off thinking it was Bill lording it over him for doing something first, Ron really listened and had gotten to know his brother much better.

He'd sought Charlie out himself a couple of times after that to check Bill's version of events.
sometimes or to ask Charlie his advice about Quidditch. He'd even confided his Quidditch dreams and Charlie was helping train Ron for the try-outs. Ron was thrilled with his brother's support.

"Here come the teams!" Harry said excitedly, elbowing Ron and drawing his attention back to the game.

Ron grinned at him, and raised the omniculars again.

For long minutes they murmured 'ooh's' and 'aah's' as the professional teams took to the skies and play began.

Harry shook his head. "They're so fast!"

"So are you on that Firebolt." Sirius pointed out.

"He's right though, they're playing very fast – it's obviously Ireland's strategy. The Bulgarian Beaters have issues with speed." Ron said authoritatively. "See?" He nudged Harry. "They can't get the bludgers anywhere near on target."

"As much as I hate to admit it he's right." Draco Malfoy said.

All of the Gryffindors turned to look at the Slytherin in shock.

"Are you feeling alright, Malfoy?" asked Neville. "You do realise you've just complimented Ron?"

Nott snorted in the background.

"I agreed with his surmising of the Irish strategy, I didn't compliment him." Malfoy snapped.

Neville huffed and returned to the action. Ron gave the back of Malfoy's head a searching look before returning his attention to the game. He'd been told very strictly by everyone that he needed to be on his best behaviour with the Slytherins. The Malfoys were part of the House of Black, as much as Ron might hate it, and he was only in the box because he was a guest of Harry's. He didn't like the snakes but he guessed he could put up with them for the length of a Quidditch match.

Hermione sighed, sat back down and pulled a book out of her backpack.

Ron stared at her. "What are you doing?"

"Reading." Hermione said slowly as though he was the odd one.

"But…" Ron waved his arms out towards the pitch and the action.

"I only came to experience the atmosphere of a professional game." Hermione explained rather snootily in Ron's opinion. "I don't really enjoy Quidditch."

"But…" Ron stuttered out.

"You watch all the Gryffindor matches." Harry said, lowering his own omniculars to look at her with faint surprise.

Hermione squirmed in her seat, her fingers tightening around the book. "That's because you play and you're my friend so I support you." She'd gone red in the face as though she was embarrassed.

Ron exchanged a look with Harry over Hermione's head. Mental, Ron thought with horror; absolutely mental. How could she not enjoy Quidditch? He returned to watching the game.
"I wish our Chasers could play like that." Malfoy said with a sigh as Ireland scored again.

"They have too much muscle on them." Ron said without thinking. "Uh…"

"Too much muscle and they're too focused on blocking rather than scoring." Zabini agreed sliding in as though Ron hadn't paused in stupefied realisation that he'd just talked to Malfoy.

"I don't understand why Flint chose them when there are better fliers in Slytherin." Nott said.

"He wanted people who could intimidate others in the air." Malfoy said shortly. "Obviously."

"You don't," Nott said, "but there again you didn't exactly try-out, did you?"

"I'm a Seeker, I don't need to intimidate anyone." Malfoy retorted. "And I think I've earned my place on the team after the last two years, thank you very much."

"When you beat Potter we'll talk." Zabini said, throwing Malfoy a teasing wink that simply infuriated the other boy.

The Gryffindors exchanged a look at the Slytherins' exchange and Ron could see Sirius's lips twitching like he wanted to grin.

Ron shook himself and returned to the match. It was a beautiful display of aerial acrobatics. Suddenly Krum moved, diving for the ground.

"He's seen the Snitch!" said Ron excitedly.

"No, he hasn't," Harry said, "the Snitch is up by the hoop. He's feinting."

Harry was right. Another minute later and Lynch, the Irish Seeker, was being helped off the ground as Krum floated back to the air.

"How the bloody hell did you see the Snitch?" demanded Nott.

"Because he's the best Seeker at Hogwarts." Ron said proudly.

Malfoy gave a loud snort but he didn't argue the point. Maybe, Ron mused, the fabled truce Harry had talked about was actually in effect.

The match wore on. Ron explained some of the more professional plays and moves to Harry and got used to the Slytherins chiming in. After half an hour, Neville had gotten comfortable enough to add his thoughts and all of the male teenagers soon congregated together, house rivalries mostly forgotten in their discussion although there was the occasional jab.

Ron slowly realised that all of the Slytherins – Malfoy included which boggled his mind – were vying to build better relationships with Harry. He was almost amused but mostly concerned. He shot Neville a look (Ron was willing to admit that Neville was much better at the political stuff) and they nodded at each other in understanding; Harry would need to be protected. He was far too forgiving and innocent sometimes.

"There's no way the Bulgarians can win this now." Harry commented. "The Irish have scored too many for them to catch up."

"Krum will end it." Ron said convinced he was right.

Five minutes later, he cheered with glee as Krum did exactly what Ron thought he would; he caught
the Snitch and put the Bulgarians out of their misery.

A silvery shape swept into the room and Ron realised it was a wolf patronus. It stopped in front of Sirius.

"Minister Oblansk and Minister Derry would like to invite you all to meet the teams in the Ministry box." Remus's voice sounded out from the wolf's mouth.

Everyone except Hermione turned to Sirius hopefully.

Sirius glanced at Harry. "It's risky. We haven't vetted them."

"Please, Padfoot?!" Harry pleaded softly.

Simeon cleared his throat. "Maybe a compromise, Sirius? Bring them onto our territory?"

Sirius raised his wand and a Grim patronus emerged. "Moony, we'll be happy to host the teams and the Ministers in the Potter alliance tent. Due to security reasons Lord Potter is restricted in his movements. I'm sure the Ministers will understand the necessity."

Harry nodded, accepting the compromise although Ron knew it didn't guarantee their meeting the teams at all. "Thank you."

Sirius ruffled his hair. "Come on. Let's get to the tent."

It took a good half an hour to exit the stadium and find the Potter alliance tent. The rest of the alliance – especially Terry Stebbins – was delighted that the teams might stop by. Harry and Neville went off to do the rounds while Hermione and Ron hit the buffet table set up at the back of the tent, with the Slytherins at their heels.

"You don't have to stick with us, you know." Ron complained.

Malfoy shot him a look. "This is the Potter alliance, Weasley. Most of them aren't too fond of the House of Malfoy or of Nott."

Ron cast a look in Zabini's direction.

Zabini shrugged. "We're neutral. They don't mind us." He paused. "My mother has almost finished completing an alliance deal with the House of Black and the House of Potter."

Malfoy and Nott looked at him with surprise.

"I thought she was still angling for marriage?" drawled Malfoy.

Zabini laughed. "Lord Black isn't as stupid as her usual targets. He knows what she is."

Ron frowned in confusion and he darted a look at Hermione who sent him one back that said she'd explain later.

There was a noise by the front of the tent and in the next moment the Minister arrived. Harry caught Ron's eye across the room and waved frantically at him to come over. Ron hurried, not wanting to miss his opportunity to meet the teams although really there was only one player he wanted to shake hands with.

Ten minutes later, he got his wish.
Sirius shook hands with Viktor Krum and congratulated him on catching the Snitch. "This is my son, Lord Harry James Potter. He plays Seeker too."

"Although not as good as you." Harry added, grinning happily at the thin dour looking Bulgarian with his large nose. "That feint you did was incredible." He motioned to his side where Ron and the others were standing. "May I introduce my friends and allies? Draco Malfoy, my cousin; Hermione Granger, a daughter of the House of Black; Neville Longbottom, my godbrother; Ronald Weasley, my best mate, and Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini, my classmates at Hogwarts although we're in different Houses."

Viktor shook hands with all the boys and kissed Hermione's knuckles which made her blush furiously. He turned back to Ron. "Vous avez été mentionné dans le journal?"

"Yes," Ron said, his heart pounding at having the famous Seeker actually talk with him, "Harry gave them my prediction when he was asked what he thought the outcome would be today."

"Vous avez raison." Viktor commented dryly.

"Thank you." Ron felt his face heat up at the praise and knew he was probably as red as his hair. "I've followed your career. You're amazing!"

"Vous jouez?" Viktor asked.

"I play but not for my House team. I'm hoping to try-out as Keeper this coming year." Ron said, attempting to act normal, despite his racing pulse. He pointed at Harry who was indulgently grinning at him like a loon. "He was the youngest Seeker for a century at Hogwarts."

"I play Seeker too." Malfoy added, pushing into the conversation.

Viktor's dark eyes flickered to him before returning to Harry and Ron. "Vous devez pratiquer, pratiquer, pratiquer pour être le meilleur."

Harry nodded. "That's what our old captain, Oliver Wood, said. He's just signed with a British team."

"Well, I'm sorry to break this up but we should let Viktor move on and let others talk to him." Sirius prompted gently.

"It was nice to meet you all." Viktor said and fell into step beside his coach as they moved to the next group.

Ron watched him go and turned back just in time to be introduced to the Irish Seeker. Life just didn't get any better than this, he thought happily.
Neville took a gulp of butterbeer and sank back in the chair that he had commandeered an hour before. The Potter alliance tent continued to buzz with chatter and laughter as everyone celebrated the Irish win. The teams themselves had left ages before as had the Ministers who were expected back at the stadium for the official Ministry party. Some of the adults had departed for other places – Simeon and Anna had gone home; the Tonks' had headed to other friends. Many were taking turns to rotate a presence at the Ministry party except for Sirius.

Sirius had refused to move further than a half a tent from Harry and Neville could understand why after the events earlier that week. He hadn't strayed too far from Harry himself once they'd reunited in the box.

Zabini shifted beside him. Neville had made a concerted effort with the Slytherin remembering his comment at the party. Zabini had proven to have a sly sense of humour and a wicked eye for observation. Some of the comments he'd made as they people watched had had Neville and the others in hysterics.

Neville followed Zabini's gaze to where Harry was conversing with Nott and Hermione, along with Jeremy and Michael. It appeared that Jeremy knew Nott quite well and the group seemed animated, discussing something that had Hermione's hands flying in debate and Harry's head cocked to the side with interest.

He frowned. Malfoy had left with his father earlier to the Ministry party; he had gone protesting, claiming he preferred to stay with friends his own age but Lucius Malfoy had been insistent. He wasn't sure why Nott and Zabini had been allowed to stay since the Malfoys were hosting them but as Narcissa remained in the tent, he guessed protocol was satisfied. Neville pursed his lips. He and Ron had both noticed the Slytherins manoeuvring during the discussion of the Quidditch match. Both Nott and Malfoy had clearly decided to build a closer relationship with Harry – presumably not for Harry's benefit but their own.

Protectiveness welled up in Neville.

Harry was far too trusting and forgiving. Neville knew he himself had a problem with wanting to please people – especially his Gran – but his gratitude that some people wanted to be his friend was tempered by his Gran's lessons on the wizarding world and their various alliances. In fact Harry was the only person he believed had no ulterior motive in befriending him beyond wanting a friend himself, and that pleased him enormously.

He certainly knew Nott and Malfoy however would never approach a Longbottom or a Potter without ulterior motive. Harry though hadn't been raised to think of the possible alliance motivations first. Sirius was browbeating it into Harry but there were times during their politics lessons when he would have to question Harry at length before Harry would see how a discussion at a dinner with an ally wasn't just idle chatter but a testing of Harry's agenda.

Neville understood to some degree Harry shying away from viewing every interaction with suspicion, questioning every comment and monitoring himself to the nth degree. It was the core Slytherin behaviours that as Gryffindors they were meant to abhor. But politically it was behaviours they needed as Lords and Heads of Houses. Sirius for all he disliked his family had been raised as a Slytherin and was embracing that in order to protect Harry. Neville understood Harry was going to have to be more Slytherin if he was going to swim in the snake infested waters of the wizarding political world. Neville even thought Harry understood that just...Harry didn't want to act like a
Slytherin.

Well, that was OK, Neville mused. He would act like a Slytherin; it didn't bother him. In fact he'd rather enjoyed the politics they'd been immersed in during the Summer. Harry could be Harry and Neville would deal with the politics within their alliance.

Which meant that Neville was going to have to deal with Malfoy and Nott.

He wasn't cowed by the idea as he might have been a few months before, but he wasn't looking forward to it either.

"Theo isn't so bad." Zabini said softly.

Neville's head snapped to him in alarm.

"You've been glaring at him for over a minute." Zabini pointed out as his wand sketched a privacy bubble around them – the underage tracking charm wouldn't be able to tell since they were surrounded by adults. "It wasn't really that hard to work out."

Obviously being Slytherin wasn't just a question of attitude, Neville thought sheepishly. He was being far too Gryffindor in his behaviour and body language.

"It's just…"

"You've realised Nott and Malfoy have understood the power Potter wields now and are repositioning themselves." Zabini supplied. He raised his bottle. "You're worried because Potter is politically naïve. Lord Black is trying to correct that but he cannot undo the years where Potter was kept unaware of his heritage and his position in a single Summer."

"I wouldn't call Harry naïve so much as wanting to think the best of people," Neville said firmly.

"How very Dumbledore-ish." Zabini's smile took away the sting of the job. "So you've appointed yourself his protector?"

Neville's chin went up. "We stand together." There was a warning note in his voice for Zabini not to question him on his loyalty to Harry.

Zabini nodded slowly. "Theo's politics are closer to Potter's agenda than his father's. The only area of major disagreement is equality for muggleborns – Theo would rather keep the political power with pureblood or at least old magical families. My guess is that when Theo becomes Lord Nott, he will seek an alliance of mutual aid and support not a détente, and he will seek it directly with Potter not with the House of Black."

"I see." Neville murmured.

And he did see. He saw why Nott had evidently cultivated relationships with Jeremy Branstone and Michael Corner, and why he looked relaxed talking to Harry. He didn't have to watch what he said because he agreed with Harry's views. That agreement would help him forge a bond with Harry – a closer one than Malfoy who remained entrenched in his father's political view despite the fact that they had to comply with the House of Black's primacy.

"What about you?" asked Neville.

"Our political agenda is close enough to Potter's for the differences not to matter." Zabini said with a shrug. "Mother was simply holding out on the alliance because she hoped to convince Lord Black of
the advantages of a marriage including giving Potter a maternal figure." He snorted a little in derision.

"Your Mother has Veela blood." Neville commented hesitantly.

"Yeah, she constantly seeks her," Blaise lifted his hands and mimed quotation marks, "'true mate.' Obviously it's a load of bollocks because that kind of thing is the invention of romance writers, but that's why she's been married so much."

"Your father…"

"An arrangement." Blaise changed position. "But she's not a murderer no matter what they say though." He claimed defensively. "Father died of a rare genetic heart condition. Donald, her next husband, didn't actually die, they divorced when they realised his resisting her allure wasn't because he was powerful but because he was gay; he's living in the States with a guy called Bob now. Don's pretty great really – still sends me birthday and Yule gifts. Gunther was just dull and drank a lot. I'm pretty sure he died of boredom even if the official report said liver failure."

Neville remained silent not sure what to say.

Blaise shook his head. "Anyway, mostly Mother's romances don't bother me. I lived with my Great-Aunt Josephine, my grandfather's sister, until Hogwarts as she had the regency. She died the Summer after our first year which is when my Mother took over. I inherited Great-Aunt Jo's house so I stay there mostly."

"I'm sorry about your Great-Aunt." Neville said softly, knowing the condolences were a poor substitute for a woman who Blaise spoke about with fondness and who obviously had been the parental figure in Blaise's life.

"Thanks." Blaise sighed heavily.

Neville decided to change the subject a little. "So are you a Veela?"

"No, only daughters of the blood can be called Veela." Blaise said with a laugh.

"Sorry, I don't know much about them." Neville explained with chagrin.

Blaise nodded. "They're like all magical creatures, secretive about their own ways. What I do know is that pure Veelas can reproduce asexually but most mate with wizards now. Sons are rare and generally have a resistance to the allure but no other Veela characteristics; daughters are considered Veela regardless of how many traits they actually retain." He took a sip of his butterbeer. "Mother wanted a daughter."

Neville swallowed the urge to say 'sorry' but what could he say? He knew something about being a disappointment for something outside of his control after all – before the Summer his Gran had practically mentioned in every sentence that Neville failed to match up to his father.

He opened his mouth to say something – anything but before he could a loud boom echoed outside the tent and the ground shook hard beneath their feet sending some of the glassware and bottles crashing to the ground.

Zabini dispelled the privacy bubble and they immediately made their way to Harry. Sirius had already reached him and gave a nod to Neville and Zabini.

"You don't think that's…" Harry began.
Sirius shook his head. "I'm not sure…"

A wolf patronus appeared – a message from Remus. "Sirius! There's been an explosion at the stadium and the stadium is on fire! The Aurors are trying to contain it but need help! Send as many able bodied men and women as you can!"

Sirius turned toward Harry and Harry immediately motioned for him to leave. "Go and help! We'll be fine!"

"Portkey out if there's any sign of trouble otherwise stay here!" Sirius ordered. "Bill…"

"I'll remain with him." Bill confirmed.

"Listen up! The stadium is on fire! Anyone who wishes to help, come with me!" Sirius shouted, already moving towards the tent opening.

Most of the adults hurried after Sirius with only Wallace Granger and a few of the women were left behind with Bill. There was a rising sense of hysteria in the tent as everyone started talking over each other.

His Gran set off her wand to make a small bang. "Dear Merlin! Get a hold of yourselves!"

"But what do we do?" Celia Inglebee clutched Lydia – who was crying for some inexplicable reason – and looked at Harry.

Everyone looked at Harry.

Harry shot a nervous look at Neville's Gran who nodded at him encouragingly.

"We don't really know what's happening except that there's a fire." Harry began, and his voice which had started out unsteady gained more confidence with every word. "I suggest everyone gathers in the centre of the tent, young children in the middle, anyone capable of defending themselves placed around them. And…and anyone with a portkey should identify themselves and agree who they'll take if we need to leave urgently."

"Good plan, Harry." Narcissa said.

"Right, you heard Harry," Neville said authoritatively, knowing Harry needed support which they had vowed to give him, "Heirs start organising seating in the centre of the tent and a play area for the youngsters. Portkey people to Harry!"

He gave Harry a confident look and went to start rearranging the tent. Susan and Hannah immediately moved to help him as did Jeremy and Michael. Hermione dragged Ron into the centre to move some chairs and smiled at Neville. Neville felt a frisson of pride that they'd all followed him

He glanced back at Harry, quietly directing those with portkeys to strategic points with Bill's assistance, and felt a surge of confidence; of satisfaction in his choice to stand beside Harry. He just hoped the fire at the stadium had nothing to do with Harry's death threats…

o-O-o

"What is going on here?" Amelia shouted over the panicking crowd in the stadium's reception room.

Remus managed to wriggle close enough to her position to answer without yelling. "The portkeys aren't working."
Amelia sighed heavily. "Where the hell is Crouch or Bagman?"

"I haven't seen Bagman at all," Remus said. "Crouch left as soon as the match was over. He said he was feeling sick."

"So basically the two people in charge of this mess are AWOL?" Amelia rubbed her head.

Cornelius popped up beside them suddenly. "Amelia! Thank goodness you're here! Something's wonky with our portkeys and the stadium is on fire!"

"Yes," Amelia said dryly, "I had worked that out for myself, Cornelius." She whistled loudly and everyone stopped chattering and turned to look at her. "Auror Dawlish," she motioned at the man standing to her left, "escort everyone out of the emergency exit and to the portkey site outside of the encampment."

Cornelius beamed at her. "An excellent suggestion! Lead on, Dawlish!"

Dawlish nodded at his partner, a wiry looking woman who looked like she was sucking a sour plum, and the two of them began herding the VIPs efficiently. It wasn't a surprise to Remus that Cornelius was at Dawlish's elbow as the Auror led the way out.

Bogdan nudged Remus. "You are staying?"

"I should," Remus said apologetically, "to help with the fire."

"Tomas will stay with you." Bogdan indicated one of his guards and Remus immediately knew it was Tomas was the werewolf that Bogdan had spoken about earlier.

"Thank you." Remus said.

"You will always be welcome in Bulgaria, Remus." Bogdan stated with a smile. He gave a nod of farewell and let his security force usher him out.

"Pleasure to meet you, Lupin." Kate said with a grin as the Irish Minister followed the Bulgarian's example and left.

Remus turned back to Amelia. "What's happening? Where do you need us?"

"Rufus has set up a command tent," Amelia said, "Sirius and most of the other volunteers have been pressed into fire duty on the North stand."

"I figured." Remus said as they moved out of the way of the flowing crush of people. "Sirius has the training for it at least."

"I think Rufus wants to give him his badge back," Amelia joked, "he's got him leading that group – thankfully because the Auror contingent is struggling to hold the East stand."

Remus nodded. "Tomas and I will join with Sirius then."

"Actually, Remus..." Amelia sighed as she stepped out of the way of a running child, "if the portkeys aren't working then that's another problem we need to solve."

"It's probably an anti-transportation ward." Remus suggested. "I doubt apparition will be possible either."

"Can you track down the source?" Amelia asked.
Remus felt torn. He wanted to help Sirius, or failing that to return to Harry's side because he sensed Sirius wouldn't be happy about leaving Harry even if he'd left him with others that he trusted. But if his skills were needed... "I'm fair."

"I can help." Tomas said. "I am trained Auror."

"Excellent." Amelia said. "Well, if you two can try to find the source of the ward and destroy it; that would be great."

Remus exchanged a look with Tomas and nodded.

They fell into step with the stragglers from the Ministry party and within minutes were outside of the stadium.

Remus cast a look back at the building; at the rising plume of smoke and the flicker of yellow flames licking at the far side of the walls. He shivered.

Tomas started casting the ward detection spell and pointed towards the far side of the camp. "Over there."

Remus conjured a patronus. "Sirius, I've gone to track down an anti-transportation ward. Good luck with the fire." He sent it off and caught up with Tomas. He just hoped Harry would be alright.

o-O-o

Amelia coughed and swiped a hand over her face, pushing her hair back out of her vision. Bloody smoke, she thought tiredly. She directed a set of people away from the stadium and made her way to the Auror Command tent.

Rufus looked up as she entered and gave a small nod.

"Report!" She ordered, coughing again.

Rufus pointed at the blueprints of the stadium. "We've established that the main fire is here at the kitchen, and as you know it's already spread to the East stand above and the North stand. It looks like the magical cooking oil ignited...it's not quite Fiendfyre thank Merlin but it's a bad enough magical fire."

Amelia nodded sharply.

"Shacklebolt reports that the East stand fire is only just being contained and Lord Black's report on the North stand isn't much better. Both have asked for the Magical Fire Unit." Rufus stabbed the blueprints at various points. "They'll be needed here and here to cut off the fire. At the moment everyone is using aguamenti charms but we need a proper Magical Fire Unit."

"I've sent a patronus to Bertie for him to send a Magical Catastrophe team but we've detected an anti-portkey and anti-apparition ward directly over the stadium and campsite so it could be a while before they get here. Lupin and a member of the Bulgarian security detail went to track down the source of the ward and break it." Amelia informed him briskly. "I've got Dawlish and a small contingent evacuating most of the Ministry and the Wizengamot out to the portkey point outside the muggle field."

Rufus grunted. "Explains why we've had complaints that nobody can apparate. I've got Cavendish and Hoskins set up to provide information and guidance; I've sent a few others out to inform the campers to stay where they are but if they wish to leave to do so in an orderly fashion. Keats and his
team are on muggle duty. The fire will attract attention."

Amelia nodded again. It looked like all the bases had been covered – no more than she expected from her Head Auror.

"Director, if asked I would have said the fire was an accident but the wards indicate a malicious intent. Is there a chance this is to do with the tip we received about certain activity? A diversion maybe?" Rufus asked.

"Good question," Amelia conceded tiredly, "we should check in with the Rat Squad."

Rufus took out a communication mirror and tapped it. "Wood, report."

"Wood here, sir." Wood's face appeared in the mirror. "All our targets are in sight, sir. Fire was a surprise. They're in discussions. I think they may take advantage."

"Keep on top of them, Wood. They move; so do you – understand?" Rufus barked.

"Yes, sir." Wood confirmed.

"Out." Rufus tapped the mirror again and it went back to normal. "Unconnected then."

Amelia's eyes narrowed at his tone. "What?"

"You remember the fire we had in 'eighty-one in Kopbridge? Almost took out Ogden's?" Rufus asked gruffly.

"Yes, mostly for the fact that I had to listen to everyone bellyaching about the price of Firewhiskey for the next five years." Amelia said dryly.

Rufus huffed but nodded. "The LeStranges set it to draw out Alphonius Ogden so they could murder his wife and child. Classic misdirection."

Amelia's eyes widened. "Harry." She barely got his name out, her throat had closed up. "You think this has something to do with the death threat?"

"Black's left the boy's side for the first time today." Rufus pointed out with succinct blunt logic. "Twilight's upon us. Portkey and apparition are down. Perfect time for an attempt on…"

"Moor! Tyler! With me now!" Amelia shouted, spinning around and heading out of the tent at a clip.

She knew Rufus would send word to Sirius. Damn it. She'd seen Richard with Sirius but her sister-in-law and Susan were in the Potter alliance tent.

Why hadn't they considered it was a ploy earlier? She should have sent Black back to the tent or sent Remus there rather than after the source of the ward.

The communication mirror in her pocket buzzed as she hurried through the maze of tents and dodged people gawking at the smoke and flames at her back. She yanked it out of her pocket without losing stride.

"Bones."

Rufus's visage swam into focus. "Rat Squad have confirmed we have targets in costume on the move."
"Bugger."

It never rained but it poured.

"You and the two men with you are the only free pair of hands I have and…” Rufus trailed off unhappily. "It's your decision, Amelia, you outranked me."

How was she supposed to make this decision? Did she rendezvous with the Rat Squad and bring in the Death Eaters they knew were going to commit a crime or did she head to the Potter alliance tent where she had family and loved ones to protect on the off-chance Rufus's gut instinct about an actual assassination attempt was on the money?

Amelia knew there was no choice. She couldn't choose a maybe over a definite. She changed direction.

"Understood. Tell Rat Squad we're on our way to support. Is Black on his way to the tent?"

"I sent a patronus to him but...the fire's gotten worse from the last update I had."

Which meant Sirius might delay leaving until it was safe to do so especially if Rufus hadn't conveyed any urgency in his message (and she knew Rufus probably hadn't – he'd probably simply informed Sirius that they'd surmised a possibility that the fire was a diversion).

She tapped the mirror off and conjured her own patronus. "Go to Harry Potter. Harry, I believe there is a potential imminent and real threat to your life. The Potter alliance should evacuate in an orderly fashion to the portkey site outside of the muggle camping grounds. Now."

She just hoped she'd made the right decision, Amelia thought as she tapped her mirror to ask Rat Squad for their latest coordinates.

And she prayed to Merlin her warning to Harry wasn't necessary.

o-O-o

The atmosphere inside the Potter alliance tent was strange, Harry mused as his eyes drifted over everything again.

Neville had constructed a square ring of chairs in the middle of the tent, two deep. The outer ring was filled with adults and Heirs capable of defensive magic. The inner ring was filled with younger children such as Connor Sapworthy – old enough for a wand but not to actually take part in a fight. The inside of the ring had babies and infants including their mothers, and Wallace and Miriam Granger who as muggles had no magic to assist if there was trouble. Everyone was within touching distance of someone with a portkey; everyone knew who they needed to go with.

Harry, Neville and Hermione had taken positions on the outer ring opposite the door with Augusta and Narcissa beside them. Bill stood on door duty along with Minerva in front of them.

There was a spirit of camaraderie in the tent, an underlying thrill of excitement and drama that offset the worry, fear and anticipation on the surface. And there was worry and fear for loved ones – all the adult men except for Bill and Wallace had disappeared to fight the fire. They'd had one short patronus message from Sirius confirming that they were helping to contain the fire to the stadium and were all OK.

But Harry couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Maybe they should have all portkeyed out as soon as they'd been notified about the stadium fire, Harry mused. If he was a Death
Eater he'd use the fire as a distraction even if they hadn't planned it that way – and they couldn't know for certain it wasn't a distraction.

"You alright, mate?" Ron asked, picking up on his unease.

"I just want to know what's happening." Harry admitted.

"We have to be patient, Harry." Hermione remonstrated with him gently. "I'm sure everybody in charge is very busy dealing with the fire. We were lucky to get an update from Sirius. They'll send word when they can."

Harry shrugged, unwilling to argue with her. He let the quiet background chatter distract him. Miriam and Wallace were discussing the muggle Prime Minister with Karen Abbott; Narcissa was exchanging hair colour charms of all things with Felicity Bones; Connor Sapworthy was playing exploding snap with his younger brother; Jeremy was talking with Nott about OWLs; Terry was chatting with Michael about the Quidditch match…

Apart from the fire, it had been a good day, Harry thought idly. The Quidditch match had been brilliant. Seeing the professionals in action had given Harry a good glimpse of the standard he would have to achieve to gain a place on a team. Sure the teams were national and the best of the best but even a lower league team would expect some of the same qualities. Harry knew he had raw talent but he hadn't considered how the Seeker could help the Chasers and the Beaters before rather than simply flying around and catch the Snitch. Some of the plays Ron had pointed out couldn't have worked without Lynch or Krum helping their teams. Maybe the Gryffindor team could try something similar when they were all back at Hogwarts.

A sound outside the tent disturbed his planning and he stood up, aware that Ron and Neville followed his example.

Bill moved to place himself between the visitor and the rest of the tent. Minerva stood off to the side, playing back-up.

The tell-tale flash of red robes as the man entered had Bill lowering his wand although he kept hold of it just in case.

"What can we do for you, Auror?" asked Bill shortly.

"Hollins, isn't it?" Minerva said from her position, as she got a good look at the Auror.

Harry frowned and shifted his weight uncertainly. Why had they sent an Auror? The chatter behind him faded into silence.

"I've got orders to take Lord Potter to the evacuation site." Hollins said tersely.

"Lord Potter has a portkey." Bill countered. "If we're to evacuate…"

"There're wards up." Hollins said.

Bill exchanged an alarmed look with Minerva. "If Harry goes, we should all evacuate."

"My orders are just for Lord Potter." Hollins argued.

"I don't particularly care, Auror Hollins." Minerva said sharply. "If Harry is leaving we all are."

A patronus entered – a small terrier who headed straight for Harry.
"Harry, I believe there is a potential imminent and real threat to your life. The Potter alliance should evacuate in an orderly fashion to the portkey site outside of the muggle camping grounds. Now."
Amelia's voice echoed loudly in the tent.

Harry's eyes snapped to the Auror in front of him and he noticed Bill raised his wand. "Why would Amelia send a patronus if she'd already sent you?" He wondered out loud.

The Auror's features twisted sharply into a sneer and suddenly –

He moved, casting one spell towards Harry and another towards Bill.

Someone screamed.

Harry responded instinctively dropping to his haunches, his wand thrust out in front of him, "Protego!"

The shield snapped into place and the purple coloured curse splashed across it…

"Protego!" Bill yelled even as he dodged the grey spell, diving and rolling, rising to shoot off his own spell. "Harry, get a shield up around everyone!"

Harry immediately cast the duelling shield that protected audiences from stray curses that Professor Flitwick had taught him – it was the only one large enough that he could think of. The silvery dome wobbled a bit as it rose but eventually it snapped into place. It didn't allow anyone inside the shield to help the combatants on the other side, leaving Bill and Minerva exposed at the front of the tent.

Bill dodged another spell and Minerva hurriedly shielded herself against a curse.

He could hear a child wail and someone else sobbing…

Minerva was casting as Bill engaged the rogue Auror in a fierce duel – the spare chairs beside her became animated and ran for the intruder…

Hollins – or whoever he was – used one to shield himself against Bill's latest spell before he cast an incendio and the wooden chairs burst into flames. He sent them back towards Minerva who was caught off guard; she hastily put up a gush of water but the chairs impacted her with a smack and she was sent flying…

"NO!" Harry yelled as he watched Minerva crumple in a heap.

Hermione's hand on his shoulder prevented him from rushing forward. "You have to shield us, Harry!" She reminded him, her voice choked with tears.

Bill seemed to be gaining ground but he'd been hit a few times – cutting hexes that had his arm, leg and cheek bleeding…he cast a chain of spells…

The fake Auror dodged the first two in a strong show of acrobatics, deflected the third and shielded the fourth before he growled and sent back a chain of his own offensive spells…

Bill deflected the first…

He dived to the left to avoid the second…

He shielded the third but it crashed against the shield and sent him backwards…

He slipped and lost his balance…
The fourth impacted him and he dropped to the floor unconscious…

"BILL!" Ron moved to go to him and both Harry and Hermione grabbed him.

"You can't leave the shield!" Hermione shouted.

Harry's heart was pounding as the fake Auror got to his feet and smirked at him.

"You think you're so safe behind your shield?" The man taunted mockingly. "You can't save them all, Potter!" He raised his wand and pointed it at Neville. "Crucio!"

The shield wouldn't stop an Unforgiveable but Neville had nowhere to go!

Before Harry could react, Augusta conjured a slab of rock in front of her grandson. The rock shattered sending chips everywhere and one nicked Neville's forehead despite his hastily flinging his arms up in front of his face.

The Auror snarled and gestured towards Bill. "One Weasley down! Tick-tock, tick-tock." He wagged his finger. "Time's running out for the rest of them!" He laughed and ran out.

For a second, there was silence.

"Drop the bloody shield!" demanded Ron, heatedly.

Harry dropped the shield hastily.

Ron ran to his brother along with Alicia Doge.

Harry glanced across the tent but went to check on Minerva. Narcissa hurried over with him.

"She's breathing," Narcissa said with relief. "She's just knocked out."

Harry swallowed hard. He noticed Jeremy hovering and gestured at him. "Someone needs to go and find a real Auror."

"I'll go," Jeremy agreed instantly.

"I'll go with him," Susan offered, "Uncle Rufus will listen to me because of my Aunt."

Harry nodded and the pair left quickly.

"I'll take care of Minerva, Harry." Narcissa promised, shooing him away.

He went over to Ron who stood over his brother as Alicia's wand worked to save him. "How is he?"

"Bad. Alicia says…says it's really bad." Ron grabbed Harry's arm; his blue eyes wide with horror and fear. "Harry, that maniac said time was running out for the rest of my family! I have to go and check on them! Warn them!"

"Ron, we should wait for the Aurors! They'll check everyone's OK! We can't just run out…it's not safe." Hermione countered.

Harry knew Hermione was right. Following after their attacker to check on the Weasleys was probably what the guy wanted. But he was torn. He didn't want any more of the Weasleys to be hurt and didn't he owe it to Bill and Ron to make sure they were OK?
"Please, Harry!" Ron begged him.

Harry took a look around the tent; most people, surprisingly Nott and Zabini among them, were focused on comforting the younger children; Narcissa and Karen were taking care of Minerva; Alicia was healing Bill; Augusta was handling Neville's cut face…

"OK, Ron," Harry said, beginning to move towards the exit.

"Wait!" ordered Hermione desperately, grabbing hold of his and Ron's arms. "You can't just leave!"

"Either come with us or get out of the way!" Ron snapped. He tore out of her grip and ran out.

Harry gave her an apologetic look, slipped out of her hold, and followed after Ron.

The smell of smoke hit him as he ran out into the fresh air. He wrinkled his nose and charged after Ron, his best friend's signature hair allowing him to track him as they ran through the rows of tents to get to the Weasleys. They dodged around people leaving, people staring at the alight stadium which blazed like a beacon as the sun went down.

Ron stopped abruptly at the outer edge of the campsite and when Harry caught up with him, Ron tugged him towards the trees.

"We can cut through here!" Ron said.

"Ron…" panted Harry, wanting to protest but Ron was already off and running again.

Harry ran. His breaths sounded harshly in his ears; the trees seemed foreboding in the fading light. He raised his hands against the backslap of branches that flew into his face; he leaped over fallen logs and stumps, felt the brush of nettles and blackberry bushes grab at his jeans; felt the wind against his face.

Ron curved to the left and Harry followed him, wand in his hand and almost barrelled into Ron who'd come to a complete stop.

Harry was about to ask why the flash of a spell had him ducking and yanking Ron down and to the side. He peeped over the bush he'd flung them behind and stared in horror at the two figures in black, their faces obscured with white masks, dangling a muggle family in the air…

o-O-o

Sirius swore under his breath as another flame shot out of the stadium wall and sent debris flying towards the team of volunteers.

Bugger, bugger, bugger, thought Sirius madly. Why couldn't the damn fire go out? No matter how much water they threw at it, the fire continued to rage. They needed a Magical Fire Unit and Sirius was furious that there wasn't one on hand. How stupid was Bagman to authorise the building of a stadium without ensuring fire safety? The man was an idiot.

An idiot who would be fired if Sirius got his way.

"Send more water over the top!" Sirius ordered. He shook off his dismay that he was the only one of the volunteers who'd experienced a magical fire before and so had landed himself with being put in charge.

Rufus had pointed out that Sirius was the only one with the proper training – he had been a Hit
Wizard and knew the protocols. The Aurors were busy trying to handle the main fire at the East stand and Sirius hadn't been able to refuse.

He should never have left the bloody tent, Sirius sighed as he directed Richard Bones and Carl Branstone to take a step back.

Another small explosion sounded to his left and Sirius yelled for everyone to shield. The stadium wall cracked ominously as the magical fire raced along it, sparking yellow and red flames that danced in Sirius's vision.

"Where the hell is that bloody Fire Unit?" asked Richard wearily. His face was damp with sweat and streaked with soot. Sirius knew he must look the same.

"There are anti-transport wards up." Sirius said shortly. Remus had gone to track down the source and disable them; Sirius missed Remus's stalwart presence beside him. "They should be here soon. Keep the water above the crack in the wall."

Rufus's last patronus had indicated that the stadium fire was probably a diversion for other activities. Sirius knew setting fires had been the LeStranges diversionary tactic during the war. Maybe the Death Eaters had decided to copy or imitate them as a sign of their anger at their former colleagues' deaths.

He hoped to Merlin that the fire hadn't been set by whoever was threatening Harry.

Another frisson of unease and wrongness snaked down his spine.

He wanted to leave.

He wanted to get back to the tent and check on his son. He wanted to have never have left in the first place.

Why had he left? Right, civic duty and the thought that Harry was safe in the tent.

Harry was safe in the tent. Bill was there. Minerva was there. Narcissa was a complete bitch when riled and she was sworn to protect Harry. Harry would be fine.

Harry was safe.

Maybe if he thought it another hundred times, he might start to believe it, Sirius mused irritably.

Richard gestured up at the wall. "It's all going to come down if they don't get here in the next ten…"

Pounding footsteps had them all turning to look behind them and Sirius felt a rush of relief at the sight of the Magical Fire Unit device carried by members of the Magical Catastrophe team at the DOM.

A large blond man approached him. "Lord Black? I'm Hector Flint. Thanks for your help. We're here to take over."

"All yours!" exclaimed Sirius happily. "We've tried to keep the fire drenched with water from above but…"

"Don't worry," Hector waved him away, "we've got this. You lot should head the infirmary tent and get checked out." He immediately turned to his team and started shouting orders.

Charming, Sirius thought momentarily amused but he was too happy for the curtness to bother him
and in truth he'd rather Hector focus on the fire than the niceties of social interaction.

He took a couple of steps back, lowering his wand.

Richard grinned at him and gestured towards a green tent that had been erected a safe distance away; a make-shift infirmary. Sirius wanted to head straight back to the Potter alliance tent but he felt a responsibility to the men he had led to ensure they got examined for cuts, abrasions and smoke damage.

"Sirius!" Andromeda leaped at him as he entered and he accepted a quick hug as she ushered him and the rest of the volunteers through to an examination area. She and Ted had been visiting his partner at the healing clinic when the fire had broken out and they’d all made their way to the infirmary tent to volunteer their services.

Ted was conferring with another Healer over a young boy but he looked up and nodded at their arrival.

"The poor thing got trampled on by his older cousins when they cleared the tents closest to the East stand." Andromeda informed Sirius in a quiet voice. "I heard you were containing the North stand. Is Harry back at the tent?"

"Bill stayed back to guard him." Sirius confirmed. He plucked at his damp soot-marked shirt. "I'd like to get back there as soon as possible."

"Understandable." Andromeda said. "I'll get someone to come and see you. In the meantime, you can all drink some water and clean-up through there."

The porta-bathroom was a welcome sight. The band of volunteers made quick use of the facilities and the chance to wash the worst of the sweat and grime of the fire away. Sirius was the first out. He had made minimal use of the bathroom, simply wanting to get back to Harry.

Ted was waiting for him when he exited. He was pushed to sit on a bed. "Everyone owes you and the men who helped a huge thank you." He said as he began the diagnostic.

Sirius shrugged. "We wouldn't have been needed if Bagman had actually followed the fire regulations for a stadium."

Ted sighed. "You should see the state of the infirmary stores! It's like he hoped nobody would have anything worse than a paper cut!"

Sirius nodded, impatient.

"You're fine," Ted said, "some smoke inhalation so here."

He handed him a potion which Sirius drank down with a grimace. The vague tightness in his chest and the slight rawness at the back of his throat disappeared and Sirius found he could breathe easier.

"Thanks." Sirius jumped off the bed, eager to get back to Harry. He hadn't taken a step when Jeremy burst through the tent opening and into the examination area, followed by a worried looking Susan Bones.

"Lord Black!" Jeremy sketched a bow and waved frantically towards the exit. "Thank Merlin we've found you! There's been an attack!"

Sirius's heart leaped into his throat. "Harry?"
"He's OK but Bill Weasley and Professor McGonagall are hurt." Susan confirmed, breathlessly.

"Are you alright, Susan?" Richard hurried to her, pulling her into a hug.

"I'm fine; Harry protected us all with a shield." Susan said clearly awed.

Ted was already packing up a bag, calling to other Healers to come with him to an emergency, and he shooed Sirius away. "Go!" he said. "We'll be right behind you!"

"I'll alert Rufus and get some Aurors out!" Richard confirmed.

Sirius didn't need any further encouragement. He raced out of the entrance and within a few strides had changed into Padfoot; his animagus form could make better time. The Grim also had the advantage of sending people stumbling out of his path shrieking in fear, leaving the way clear.

He raced through the rows to get to the Potter alliance tent, skidding around corners and almost tripping up one Irish supporter who came out of his tent at the wrong time.

He entered the Potter alliance tent at a run and changed back at the scene of mild chaos; most of the children had been gathered into the centre of a ring of chairs and were being comforted; Bill Weasley was on the floor to the side, Alicia healing him with help from a couple of others but she looked tired and pale. Minerva sat on a chair to the other side of the room, with Augusta and the Grangers tending to her. He couldn't see Harry and his panic began to rise.

"Sirius!" Minerva greeted him with relief, although she continued to hold a compress to her head. "Thank Merlin!"

"Where's Harry?" asked Sirius immediately.

Augusta and Minerva exchanged an anxious look, silently conferring.

"Someone pretending to be an Auror entered the tent and tried to insist on evacuating only Harry," Minerva began, hurrying her words out, "we refused to let him, of course, and he attacked. Harry shielded everyone but myself and Bill who were engaged with the imposter. Unfortunately I was taken out quickly…"

Sirius gestured for them to get to the point.

"Bill was good but whoever it was that attacked was better." Augusta said, picking up the account. "Once Bill was down, the bastard tried for Neville before saying that the rest of the Weasleys were running out of time before departing."

"Ronald was very upset and insisted on leaving to check on his family," Miriam joined in smoothly, "he requested Harry's presence and Harry followed him out of the tent despite Hermione's advice for them both to remain."

Oh no.

Harry was out of the tent and alone without protection.

With Death Eaters around the place looking for a vulnerable target! And the guy who'd attacked them loose!

Sirius was going to kill him.

Well, firstly, he was going to hug the dickens out of him and then he was going to kill him.
"Hermione followed after the pair of them." Wallace added with a huff.

"And Neville went with her!" Augusta's expression gave away that she was torn between horror and pride.

"They're on their way to the Weasleys' tent?" checked Sirius, trying to keep calm as his worry escalated again.

The women nodded although Minerva winced as she did.

Sirius turned around and before he'd reached the exit, he'd changed back to Padfoot and was running. He almost barrelled into Ted and two more Healers on their way in but paid them no attention.

He had to get to Harry.

o-O-o

Remus pushed a branch out of the way and directed Tomas to the left as he tried to ignore the sounds of the campsite behind them. The thick black smoke was hanging like a cloud over the area; the fire creating an artificial light as the sun went down and night fell.

He couldn't help worrying about Harry. Was he OK in the tent? Had he evacuated?

He couldn't help worrying about Sirius. Was he OK dealing with the fire? Had he managed to get back to Harry?

"You are concerned for your pack." Tomas said breaking the silence.

"I am," replied Remus without thinking, "I should never have left them."

"Then you admit they are your pack?" Tomas said with surprise.

Remus considered the question and shrugged. "I've never denied it."

"Yet you eschew the packs on the Continent." Tomas commented.

His words brought Remus to a suspicious halt. "Excuse me?"

Tomas turned to look at him. His dark hair had streaks of silver and his swarthy face was covered in minor scars from the lycanthropy. He shrugged apologetically. "We are a close bunch and that a werewolf was allowed to attend Hogwarts is something of a story in our society. Many of us have wished to meet you yet all of us know the only time you sought our company was to spy."

"It's not something I'm particularly proud of in hindsight," Remus said with sincere regret, "I spied because it was asked of me and I owed Albus Dumbledore a debt."

"And not because you wished revenge on your sire."

"My only sire was Marcus Lupin. Greyback was nothing more than the monster who bit me."

Remus answered sharply.

"If you consider your sire a monster, it is not surprising you consider the rest of us as such." Tomas said. "And yourself."

"We are monsters under a full moon and in the control of the wolf." Remus retorted. "But Greyback
would be a monster even if he wasn't a werewolf."

"That perhaps we can agree upon." Tomas said.

"Then perhaps we should continue with our mission." Remus said tartly.

"We are close." Tomas said as he cast the detection spell again.

"Yes." Remus nodded.

"Perhaps we should disillusion ourselves in case someone is protecting the source." Tomas suggested.

Remus nodded again. It was a good suggestion. A couple of spells later and their footsteps were obscured too allowing them to move stealthily through the undergrowth.

Tomas sniffed the air suddenly and reached out towards where he must have assumed Remus was walking. He cast a privacy bubble. "I smell something ahead. Vermin."

Remus scented the air…and growled. "Wormtail."

"Wait!" Tomas said.

But Remus was already moving, slowly and steadily he crept forward. It wasn't long before he could see the rat. It was guarding a rock, rune marks covering its rough surface.

The rat froze suddenly; its ears twitching. It suddenly shifted and a wizard stood there in its stead.

It was all Remus could do not to move; to give into the urge to jump at Peter and try to strangle him with his bare hands. He raised his wand carefully. One spell…one spell to take revenge for all Peter had perpetrated on them; the deaths of James and Lily; the loss of a happy childhood for Harry; the years that Sirius had spent in Azkaban…

Peter wrinkled his nose. "I know you're there, Moony, I can smell you…you and another wolf." His eyes darted about the forest. "It's too late. He's already gone for Harry and he'll get him."

Who had gone for Harry?! Remus froze, horrified. Had Voldemort gone for Harry? The urge to run back to the camp and see for himself was almost too much.

No, he thought furiously, that's what Peter wants, to chase me away and leave him alone.

"You and Sirius can't save him," Peter continued snidely, "the Dark Lord wants him and he does what the Dark Lord wants. Save yourself!"

Like Peter had done. Because that was all Peter wanted; to survive.

Coward, thought Remus. He sent a silent stunning spell towards his former friend but as the red light arced across the space between them Peter squeaked and immediately shrank back into the rat, scurrying away into the undergrowth.

"Buggeration!" Remus swore.

"I will go after him!" Tomas said. "You deal with the ward stone!"

Remus nodded absently and made for the rock that Peter had abandoned. He cast a number of charms on it before he deemed it destroy without further ado, obliterating it into small pieces.
He reversed the disillusion spell to reveal himself as Tomas ran back towards him. "The rat?"

Tomas shook his head. "He apparated as soon as he heard the rock explode. I tried to stun him but he got away."

Bugger. At least, the anti-transportation ward was down for everyone, Remus mused as he turned and started to run for the campsite, Tomas at his heels. He only hoped it was enough to save Harry.

Where the hell were the Aurors, Harry thought frantically as he stared at the tableau of the Death Eaters torturing the muggles.

Dealing with the fire, a voice in his head responded firmly. Harry's jaw set and he sprang out of the bush and levelled his wand.

"Harry…” Ron gasped but immediately got to his feet, pointing his own wand at the pair.

"Put them down!" Harry shouted.

The Death Eaters turned towards them and Harry pushed Ron out of the way of a curse as another screamed towards him. He shielded quickly and dived to the side, casting a wide-spread cushioning charm on the ground as the muggles were released, screaming.

One Death Eater advanced on him, threateningly…

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled. A burst of red shot out of his wand, travelling across the clearing with speed and impacting the surprised Death Eater who hadn't even moved out of the way.

"You brat!" The other Death Eater hollered. "Reducto!"

Harry threw himself backwards and the spell hit a tree. It groaned and swayed. Harry rolled out of the way.

Ron got to his feet and tried to stun the Death Eater but had to quickly dodge another reducto curse himself.

A red beam suddenly came out of nowhere and the Death Eater went down.

"Got you!"

Harry gave a relieved sigh as he recognised Wood from the Rat Squad and Oliver's cousin run into the clearing with Chambers.

"Chambers, bind the pair of them!" He made his way over to Harry and helped him to his feet.

"What are you doing out here, Harry?"

"Someone attacked the Potter alliance tent! They threatened the Weasleys – we're on our way to check on them!" Harry said. "Can you contact someone and let them know?"

"Harry, you should stay here with me and Chambers!" Wood said. "The rest of the Squad are dealing with the others but I can call Bones and…"

"No time!" Ron barked. "Come on, Harry!" He was off running again.

Harry gave Wood an apologetic shrug but he was already moving after Ron, following him out of
the trees and stumbling into a bright yellow tent that had been on the same row as the Weasleys. He searched immediately for the purple and pink colours and his heart froze at the sight of smoke…

"Merlin! It's on fire!" Ron exclaimed fearfully.

"Come on!" Harry grabbed his arm and helped Ron push through the gaggle of people who were crowded around the Weasleys smoking tent but not actually doing anything.

Harry finally got them through to the front with a judicious use of elbows. Just across on the other side of the crowd Hermione and Neville stumbled to the front just as Ron and Harry did.

"You followed us?" Harry asked surprised as Neville bent double trying to catch his breath.

"As if I'd let you and Ron run off into trouble without me." Hermione retorted. "Oh God, it's on fire! Does anyone know if they're in there?"

"I heard voices about ten minutes ago." An old woman confirmed behind Hermione. Others clamoured to add their agreement.

"Then what are you DOING?" Ron shouted. "MY FAMILY ARE IN THERE AND YOU'RE ALL STANDING AROUND LIKE NUMPTIES!" He made a dive towards the tent and bounced off a ward. He was thrown back and skidded across the dusty grass.

"That young man is why we've sent for the Aurors!" The old woman berated him.

"A lock down ward! It was used in the last war, Harry, and prevented the people inside from escaping and the people outside from helping!" Hermione said breathlessly. "Harry, you could overpower it with a reducto!"

"Don't you think we've tried!" A dark haired man snapped in an Irish accent.

Harry raised his wand. "Everyone stand back!" He warned as he pointed it at the Weasleys' tent. "REDUCTO!"

He made no effort to dial his power back and the stream of light half-blinded those at the front of the crowd; Hermione and Neville knew to cover their eyes.

The spell crashed into the ward and for a second the bright green colour of it was visible before it evaporated.

Ron hurled himself toward the tent. "DAD!"

Hermione caught hold of Harry as he went to follow, her wand casting around his head. A perfectly formed Bubble Head charm appeared and he nodded his thanks to her before entering the tent. The visibility was awful.

Thick grey smoke hovered over the space and Harry was grateful for the Bubble Head as he found Ron already incapacitated, coughing into his arm.

Neville appeared beside him with another Bubble Head around him and pointed at something moving in the corner.

"ARTHUR!" Harry called out. He raced over with Ron, trailing behind him.

Arthur was lying unconscious on the floor, glasses askew. He was curled up around Ginny who was conscious and crying into a damp tea towel which was wrapped around her face.
"Ron, get your Dad out! Neville, help him!" Harry ordered, knowing it would take the two of them to carry Arthur; both were taller and had more muscle mass than he did otherwise he would have been tempted to have asked Neville to rescue Ginny. He stooped and picked her up awkwardly. She held onto him tightly as he carried her out of the tent and into the open air.

He set her down, gently on the grass. "Ginny, who else is in the tent?"

"Charlie!" Ginny croaked out. "He was going to try to see if we could get through the back of the tent!"

Harry checked that Arthur was received healing and gently extracted himself from Ginny's grip to go back into the tent.

Hermione was looking after Ron who had collapsed coughing, his eyes streaming.

It was Neville who fell into step beside Harry as they made their way back through the dense fog of smoke. They headed into the back bedrooms and found Charlie passed out in the second one. It looked like he'd been thrown backwards because of the ward and hit his head; there was a bloody wound.

Neville grasped his legs and Harry took his shoulders. He wished Charlie wasn't quite so burly as they lugged his body through the tent. By the time they'd gotten outside, Harry's arms ached with the strain. They placed him down on the ground less than gently but it was that or drop him. The Bubble Head charm collapsed and Harry was assaulted once again with the stench of smoke.

"Merlin!"

The twins' voices sounded in unison as they pushed their way to the front of the crowd. Fred and George stumbled towards their family, their freckled faces pale.

"What…"

"…happened?"

"Some tosspot decided to try and kill us!" Ron snapped before being overcome with a wave of coughing.

Harry stepped back as people came forward from the crowd to heal Charlie. Fred and George gathered around Ginny as Ron hovered by his still unconscious father. He glanced toward the treeline and saw a flash of red through the dark silhouettes.

The fake Auror!

Anger stole his breath.

His mind filled with one thought: to catch the bastard!

Harry ran into the trees after the guy. He was filled with rage, his heart almost bursting with it.

How could someone try and hurt the Weasleys?!

Hurt Minerva?!

Try to torture Neville?!

He crashed through a bush and almost got hit with a stream of yellow light. Harry flung himself to
the ground, rolled and came up swinging.

He snapped off a reducto towards the red robed figure who laughed and dodged it – a tree shattered into splinters on the other side.

"Good but not good enough!" A purple curse shot towards him…

Harry dived forward again – and lost his glasses.

"Confrigo!" The guy yelled.

Harry bolted out of the way as the blasting curse hit the ground where he had just been sending up a shower of dirt and grass that obscured his view even more.

A second later he was hit with a cutting hex, his upper left arm slicing open and bleeding freely.

He sent a banishing charm toward the blur of red he could see and was pleased when the figure got tossed backwards.

He used the moment to get to his feet and try to get his bearings but a sudden stream of spells shot in his direction and he found himself back on the defensive, shielding desperately against a barrage of offensive curses.

"You want to play! Let's play!"

Harry dodged another spell as his shield broke apart.

"Hey! Stupefy!" Neville shouted. His spell went way wide of the target but did what Neville had wanted – it diverted attention from Harry.

"A Longbottom to play with!" The man taunted with a laugh. "How wonderful!"

A spell shot over in Neville's direction and Harry scrambled to his feet as Neville tried to evade and fell.

"There's no Grandmother to help you now!" The blur shouted. "Crucio!"

The light sped across the clearing and Harry knew he would never reach Neville in time to save him…

"Familius magicus protectus!" Harry called out furiously, raising his ring hand in Neville's direction – hoping beyond hope that the family magic could stop the Unforgiveable.

Magic rushed through Harry and it was like getting caught in a flood of warmth and power and rage…

A stream of gold shot out of his hand, arched through the air becoming the Longbottom bear…

It roared loud enough that Harry fell back on his bottom, shocked as the bear collided with the Crucio and swallowed it!

The bear landed and roared again…rearing up on its hinds paws, almost as tall as the trees.

The guy snarled a word Harry couldn't make out and disappeared. Portkey, Harry thought absently; there must have been a portkey.
Neville got to his feet and Harry staggered to his. The bear lowered itself to the ground and ambled back to them. Harry nodded an acknowledgement at the large gold beast which bumped its head into Harry as though asking for petting, stunned that it had responded to his call.

It gave a grunt, nudged Neville and disappeared.

Neville slapped Harry's shoulder and Harry winced as it jarred his injured arm.

"Gran's going to be furious," Neville said, conversationally, "that completely beat her rock thing hands down."

Harry stared in shock at Neville for a moment before he burst into giggles, within seconds the two of them were laughing slightly hysterically. Harry swiped at his eyes as the laughter started to shift to relieved tears.

"Accio glasses!" Harry caught the gold-frames as they zipped to him. He really needed to find a way to keep them on his face. "We should head back." He said putting them on, worried about the Weasleys.

A black Grim suddenly burst through the undergrowth and transformed into Sirius.

"HARRY!"

"Padfoot!"

It wasn't even a conscious decision.

Harry launched himself into Sirius's arms. Sirius caught him, hauling him into a tight hug. Harry didn't notice as Remus arrived a moment later to sling an arm around Neville.

Harry clung onto Sirius, burying his face in Sirius's damp and smoke-scented shirt.

Everything was going to be OK.
ATTACKS AT THE WORLD CUP! Rita Skeeter

To the shock of all, the wondrous Quidditch World Cup last night ended in terror with a series of attacks from malcontents.

A serious fire broke out at the stadium itself resulting in the evacuation of the Minister's party which included prominent members of the Wizengamot, the Irish and Bulgarian Ministers. Although initially thought of an accident, the erection of anti-transport wards suggested a bleaker purpose. Aurors on site with the help of volunteers led by Lord Sirus Black managed to keep the fire contained to the East and North stands before relinquishing their place to the Magical Catastrophe team who brought a Magical Fire Unit. Questions were raised by Lord Black at the scene why a Unit hadn't been acquired for the stadium to meet standard fire regulations. The Minister of Magic has promised an immediate investigation.

Unfortunately, the fire was but a diversion for four different attacks. The first was directed at Lord Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, and it was only the bravery of family friends William Weasley and Minerva McGonagall that prevented the kidnapping of young Harry, who heroically shielded everyone else in the tent including many women and children while the brave two engaged the attacker.

Close friend Karen Abbott stated: "Harry, Minerva and Bill protected everyone in the Potter Alliance tent. We owe them a great debt of gratitude." Professor McGonagall, a Hogwarts teacher for many years, sustained minor injuries and was released last night by St Mungo's into the care of Lord Black. Mister Weasley remains in critical condition at the hospital having sustained a dark curse that turned his liver to jelly.

The Weasley family was itself a target of the second attack which found their tent subjected to a lockdown ward and set on fire. Alerted to the danger by the taunts of the Potter Alliance attacker, Harry once again played rescuer along with the Weasleys' youngest son Ronald and school friends, Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom. In an impressive show of magic, Harry overpowered the ward and the children rescued Arthur Weasley, the current Chair of the Muggle Affairs Committee, his daughter Ginevra and his son Charles. All three remained in St Mungo's overnight for observation.

Additionally, a muggleborn family was attacked by two men wearing black robes and white masks reminiscent of You-Know-Who's followers, and separately there was an incident of muggle-baiting by similarly dressed men. These attackers were apprehended by the DMLE and the families involved sustained minor injuries.

It is suspected that these attacks are a protest against the move to acknowledge the recent technological and scientific advances of muggles in order to better protect our world. Minister Fudge stated forcefully: "These men will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. We will not bow to terrorists and trying to invoke the past fear and anguish of You-Know-Who's reign by wearing similar costumes and executing similar tactics is particularly despicable."

We at the Daily Prophet fully support the Minister's position and our best wishes go to the Weasley family for a speedy recovery.

Simeon finished reading the article over Sirius's shoulder and sighed as he took a seat on the opposite side of the desk. "At least the press came out positive for our side."
Sirius grimaced. "That was pretty much Cornelius's reaction."

"From his point of view, everything worked out." Remus said from his position by the window. "The Death Eaters were caught; nobody died; all else is manageable in his view. He'll end up giving Bagman a slap on the wrist because of the missing Fire Unit and call it a job well done."

"And they call me the pessimistic one." Sirius muttered. But Remus was right. His conversation with Cornelius via the floo had already covered every single one of Remus's points although he had agreed a proper investigation for the Fire Unit was called for since its lack was used to enable arson.

"So the main issue is the life debts, right?" Simeon said. "Working out the mess of who saved who?"

"Unfortunately." Sirius confirmed glumly. "I think everyone considers the fire a group effort since it threatened everyone and everyone took care of it…"

"So quid pro quo." Simeon nodded. "Obviously nobody is going to claim the muggle family owe a life debt?"

"If they owe a life debt to anyone, it's possibly Harry who distracted the Death Eaters when the boys stumbled over them according to what he said last night." Sirius said thoughtfully. "But there's no precedent for enforcing a life debt when a muggle owes it because of the Statute of Secrecy so…"

"No life debt." Simeon concluded.

"Nor for the muggleborn family as they were ultimately rescued by Aurors, who are, by virtue of their profession, excluded from life debts." Remus shifted position, turning to face the room rather than the gardens.

"Which leaves the attack on the Potter alliance and the Weasleys." Simeon said.

"According to Harry's statement last night to Amelia, we can deduce that the efforts of three people saved those in the Potter alliance tent; Bill and Minerva who fought with the attacker, and Harry himself in raising the shield." Remus stated quietly. "The presence of Harry within the tent arguably was the reason for the danger thus negating any life debt owed to him, and it's also arguable that he was acting in concert with the oaths taken between the alliance so again; no life debt owed."

"Some will feel that no life debt is owed to Bill and Minerva because they were defeated in the duel and the attacker ultimately left because he couldn't get to Harry or anyone else behind the shield. Well, he tried to hurt Neville but the House of Longbottom saved itself in that instance." Sirius added.

"I would suggest proposing to the rest of the alliance that any debt to Bill and Minerva is owed by the House of Potter and allow us to handle the matter." Remus advised.

"Is any debt owed by the House of Potter for Weasley?" Simeon interjected. "Forgive me if I'm wrong but he was there because he's sworn to service and that includes an element of acknowledged risk. He took on the duty of guarding Harry of his own accord."

"I agree with Simeon," Remus held up a hand when Sirius went to argue, "I would feel that there was no debt if it had been me instead of Bill. Plus there's the fact that Harry in turn saved Arthur, Ginny and Charlie last night. In the balance of things it may be better to suggest to the House of Weasley that in the spirit of the alliance of friendship, both Houses agree no debts are owed on either side, although Arthur probably needs a separate discussion with the Longbottoms – Neville did risk his life saving Arthur and Charlie."
"Fair enough." Sirius said. "Which leaves Minnie."

"Who is the Regent Apparent to the House of Potter and therefore by law is directed to protect Lord Potter as a minor." Simeon pointed out. "No life debt."

"Well, we may still want to do something personally to acknowledge her." Remus said to Sirius.

"I was thinking of offering her a permanent home in Griffin House," Sirius mused out loud. He'd been thinking about it for a while since Minnie had spent a lot of time with them during the Summer. She'd actually been released into their care the night before by St Mungo's and was currently at Griffin House being fussed over by Dobby and Harry. "What do you think?"

Remus nodded. "It's OK with me. But you'll need to talk to Harry."

Sirius nodded. He'd intended to without Remus's word of caution. Griffin House was Harry's home first and foremost. "Well, that deals with the life debts. I'll send out a letter to all the Heads of Houses who had family in the Potter alliance tent to confirm they agree."

"How is Harry this morning?" asked Simeon, reaching for his discarded coffee cup.

"Grounded until he's thirty." Sirius replied dryly. He didn't think the fear of losing Harry that had flooded him on receiving news of the attack would ever leave him. The terror he'd felt when he'd arrived at the Potter alliance tent only for Harry not to be there; in arriving at the Weasleys' tent only to be told by Hermione that Harry had just suddenly charged into the woods…

He'd listened when Harry had given his statement to Amelia and had been alternatively proud and furious; proud at Harry's heroism, his skills and his steadfastness in his friendships; furious that so much of what Harry had done had put him at risk especially his last act…

The fact that Harry had acted in anger going after the attacker was something that Sirius understood – he'd done the same thing with Wormtail after all – but it scared Sirius. The outcome could have been so much worse than that of a bad cut and some colourful bruises. Harry had sheepishly admitted that he'd been outclassed in his duel and if Neville hadn't turned up and created a diversion…

"Seriously?" asked Simeon with amusement. "He saves everyone and you ground him?"

Sirius leaned back in his desk chair and ignored the snort from the peanut gallery also known as Moony. "Just you wait until Jason gets older."

"Actually, Harry pinpointed his own mistakes; going with Ron without asking any adult to accompany them and going after the attacker alone in the woods. He even suggested his own punishment," Remus added, amusement colouring his tone again, "since Padfoot and he have this punishment system they worked out a while ago so we're consistent across the board when he does something wrong."

Sirius harrumphed but he couldn't deny Remus's charge.

They'd waited until breakfast before a discussion and a rehash of events because they'd all been exhausted the night before. Apart from the attacks themselves, everyone had been interviewed by Aurors and then they'd all gone to St Mungo's for treatment. Bed and a good night's sleep had been the priority for everyone once they'd gotten home.

But coming down to breakfast, Sirius had been all ready to yell at Harry, point out just how much danger he had placed himself in by running in without thinking, and hand out Harry's punishment of
being grounded for the rest of his life. Before he could utter a word, the blighter had apologised, acknowledged his mistakes and accepted his punishment according to the system they'd worked out. Sirius had settled for hugging the daylights out of Harry again.

Simeon nodded slowly. "I guess there have to be rules. Or so Anna keeps telling me." He grinned, drained his coffee and stood up. "Speaking of the ball and chain, Anna wants to hit Harrods today for last minute souvenirs and shopping. You need me for anything?"

Sirius shook his head. "Don't forget tonight's the Farewell Dinner; family only."

"See you then, mon frère." Simeon left the study and Sirius dropped his gaze to the Prophet again.

Remus moved from the window and dropped into a chair. He steepled his fingers together. "Harry wasn't the only one to make mistakes yesterday."

"Are you suggesting I should ground myself, Moony?" Sirius asked disgruntled at the criticism but feeling that he deserved it.

"Actually I was referring to me."

Sirius's head shot up at the chagrined shame of Remus's quiet statement. "You didn't do anything wrong. Merlin, I was the one who pushed you into taking on translation duty for Cornelius instead of protecting Harry as we agreed."

"If I had objected you would have apologised and found someone else. You were only asked in the first place because I showed off my language skills instead of keeping Mum, and drew Cornelius's attention." Remus protested. "And once the fire broke out, I should never have asked you for help and I should have made my way straight to you and Harry rather than letting Amelia side-track me with finding the anti-transportation ward." He sighed. "And let's not forget my letting the rat get away again!"

"Firstly, I will state again that it was me who made the decision on the translation duty and, honestly, if I had sent Harry home with Simeon and Anna after meeting the Quidditch teams, none of the rest of it would have mattered!" Sirius countered, rubbing his head at the slight throb of a headache.

"You wanted him to enjoy the moment!" Remus argued. "And we thought everything would happen later!"

"We knew there was a death threat, I was stupid not to have evacuated him immediately when you sent the message." Sirius said simply. "And I should never have left Harry even if I do have the training to deal with a fire," he continued, "if I had been there…"

"It may have deterred the attacker, it may not," Remus pointed out, "we don't know for certain. You might have ended up the same way as Bill. The attacker probably would have still gone after the Weasleys and if he did and we didn't have a warning of it…" he sighed heavily, "Molly could quite have easily been mourning a husband, a son and her only daughter this morning."

Sirius acknowledged the truth of that by inclining his head a touch. It was a sobering thought.

"The truth is that no single decision either you or I took in isolation was wrong, necessarily at the time. We just need to learn from yesterday and…" Remus waved a hand at him, "not make the same mistakes again."

"Yesterday shows we should dump plan B and go with plan A." Sirius muttered.
"No, Sirius, we're not wrapping Harry in cotton wool and hiding him from the world for the rest of his natural life." Remus objected before he grimaced. "No matter how much I might want to go with that plan. Besides, plan B isn't working out too badly."

Sirius harrumphed and got up. He wandered over to the far side of the study and with a stab of his wand, revealed the hidden blackboard that detailed out their original plan.

"Politically, we're solid." Remus said walking up to stand next to him. "The Potter alliance is back; the Order of Merlin recipients are already agreed to join at the September session. You'll have the neutral bloc alliances to announce along with the détente with Wilkes and Selwyn to go along with the one you have with Nott."

Sirius folded his arms. "Solid is a good word. We can start to make some real changes to the laws by Christmas."

Remus nodded. "Just as we planned. So, we're shutting down Voldemort's access to political power and decreasing the number of allies he has and the financial base he can draw upon." He sighed and pointed his wand at the board. 'Foreign policy' appeared as a task. "We need to think about this more."

"Agreed. The Treasure Hunt isn't going so well." Sirius commented.

"It's stalled," agreed Remus, "but I think getting rid of three of the six horcruxes isn't a bad showing. We only have two to go since the diary is already handled."

"We should probably get rid of the snake too, Albus is right about that." Sirius added a note to the board. "Well, Godric's Hollow is on hold until Bill's out of the hospital and we'll have to wait for him and Caro to have a legitimate reason to be in Hogwarts to search for the diadem."

"Tag the Death Eater worked well for the World Cup." Remus said. "The problem was the rogue who upset the applecart and who apparently is working with Voldemort since Peter was helping him last night."

Sirius took in the pain on Remus's face and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's not your fault he got away."

"It is my fault." Remus argued. "I should have done something more! Tomas thinks he managed to catch him with a cutting hex when Peter transformed to apparate but as it was meant to disable rather than kill, Peter probably survived it. I couldn't even nail Peter with a stunner!"

"Because he transformed into his animagus form." Sirius said. "He's bloody difficult to catch or hit because of his form. I should know!"

Remus pointed his wand at the board and 'find a way to neutralise the rat' appeared. "We need to take away his advantage. There are some old wards that will force an animagus into human form. I'll research them."

Sirius patted his shoulder

"We also need to know who this Hollins guy really is since the real Auror Hollins was busy dealing with the fire." Sirius murmured unhappily.

"Agreed; we need to focus some effort on finding out who the rogue is and shutting him down." Remus said, adding the item to the blackboard.
"I'll settle for killing him." Sirius said evenly.

That Remus didn't argue showed the werewolf's own anger at the man who'd managed to get close enough to Harry to almost kill him.

"We have an unknown rogue and we have Voldemort and the rat staying somewhere unknown. We know they're working together." Remus mused out loud. "None of the known Death Eaters are hiding the bastards."

Sirius frowned. "You think they're staying together?"

"It's probable," Remus said, "since Wormtail admitted that the rogue was acting on Voldemort's order. I think this guy must be whoever is giving Voldemort house-space. Voldemort knows about him. The other Death Eaters don't, yes, which is why Lucius doesn't know about him… but his Master? No. I hate to agree with Lucius but I think he's right; this is someone like Peter; someone Voldemort kept secret in the war."

"Great." Sirius snarled. He swept a hand through his hair.

"Thinking about it, this was all probably an attempt to grab Harry for this ritual we think Voldemort is planning," Remus continued, "if they had Harry, they could keep him terrorised and challenged for the nine months without using the tournament."

"You think the tournament is their plan B?" Sirius asked as his blood ran cold as he thought about Harry being kept somewhere, being tortured and hurt.

"Yes. The more I think about it, the more I do." Remus sighed. "I think I'm pleased Harry has grounded himself until he goes to Hogwarts."

Sirius couldn't speak. He nodded.

It was Remus's turn to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'll be OK, Padfoot. The other thing that is going well is Harry's training. He needs some more duelling practice but he's good. He survived long enough against someone who downed Bill for help to arrive; that's no mean feat."

"Right," said Sirius, trying to take comfort in Remus's words, "and he knows his animagus form now. He just needs to perfect it. If he could transform…"

"Even if he was abducted, he'd have a way out nobody would suspect." Remus agreed. He sighed and pointed at the board where they'd written 'the power he knows not.' "We have two candidates for this power: the Hallows and the family magic."

"He called the Longbottom magic." Sirius said. "Augusta told me that she'd asked Amelia to change Neville's statement to say family magic rather than detailing that it was theirs and not ours that got called. Harry only said in his statement that he had called family magic."

"Do you think Ollivander's story is right? That Harry as the most powerful wizard of his generation can call on all of the family magic?" Remus asked.

"Maybe, or it could be the oath of fealty allowed Harry to call Neville's family magic when Neville was in danger – Neville pledged his magic to Harry." Sirius sighed and shrugged. "We still know so little about how it works and Harry's relationship to it."

"Which leaves us with the Hallows." Remus sighed. "The source Ollivander quoted wasn't in your grandfather's papers. I haven't been able to track it down. I think I should ask Ollivander."
"We're not there yet." Sirius cautioned him. "We still have to confront Albus about the wand."

"Are you telling Harry as planned?" asked Remus frowning.

"Yes," Sirius nodded, "and we'll discuss what he wants to do." He sighed. "I want to protect him but he needs to know that Albus will continue to keep things from him."

"And justify it all with 'it's for his own good.'" Remus added with a touch of bitterness.

"Or the Greater Good," pointed out Sirius wryly, "whichever he feels will most suit the situation at hand." He shook himself briskly like Padfoot and did a tempus charm. "I'm going to head to St Mungo's. I promised Harry I'd look in on Bill and the rest of the Weasley clan personally since he can't leave the house."

Remus nodded crisply. "Leave the board out. I want to have a think and maybe add a couple of things."

Sirius patted his back. "Thanks, Moony."

It didn't take long to get to the floo and travel to the premier wizarding hospital. He had left orders that the Weasleys be treated with the honour bestowing an Ancient and Noble House so he wasn't surprised to find they'd been designated a private suite on the Spell Damage Ward. He bought a couple of things from the gift shop and headed up in one of the lifts with a surprisingly cheerful ghost who had died two weeks before from choking on a chicken bone in the waiting room.

He slowed in the corridor as he spotted Percy Weasley outside the suite door in the corridor, facing the wall and crying into the sleeve of his robe.

"Percy?" prompted Sirius gently. "Is...are you alright?" He huffed. "Stupid question, I know, I mean obviously you're not alright. How could you be alright with half your family in the hospital?"

"That's not..." Percy swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, and Sirius juggled the balloons and gifts to hand him a handkerchief. "Sorry, Lord Black."

"Call me Sirius." Sirius corrected softly. "Now, what's the problem?"

Percy hesitated but he heaved a sigh and gave in to the need to confide in someone. "I had to go into work this morning. The department has a huge amount of clean-up to do and Mister Crouch is still recovering from the flu – he had to leave straight after the match yesterday and sent an owl this morning rather than coming in himself!" He said defensively. "I took an early lunch break so I could come and see everyone but they're all mad at me anyway."

"Because you went to work rather than staying with your family?" Sirius clarified.

And he could understand why the rest of the Weasley children might not appreciate Percy's work ethic. With the exception of Percy himself, Molly, Fred and George, the rest of the Weasleys had been attacked and hospitalised. Most people would have taken the day to be with them. On the other hand, the sense of responsibility that had dictated Percy's action in going to work wasn't a bad thing. Crouch should have offered him a personal day, Sirius thought irritated, but then that was Crouch all over; unthinking and uncompromising.

Percy nodded. "I do care that they almost died..." he looked embarrassed at the admission. "But I'm needed at work."

"Percy," Sirius began cautiously, "I know you admire Mister Crouch greatly," and Sirius tried hard
Percy straightened his shoulders. "I don't want to let Mister Crouch down and I have responsibilities. I don't know why others don't see that."

Sirius knew it was futile to keep arguing. "Well, I should make my way inside. Will you join me?"

"I should get back to the office." Percy said, looking towards the door with a mixture of want and hurt. "Tell them I'll be by later."

"Of course." Sirius watched him walk away and sighed. He was hardly going to get through to the young man, he reminded himself. He and Percy's new hero, Crouch, had too much enmity for that.

He knocked sharply on the door and entered at the chorus of 'come in' from the Weasleys behind the door.

The room was very restful, decked out in calm sea-greens and deep night-time blues. Large windows let in lots of sunlight. There were four beds; two either side of the room. Arthur and Ginny were on the left, Bill and Charlie on the right. Bill was closest to the door designating his position as the one most requiring attention; the twins sat one either side of the bed keeping watch on their sleeping brother. Ron sat on Charlie's bed playing chess.

Most of the faces lit up with one notable exception; Molly who was camped out with knitting needles between Arthur and Ginny. Remus had been the one to collect her from the Burrow and escort her to St Mungo's the night before and Sirius wasn't looking forward to her reaction to seeing him especially without…

"Where's Harry?" Molly immediately asked.

"Hello to you too, Molly." Sirius greeted her wryly. Before she could say anything more, he handed her the 'Get Well' balloons. He made his way to Arthur and handed him the large box of chocolates and tin of biscuits he'd bought. "For you and your family, Arthur."

"Thank you, Sirius." Arthur said, watching in amusement as his wife's face turned red. "I take it you kept Harry home given the attempt on his life yesterday?"

"He's also grounded for taking unnecessary risks. Obviously while we're happy he saved you, some of his actions lacked forethought." Sirius began to explain.

"Like going after the bloke who did it?" Arthur nodded.

Ron scowled. "I would have gone after him too if Hermione hadn't sat on me."

"And you would have been grounded too if you had." Arthur said firmly. "I might be very proud of your helping to rescue us, Ron, but I'm still debating what on earth was going through your head asking Harry to help you instead of an adult since he has a death threat hanging over him."

Ron flushed red.

"Harry sends his love," Sirius said, changing the topic slightly, "we tried to see you last night but by the time we'd finished with the Aurors, the Ward was closed to all but family and the night mediwitch refused to let us in."
She had been singularly unimpressed with Sirius's Lordship or Harry's status as the Boy Who Lived.

"Then, we were asked to take Minerva home so…"

Molly sat down again with a harrumph. "How is Minerva?"

"Mostly annoyed," Sirius waved a hand towards Bill, "and feeling guilty she didn't do more. Physically she's healed although she was moving a bit carefully at breakfast. Dobby made her take a pain relief potion."

"Bill will be relieved to hear she's better when he's awake," Arthur said. "They've got him in a healing sleep to get around the pain issue as his liver heals. He won't wake until late this afternoon."

Sirius nodded in understanding. He pointed at a plush soft toy of a snake on his bedside cabinet. "Present?"

"From the woman he works with," Molly sniffed, "Caroline Something?" Her face brightened. "Alicia was here earlier too. She's working a shift right now but will be back later. They make a lovely couple."

Evidently Molly was already planning a wedding, Sirius thought half-amused.

"The Healers were very complementary about Alicia's immediate care in Bill's case; they think it saved his life." Arthur shuffled further up against his pillows and Molly immediately moved to help him, pushing past Sirius who moved out of her way. "Speaking of which, I'm glad you're here, Sirius, because I could do with your advice about the life debt issues incurred last night."

Molly cleared her throat loudly. "Boys, you can go and get some fresh air for a while." She shooed the twins and Ron from the room with an efficiency that enthralled and appalled Sirius in equal measure. She moved onto Ginny very quickly. "Come along, Ginny, we should get you cleaned up and into fresh clothes. The Healers said you would be released this afternoon; no need for you to be lollygagging in your nightwear."

They were both out of the room were surprising speed despite Ginny's pleading eyes to her father.

Sirius sighed. "Remus, Simeon and I were just discussing the life debt business before I came here. It's a bit of a mess really."

"What was your conclusion?" asked Arthur.

Sirius explained the discussion succinctly. "I'd like to think we agree that the actions Bill took to save Harry and Harry took to save your family cancel each other out in the spirit of the alliance of friendship between the House of Potter and the House of Weasley."

Arthur grimaced. "I think you're letting us off lightly there, Sirius, but I'll take the proposal with thanks." He sighed. "I'll also accept that no-one in the Potter alliance tent owes a debt to Bill, I think he'll agree with that since his actions ultimately failed to protect them."

Sirius winced. "I wouldn't put it that way, Arthur."

"You didn't," Arthur reminded him, "and no matter how proud I am of Bill's actions last night, the truth is that he lost the duel."

"He's going to kick himself silly over that." Charlie offered. The second eldest son of the Weasley brood had been listening quietly since Arthur and Sirius had begun their discussion.
"Whoever it was that attacked us is a very powerful and accomplished wizard." Sirius noted. They should really consider that part of the profile as they tried to reduce suspects. Not everybody had a talent to make the potion needed to impersonate someone; not everyone had a talent for duelling and warding.

"So the remaining issue is Neville Longbottom." Arthur broke into Sirius's thoughts. "The boy risked his life in saving me and Charlie."

"I can do what Bill did, Dad," Charlie offered, "swear service to the House of Longbottom for a time."

"Actually, I think Augusta would prefer the use of your old stables behind the orchard at the Burrow. She's been having trouble with finding a new stable for the Longbottom horses since she's on the verge of selling their Spanish place. I know Remus has been pricing building one for her at Longbottom Manor." Sirius said dryly. "Your stables would be fine with a couple of days work to fix them up. You could negotiate a reasonable deal there."

"Ginny would be happy," Arthur commented, "she always wanted a pony." He sighed and glanced over at Charlie. "Thank you for the offer though, son."

"It's my life he saved, Dad." Charlie pointed out. "My Bubble Head must have collapsed when I got thrown backwards. I'm never going to live that down when I get back to the Reserve."

"Well, at least you cast yours correctly." Arthur said with chagrin. "Mine was hopeless and the one I cast on Ginny hardly lasted any longer."

"I can't do them properly either." Sirius commiserated. "Mine are complete bollocks. Moony always had to cast them for me. Harry said Hermione did his and Neville's."

Arthur smiled gratefully. "Did you read today's paper? The theory that this person wants to defeat the move to establish a closer relationship with muggles?"

"I'm not sure Rita's got it right." Sirius said. "But he's working for Voldemort and it's something Voldemort would want stopped."

"All the more reason to go forward then. You-Know- Voldemort will find that the Weasleys aren't so easily cowed." Arthur said firmly. "We haven't been a Gryffindor family for years for no reason."

Sirius smiled at him. "You're a good man, Arthur, although I suspect that you'll have a meeting with Amelia to discuss security measures in your near future to look forward to."

Arthur nodded. "I find that I'm surprisingly alright with whatever measures Amelia thinks I should take." He smiled grimly. "I might be a Gryffindor but I do have a family to protect." He sighed. "I should apologise for Ron dragging Harry with him to check on us but if he hadn't..."

Sirius struggled with what to say and ended up sighing. "They're friends. If it had been James and I...we would have done exactly the same. Harry knows he should have grabbed an adult to go with them or sent an adult in the first place but...you're right. If they hadn't checked on you...those lockdown wards are bloody hard to bring down. Harry's probably one of the few wizards on the planet who could overpower a ward like that." He shifted his weight. "Remus says we all need to learn from our mistakes and move on. I think he's right."

Arthur nodded.

Sirius cast another look at Bill. "I'll come back tonight to visit Bill when he's awake."
"Thank you for visiting, Sirius, and give our love to Harry." Arthur smiled.

Sirius nodded briskly and left the room with a wave to Charlie.

He flooed back to Black Manor, spent an hour doing correspondence on the life debt issue and finally, flooed back to Griffin House.

Dobby popped in immediately. "Harry Potter is in the sun room with Harry Potter's Professor McGoggles and Mooey."

Sirius thanked Dobby fondly and wandered down to the sun room. He could hear Minnie's voice before he entered the room and realised she was leading Harry through a meditation. His footsteps automatically sped up.

Harry was once again a raven. He perched on the seat of a chair opposite Minnie who looked gleeful even as her voice carried on in soothing tones, encouraging Harry to get used to the feel of his wings, his clawed feet, his sharp beak, and his keen eyes.

Remus grinned at him from a corner of the room and Hedwig watched silently, perched on the back of a dining chair. Sirius was relieved that Remus and Hedwig were present. Minnie was at heart a tabby cat and if she let her animagus form gain control for just a moment...well, he trusted Remus and Hedwig would protect his little raven. Or, thought Sirius with some amusement seeing the intent look on Hedwig's face, her raven. Maybe he should call Harry 'Owlet?'

"Begin to think of your human form, Harry," Minnie said firmly, "consider your toes; wriggle them, imagine them sinking back into the rug. Consider your legs and how they support you as you sit on your bottom. Consider your body. Consider your arms and your fingers. The shape and feel of your fingertips. Consider your face; your features. Keep thinking, Harry. Remember how you feel as a human. You have skin not feathers. You have a nose not a beak. You have feet not claws. You have arms not wings. Let the raven fly away and resume your human form."

Harry blurred and transformed.

But not completely.

He was covered with black feathers.

Sirius couldn't help it. He burst into laughter and Remus followed. Harry shot him an annoyed look but then his eyes dropped to his hand, covered with tiny black feathers and the disgust on Harry's face set Remus off again.

"Really, Mister Lupin, Mister Black," Minnie sniffed haughtily, "I fail to see what is so amusing."

Sirius got a hold of himself. "Sorry, Harry."

"Now, Harry, close your eyes and think of skin, the tiny lines that run across it, the colour of it, the small hairs that coat the surface. Keep your skin in your mind. Think of it. Remember how the wind feels against it or the sun. Focus." Minnie continued, ignoring Sirius and Remus in favour of returning to the lesson.

Harry blurred again and when he solidified he was without feathers.

"Excellent, Harry!" Minnie clapped her hands. "Excellent!"

Hedwig barked her approval.
"That was brilliant." Sirius added, moving into the room properly to hug his son.

"Maybe we should call you Feathers?" Remus offered, coming forward to sit beside Harry.

Harry pulled a face at him and gestured at Sirius impatiently. "Did you see Bill?"

"I did," Sirius said, "he was sleeping but he's going to be fine. I'll go back later to talk with him. Arthur and the other Weasleys send their love. They're all OK, just being kept in for observation."

Harry breathed out and relief skittered over his features before settling there as though he'd accepted that he could be vulnerable enough to show it in front of them.

"That's a relief to know." Minnie said. "I believe I should join you in duelling practice. It has been many years since I have had to defend myself in such a way and I was less than useful."

"You were brilliant!" defended Harry gallantly. "The thing you did setting the chairs on him was really cool."

Minnie flushed with pleasure at the praise but she shook her head. "I need practice I'm afraid." She looked directly at Sirius. "I would like to join your DADA lessons."

"You're more than welcome." Sirius said. "However, Harry will be back in Hogwarts this time next week."

He had to hide the smile that he wanted to make at the stunned expression on her face as she realised she'd forgotten.

"However, we can always stop by the school and provide some extra tutoring." Remus offered, sounding as amused as Sirius felt. "Just a thought."

"A good one." Harry said eagerly. "Maybe we could do a session mid-week? I'd have practice for the duelling elective that way."

"We'll be in the Hogsmeade property so close by." Remus reminded him brightly.

The Hogsmeade property was a three bedroomed cottage on the outskirts that had needed complete renovation; the tiny kitchen, dining room and front parlour were being remodelled into a kitchen with an attached small orangery at the back and an open plan living and dining area. Remus would take the attic room which would have an en-suite shower, leaving the two bedrooms on the first floor for Harry and Sirius. Harry had the small room; Sirius had the double; they'd share a bathroom. It was cozy and charming, and would do as a bolthole for Harry if he wanted to spend Hogsmeade weekends with them. Sirius was happy to live there while Harry was in school. The Three Broomsticks was a brisk ten minute walk from the front gate; Honeydukes and the Shrieking Shack were also within walking distance and offering easy passage into Hogwarts.

"I think in the circumstances Albus would not say no. There is a clear and present danger to Harry which would justify the extra training and the special treatment." Minnie said enthusiastically.

Sirius was certain that Albus would say yes and offer to help. But if it meant he would get time with Harry while he was at school, Sirius wouldn't complain overly much. He might suggest opening up the training to Harry's friends to mitigate the special treatment issue and that would hopefully put Albus off for a while.

He nodded. "I'll speak with Albus later. We're due to have a War Council at six." He decided a change of subject was in order. "The animagus training is obviously going well."
"Harry is a natural." Minnie gushed – gushed! – and smiled proudly at Harry. "I've rarely used this meditative technique in animagus training but it works wonderfully for him. It seems to be easier than training separate body parts to transform and then to resize the whole." She considered Harry as though contemplating an interesting object. "Perhaps there is a study to be done of the experience. What do you think, Mister Potter?"

Harry looked surprised. "Me?"

"Well, you would need to keep a journal as would I." Minnie suggested. "Publication, of course, would wait until you would want to make your animagus form public."

"Is it really different what I'm doing?" asked Harry, worrying his bottom lip thoughtfully.

"Unique." Minnie said dryly. "You have an instinctive talent, Harry. I actually think you'd have a good chance of transforming into one of the other forms available to you if you meditated on it long enough."

Harry perked up again. "Really? Because I love my raven form but if I could change into the others that would be brilliant."

"Well, let's focus on getting you trained up in the raven form first." Remus said before realising he'd stepped into Minnie's territory and hastily correcting his error. "I mean, if that's what you think, Minerva."

Minnie sent Remus a sharp look to say she wasn't fooled but she nodded. "Quite right, Remus." She turned back to Harry. "We'll get you comfortable with your raven form first before trying any others." She grimaced a little. "And now I think I shall retire to my room and rest for a while."

She turned away the offers to escort her and the three men were left in the sun room feeling rather helpless.

"She is going to be OK, isn't she?" Harry asked worriedly.

"She's going to be fine. She's a tough old cat." Sirius reassured him. "We, Remus and I, thought we might invite her to move in here more permanently – consider it her home away from Hogwarts? What do you think?"

"Sure." Harry nodded.

"You don't have any concerns about living with one of your Professors during the holidays?" asked Remus when Sirius floundered.

Harry shrugged. "If it was Snape maybe."

Sirius gave a dramatic shudder. "Perish the thought."

"And besides, I'm already living with Remus and he was a Professor," Harry pointed out with simple logic, "and she was Dad's godmother and my Gran's best friend, and I think they'd want us to be Aunt Minnie's family. Right?"

"Right." Sirius said faintly.

"Can I take my Firebolt out?" asked Harry abruptly.

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "I thought we agreed you were grounded."
And there they were; those green eyes of pleading doom.

"Harry." Sirius said warningly.

Harry gave in, folding his arms tightly over his chest.

Sirius sighed and reached over to drag his son into a hug. "I love you, you know that, right?"

"I know." Harry said, his arms creeping around Sirius to return the embrace. "And I know I'm grounded and why. I shouldn't have gone chasing after the guy."

"We all made mistakes yesterday." Sirius allowed, tightening his hold. "At least going after the Weasleys helped saved their lives but you have to stop putting yourself at risk." He gave another sigh. "But I have to make better decisions about your safety too."

He didn't want to fall into Albus's trap of protecting Harry at the cost of his happiness but neither did he want to indulge Harry too much and risk his life.

And speaking of indulging…

"One hour on your Firebolt."

Harry yanked himself backwards in surprise before he hugged Sirius hard enough to drive the breath from Sirius's body. Harry dived out of the door before Sirius could say another word, obviously deciding that he should act before Sirius changed his mind. Hedwig followed no doubt to keep an eye on him in the sky.

Remus waited until Harry was gone before he raised an eyebrow knowingly at Sirius.

"Don't say it!" barked Sirius.

He gathered what was left of his dignity and made for his study. He was not a soft touch just because he let Harry go out on his broom. He was simply allowing Harry some freedom since Harry would be going nowhere else for the remainder of the Summer except to Black Manor for his lessons. Sirius was a perfectly responsible parent.

His chest ached anew at the memory of the night before; at the thought of losing Harry; the panic and the terror he'd felt when he'd realised Harry had gone after the rogue.

He took a deep breath.

Harry was safe.

That was all that mattered.

Sirius's jaw clenched with determination. They wouldn't make the same mistakes again.
Pronglet's World Cup:8

It was irritating.

Beyond irritating.

Severus glared at the teacup in front of him as though it was the fault of the teacup that he had to spend his Friday night in the Headmaster's office listening to the old wizard recount to him and Moody what had happened at the War Council.

Moody took a swig out of his flask and Severus shot him an annoyed look. Moody could have at least shared the alcohol, Severus thought sourly, even if it was Firewhiskey and not the twenty year old Scotch that Severus had in his quarters. Moody simply smiled at him, a twist of his lips that gave his scarred face a grotesque edge.

"…and so that was all that was discussed." Albus finished at last. "Your thoughts, gentleman?"

Moody looked at Severus daring him to go first. Severus looked at Moody with a raised eyebrow. Who did Moody think he was? Black? Only a Gryffindor would respond to that kind of a dare and jump in first.

"Alastor?" prompted Albus smoothly when neither spoke.

Moody grunted but gestured over the polished surface of Albus's desk in Albus's vague direction without looking at him. "Clearly mistakes were made. Expected better of Black. He must have gone rusty in Azkaban."

"Or perhaps he is now beginning to recognise the true challenge of keeping young Harry safe." Albus smiled smugly, as though Black's incompetence somehow justified his own.

Severus scowled. "It does not surprise me that Potter was his usual reckless self."

And once again, Severus hadn't been anywhere near saving the boy, protecting him as he had promised. It was not his fault. It was Potter's. Merlin knew the boy was attracted to danger like he was an iron filing and danger was a magnet.

"Why Severus," Albus said his eyes twinkling, "one could almost make the argument that you are defending Sirius Black."

Severus stiffened and threw Albus a disgusted look. He didn't bother saying anything verbally; he wasn't going to dignify Albus's comment with a reply.

Albus hurriedly cleared his throats. "Regardless of the mistakes made in keeping Harry safe, my original question was more about our mysterious opponent and what the threat means for us here at Hogwarts as Harry and the rest of the students will be arriving shortly, and let us not forget that there is the Tri-Wizard Tournament to consider."

"We should cancel that bloody tournament for a start." Moody said immediately.

Severus nodded in agreement. The tournament was the height of foolishness in his opinion; it would have been without someone after Potter, without Potter himself around. Who wanted more brats around? And Beauxbatons and Durmstrang had their own issues.
Albus looked at them both with disappointment. "We can't cancel the tournament. It is a wonderful opportunity…"

"For someone to take advantage of the holes that will open up in our security and kill Potter." Moody interrupted gruffly.

"We'll bring in additional security and we'll discuss specifics nearer the time the tournament begins but cancelling it is not an option; it would cause a diplomatic incident." Albus countered. He placed his hands flat on his desk. "Let us put the tournament aside and concentrate on immediate issues. Severus, what about you? Any thoughts on our mystery attacker?"

Severus pursed his lips. He hadn't told Albus about the block on his memories and he didn't believe Moody had mentioned it to Albus either. He carefully weighed up whether to keep his secret and decided it was too soon to believe that the hidden memory had any value. "I agree with Lucius's comments to Black; whoever made the second death threat and went after Potter yesterday must be someone kept secret from the rest of us just as Pettigrew was kept secret."

"Do you think whoever it is, it's someone who You-Know-Who trusts to hide out with?" questioned Moody.

Severus resisted the urge to shift position under the intensity of Moody's regard. "It is the most likely conclusion. I suspect that it was the Dark Lord's decision to keep this person sequestered and thus it is someone he trusts. Further, no follower of the Dark Lord, hidden or otherwise, would have presumed to go after Potter with such zeal yesterday if it did not have the Dark Lord's approval. The fact that Pettigrew was part of it suggests in itself that the attack happened at the Dark Lord's behest."

"Indeed," muttered Albus, with a weary sigh.

"I also concur with Director Bones that it was an improved Polyjuice that was used." Severus said. "The Dark Lord himself undoubtedly provided the recipe. He had me brew it once."

"All of which substantiates that this fellow is working with Riddle." Moody huffed. "So, Bones has tagged the Death Eaters who are identified – we know it's not the likely suspects. We know it's someone was has the ability to call a house elf to them. We know whoever it was had access to the Longbottoms' party either impersonating someone or they were present as themselves." He grunted. "Amelia will be doing her nut. There're too many suspects to tag; the Aurors would be spread too thin."

"Amelia said the same thing." Albus nodded slowly. "It is unfortunate but our best hope lies in Voldemort or one of his associates making contact with one of the known Death Eaters."

Which was unlikely to happen, Severus thought. The Dark Lord had found somewhere safe to use as a base and had surrounded himself with loyal followers. What need would he have to call upon someone who had denied serving him and thus was no doubt a traitor in the eyes of the Dark Lord? If Severus was the Dark Lord, he would wait until he was fully restored to a body before contacting any of them. He refocused on the question of who else could be helping the Dark Lord.

"This new associate of the Dark Lord's," Severus drawled, "will have been the one to brew the potion. He would have been the one to impersonate Dawlish and duel Weasley and Minerva. He also set a magical fire detonation skilfully enough to make it appear to be an accident."

"And set a lock down and the wider anti-transportation ward." Moody nodded grimly. "He's a powerful bastard alright."
"That," Severus suggested, "should reduce the number of suspects."

"Sirius suggested the same thing," Albus replied, eyes twinkling again, "but as Bertie pointed out, the publically acknowledged magical abilities of the suspects may not match up with their private and secretly practiced abilities. It is likely that this individual has remained invisible as a potential threat by not demonstrating their power."

Unfortunately Croaker was right, Severus thought and refused to think he was less disgruntled at that than the comment he and Black had thought along similar lines.

Moody motioned with his flask. "What about the Death Eaters who were caught?"

"In Ministry holding awaiting trials which will be held in due course. After what happened with Sirius, Amelia and Cornelius are keen to ensure all process and protocols are duly followed." Albus confirmed. "Three of the Death Eaters are claiming to be under the Imperius curse; Dennis Travers refused to speak at all."

"From what I can gather from Lucius today, the blame for their capture is being attributed to the Aurors being on high alert after the reported fire and realisation that there was an anti-transportation ward erected." Severus informed them. Lucius had been smug during breakfast that morning. Travers was a fanatic and he would have hindered the pureblood nobility's scrambling to achieve some kind of neutrality agreement with Black.

"Excellent." Albus said brightly.

Moody glared at him, his magical eye spinning. "Don't get bloody cocky, Albus. Yesterday was an obvious attempt to snatch Potter, possibly for this ritual you think is in the works. It'd be easy enough to terrorise and challenge the kid for the requisite nine months if you have him in your possession."

"An attempt that was thwarted." Albus pointed out serenely.

Severus and Moody both looked at Albus with identical derisive glares.

"Only because Potter has sheer dumb luck on his side!" snapped Severus.

"I'd disagree with that," Moody said, waving at him, "boy has to have some talent to last against a powerful wizard long enough for help to turn up, but my point is this: if this attempt failed, that means they'll want to make sure their next gambit succeeds."

"They will try harder to get Potter into this blasted tournament." Severus caught onto Moody's point immediately. He pinched the brow of his nose.

Albus slumped back in his chair. "Alas, I had not thought of it in those terms."

"Which is why I'll say again that we should cancel the damn thing." Moody said firmly.

Albus shook his head. "It's not possible, Alastor. We shall just have to be vigilant." He smiled at Moody as he said the last and Moody gave an amused huff. "Sirius has requested permission to continue Harry's duelling tutoring while he is here at Hogwarts. He has offered to open up the sessions to the entire fourth year so there can be no suggestion of special treatment."

Severus harrumphed.

"It'd be a good idea to run a duelling club for the other years since Hilliard will be running the elective for fourth years only." Moody suggested. "Hilliard himself could take the sixth and seventh
years, I could do the fifth, Sirius and Remus the fourth, and Filius the lower years."

"A wonderful idea!" Albus beamed at Moody. "I'll make the request to Filius and Tobias." He glanced at Severus. "Perhaps you could also lend a hand, Severus?"

"Perhaps." Severus said non-committedly. He had no interest in the duelling club. He had only participated previously because he'd wanted to put Lockhart in his place.

"Well, I think that's all for tonight, gentlemen." Albus said, rising.

Moody and Severus made their way out of the office and down the spiral staircase.

"Drink?" offered Moody.

Severus nodded, understanding that it was a request to talk without Albus's presence.

They went to the staff room – their mutually acknowledged neutral ground. Severus was pleased to see it empty. They sat in the small seating area where they had first talked and Moody poured them both a glass from his flask while Severus erected a privacy bubble.

"Have you made any progress on your memory issue?" Moody asked bluntly.

Severus shook his head. "I have isolated the affected memories but nothing beyond that." It was slow work. The block was a good one – excellent in fact. He would admire Bella's handiwork if it wasn't for the fact that it was his memory she had played with. He gazed at Moody, his eyes sweeping over the magical counterpart. "I don't suppose…"

"Nope," Moody said succinctly, tossing back his drink, "leglimency has been out for me since I lost the eye. You need two good 'uns as you very well know." He gazed at Severus thoughtfully. "You could ask Albus."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Would you want him rooting around in your head?"

Moody gave a short barking laugh and conceded the point. "How about a Healer? I know someone who works on the Memory ward at St Mungo's."

He did actually consider the offer but regretfully shook his head. He wouldn't wish his mind on anyone. "I shall endeavour to continue with my own efforts."

"And if the answer to who is hiding You-Know-Who is buried in there?" Moody said with incisive insight. "The LeStranges covered up Crouch's involvement with them. Perhaps what you saw was some other bugger."

It was a possibility.

Bella and Rodolphus had a good working partnership as a couple but he didn't think that they'd shared a bedroom the entire time Severus had stayed with them. It was entirely possible that just as Rabastan had taken Crouch Junior as a lover, Bella or Rodolphus themselves had a surprising paramour hidden in the closet – one like Crouch that the Dark Lord himself had marked and approved of as a liaison.

"If Potter is entered into the tournament and I have not removed the block by then, I will request assistance." Severus compromised.

Moody grunted but seemed satisfied with the answer. "Let's hope our security can keep Potter out."
Severus nodded but he wouldn't put it past the brat to enter himself.

Filius wandered into the staff room and smiled at them both. "Goodness, I thought I was the only one about this evening. Everyone else seems to have deserted the place."

Severus hurriedly took down the privacy bubble.

"Have you spoken with Minnie?" asked Moody, shifting forward to welcome Filius into the seating area with a wave of his hand.

Filius nodded. "I've had an owl. She was released into the care of the House of Potter. She says she'll be fully recovered and back on Sunday to deal with the final preparations for the new school year."
He sat down with a small sigh and accepted Moody's offer of a drink (a small silent wiggle of his flask) with a nod. "She says she needs duelling practice."

Moody smiled as he poured Filius his drink. "There's a duelling club proposed."

Severus knocked back the last of his drink, set his glass down and stood up. He had no wish to listen to Filius and Moody discuss a duelling club nor to get pulled into any commitment to help. "I believe I will retire for the night." He inclined his head, allowing his dark hair to fall forward before turning abruptly and striding out, aware his robes were billowing behind him.

The walk to the dungeons was long and his thoughts revolved around the attack on Potter. He was furious with Potter all over again by the time he entered his private quarters. He made for the bedroom and sitting on the bed, opened the top drawer of his bedside table and took out a photo. It was a rare photo that he had of Lily and himself as children before Hogwarts, before everything had been ruined by Potter Senior. It was a muggle one Lily's mother had snapped with a Polaroid camera and handed to him right there and then.

"I'm trying to keep him safe, Lily." Severus whispered to the photo, stroking a finger over her innocent features. "But your son doesn't make it easy. He has far too much of Potter in him and far too little of you."

What had the brat been thinking? Going off to rescue the Weasleys? Charging after his attacker into the woods? No doubt he wanted further glory and praise for his heroics.

Or he had no sense of self-worth which was more likely given his appalling upbringing with Petunia.

Well, he would keep Potter safe despite the brat's lack of self-preservation. He would do it because Potter was needed to vanquish the Dark Lord so Lily could be avenged. Potter owed his mother that much for her sacrifice; for causing her death. And as much as he hated Potter's presence within the castle, it would be easier for Severus to protect him once Potter was back at Hogwarts.

Severus sighed and put the photo away, closing the drawer on his memories and his melancholy.

o-O-o

Dennis Travers had been sixteen years old when he'd taken the Dark Mark. He'd gone along with his father and his uncles. His family had little status but they were comfortable financially thanks to good investments and his grandfather's broom charms patent that had been bought by Nimbus. His father had worked in the Department of Magical Transportation until his incarceration in Azkaban in 'eighty-one. He could still remember the night the Aurors had come for his Dad…

Rain battered down on the roof, filling the living room with a thunderous pitter-patter. The room had been lit with oil lamps casting a gloomy orange light and strange shadows against the walls. A fierce
blaze had filled the fireplace, warming the room. His mother, a slim pretty woman, sat beside the
Wizarding Wireless, knitting as was her wont when she was anxious. He and his father had been
playing cards on a small felt table; twenty year old Dennis was winning.

"I wish you'd shut that thing off." His Dad said brusquely. "It's been nothing but bloody gossipy
nonsense since Halloween."

"Igor was scheduled to appear before the Council of Magical Law today." His Mum replied sharply.

His Dad glanced over at her. "There's nothing to worry about it. Igor's sentencing will be a
straightforward affair. They have more than enough evidence to convict him."

"And if he gives you up for a lighter sentence?" His mother asked pointedly.

"I would have heard something at the Ministry before I left if anything had been said." His Dad said
dismissively.

"I don't trust him." His mother said. "Foreign muck; we can't trust him to remain faithful. Antonin is
not much better either, fleeing abroad like he has done."

His Dad rolled his eyes and winked at Dennis. "We'll be fine, Mabel. You're getting yourself worried
for…" he froze and suddenly his wand was in his hand. "The wards! They're under attack!"

His mother stood, dropping her knitting and wrapping her arms around herself. "I told you! I told
you that Russian bastard wasn't to be trusted!"

"Travers!" Alastor Moody's gruff tone sounded loudly from outside. "We know you're in there!
Leave your wand and come out with your hands visible!"

"What are we going to do?" His mother wailed.

His Dad's lips firmed and he swung towards Dennis. "Forgive me, son. Imperius!"

It had all gotten blurry after that. Dennis had woken up in a small ward at St Mungo's with his
mother sat beside him. She had told him that his father and she had protected him; the Aurors
believed that Dennis had been imperiused into taking the Mark by his father and she had been
coerced by the threat of physical violence. The truth was that Karkaroff had betrayed them; he'd
given up Dennis's father for the murders of the blood traitors, the McKinnons. His father would be
going to Azkaban.

And so it had happened. Luckily, his uncles had stepped in and taken care of his mother and himself,
ensuring that they had a home and that Dennis's place in the Ministry was safe. He'd continued in the
Department of Transportation, following in his father's footsteps, honouring the man who had
protected him.

But now…now Dennis would be going to Azkaban himself. He wasn't bothered so much by that; he
stood by the Dark Lord and he wouldn't deny him to save his own skin. No, he was more bothered
about his stupidity in allowing himself to be captured.

He stared up at the ceiling of his Ministry cell and contemplated how very wrong the mission had
gone. It had been idiotic in hindsight to continue when the stadium fire had happened. He should
have realised that it would draw more Aurors to the campsite. Travers had also been hampered
because he'd had to imperius Rowle who'd gotten cold feet – stupid bastard – otherwise he would
have gotten away.
He frowned and rubbed his nose.

Dennis hadn't exactly had a chance to read the Prophet since he'd been placed in his cell but he'd heard the Aurors talking and it looked like the small operation he and his team had put together had somehow run amok of the rogue who'd made death threats against Potter.

He scowled.

It was supposed to have been his night, his opportunity to remind everyone of the Dark Lord, to remember and fear, to prove to the Dark Lord that he was not forgotten and that there were those who upheld his ideals and welcomed his return.

The pillock who'd attacked Potter had ruined everything.

But he'd heard his guards exchanging gossip and the theory was that the rogue had been acting in concert with Pettigrew since the Rat Squad had been there. Travers considered that in the quiet of his cell. If the idiot who'd spoiled his party had been working in concert with Pettigrew, did that mean he was working under the orders of the Dark Lord himself? And if he was, had his own operation interfered with the Dark Lord's? Messed it up? Potter had stumbled into MacNair and Jugson according to the chatter.

The thought had him tense with anxiety. He remembered the meetings his Dad had taken him to and the screams of those who had failed in the Dark Lord's service as they received their punishment.

Well.

If he cocked up and the Dark Lord punished him, that was fair enough. Hadn't Lucius warned them all that interfering ahead of the Dark Lord himself contacting them could lead to this? Travers had simply wanted to show his Lord that he still followed him but he would acknowledge his mistake and take his lumps.

A pop signalled the entry of a house elf with his supper – a bland affair of watery broth and some stale bread bun that had seen better days. The elf placed it on the floor and popped out again.

Travers sighed and fetched it. He took off the warming lid and sniffed suspiciously at the broth. He opened up the paper napkin to unwrap the plastic spoon and froze; there was writing on the napkin.

He carefully looked around his cell. There was nothing in the tiny room that suggested he was under a surveillance charm. The cot was standard issue; the magic bedpan stuffed under it just the same. The door was solid and locked with only a viewing hole that was accessible from the other side. He'd been stripped of his robes and given a grey set of trousers and top to wear in a scratchy material.

He carefully unravelled the napkin and made to place it on his lap as though it had no value. He glanced down as he spooned up his broth and read the words.

"Your attempt at pleasing the Dark Lord was pitiful but your silence and faithfulness are recognised. Remain strong and take heart for you will soon return to his side."

Dennis managed to control his expression but deep inside, he was smiling with what he believed was justified satisfaction. The Dark Lord wasn't angry with him; he'd been noticed for his faithfulness. He scooped up some more of the tasteless soup and hid his grin.

He would do as the note said; he would remain strong even if it meant going to Azkaban like his father. In time, he would be rewarded and he would have more power than Lucius Malfoy could
shake his cane at.

The broth was soon gone. When the house elf came back for the tray, the napkin was shredded like confetti into the bowl, and Dennis was asleep and dreaming of serving at the Dark Lord's side.

o-O-o

Harry sat on the wooden picnic table and gazed out into the back garden of Griffin House. It was a cool day for the end of August – rainy more than sunny, overcast and grim. It suited his mood. Hedwig swooped down and he automatically held out his arm to her. She landed in a rush of wind from the backwash of her wings. Harry leaned forward and let her nuzzle him, welcoming the comfort. He couldn't wait to fly with her as a raven; couldn't wait for the freedom of his own wings…

Hedwig gave a bark.

"Sorry, Hedwig," Harry said softly and reached into his pocket where he kept a few owl treats. "I guess I'm a little distracted. Sirius showed me his grandfather's memories today."

Sirius had confessed that he'd delayed showing Harry the memories – once because of Simeon's visit and again because he'd wanted them to enjoy their last weekend before Harry went back to Hogwarts together especially after the World Cup shenanigans. Harry understood. Having seen the memories, he knew how painful they were for Sirius and what the implications for himself were given the last memory with Ollivander.

Frankly, the wand maker freaked Harry out. But the knowledge that the old wizard had of his craft had been impressive. The story of the family magic and the Hallows had entranced Harry. The story of the family magic connected with something inside of him; something that told him it was the truth.

He remembered the warmth he'd felt in calling the Longbottom bear. Sirius had cautioned him that they didn't know if the magic had responded because of Neville's fealty but Harry didn't think so. He had simply and instinctively reached for and found the bear there waiting for him along with the surety that the steadfastness and ferocity of the beast had been his to call upon. The problem was that he had no idea how to deliberately call upon all family magic and he had a feeling that it couldn't be done without the circumstances being rather dire.

He sighed. "What do you think, Hedwig? Do you think I could call all the family magic to defeat him?"

And what of the consequences? Merlin had called the magic and disappeared afterwards. Was that the price for using it? Giving his own life? But didn't it make sense that it would incur such a cost? If he called all family magic and used it to wipe Voldemort from the face of the wizarding world, wouldn't he consider his magic and his life to be fair payment?

He shivered.

Hedwig barked and nuzzled him again.

Perhaps he didn't need to go so far…perhaps he only needed to call upon his own family magic to assist him as presumably the Peverells had done in the defeat of the Dark Wizard Severn. His ancestors must have brilliant men to have invented the Hallows. Would they be disappointed in him? Maybe they might have been before the Summer. Harry thought honestly, in the same way he believed his parents would probably have been disappointed with him – for not trying his best and being lazy. Maybe he would invent something as brilliant as the invisibility cloak for his descendants.
Maybe.

Of course he had no idea what he could invent that would help him defeat Voldemort and as for the Hallows themselves...

He stroked Hedwig's feathers. "I don't know what to do, Hedwig. The Headmaster is still keeping secrets."

It hurt.

He had thought Dumbledore sincere in his apology at the beginning of the Summer. He had thought Dumbledore had been sincere in his offer to help Harry...

The Headmaster clearly had some knowledge of the power of the Hallows since he'd recognised the Resurrection Stone, had presumably looked over the cloak whilst it had been in his possession, and he held the Elder wand. Hadn't it ever occurred to the Headmaster that they were 'the power he knows not' alluded to in the prophecy? It seemed incomprehensible to Harry that Dumbledore wouldn't consider that the Hallows could be a possibility. And so, if he had an inkling they could be the power, why hadn't Dumbledore said anything? To Sirius if not to Harry?

He took a deep breath and tried to think of all the lessons Sirius had given him regarding motivations.

What was Dumbledore's motivation in keeping the secret?

The first answer was easy: Dumbledore wanted to keep the wand out of Voldemort's hands. Harry could understand that, and he even agreed with it.

The second motivation was probably related to Harry's protection and the sentimental thinking Dumbledore had always had about giving Harry a normal childhood.

Harry snorted and received a chiding look from Hedwig.

Dumbledore had failed on every level to give Harry a normal childhood. As he had said to Neville, he had forgiven Dumbledore for placing him with the Dursleys but he would never forget it. He was prepared to admit at last that not only had his treatment there been horrid to endure, it had been abusive and abnormal. If taking the Dursleys to court wouldn't turn into a press circus, Harry might have been willing to see justice done.

After Voldemort and as soon as he turned seventeen, Harry promised himself. He'd buy Grunnings, fire Vernon and find a way to evict Petunia from her dream house. He didn't want any of them dead so they could remain in the house until Voldemort was dealt with but after that...all bets were off.

There was a small part of him that argued against it, pointing out that didn't he owe them for taking him in at least, but when he remembered how grudgingly he'd been housed, fed and clothed, Harry had to admit that it wasn't right that the Dursleys never had to face up to their actions in regards to what they'd done to him.

A large part of him still wanted to ignore it; to focus on the present and future and forget his past with his hateful relatives.

Harry sighed as Hedwig shuffled over to his shoulder and began to preen his hair. He had been thinking about Dumbledore's motivations about the wand not the Dursleys, he reminded himself.

So, Dumbledore had kept the secret to protect the wand from Voldemort and to continue to protect Harry from the responsibility of it. That made sense. But for Dumbledore not to have simply told
Sirius that he had the wand when the subject had come up over the stone…

It was possible that Dumbledore also felt the wand was his by rights regardless of Harry's ancestral claim upon it. And Sirius and Remus had both confirmed after they'd exited the memory that under the law, Dumbledore could claim he had won the wand fairly after defeating Grindelwald. Legally, it was all very grey and could go either way if Harry ever took it to court.

And it was all too possible that this was another of the Headmaster's manipulations; that Dumbledore intended to reveal the secret but only when he wanted to reveal the secret – when Dumbledore deemed it was right and necessary for the secret to be known.

Harry scowled and Hedwig tugged on his hair.

"Ow!" He turned to glare at her and she glared right back. "It's just…why can't he be straightforward and honest?"

Hedwig barked her agreement.

It was what he hated about politics and strategy in general; the constant need to determine who needed information, what information could be used to gain leverage and advantage. If everybody was just honest with each other…possibly there would be a bloodbath but at the end of it everybody would know where they stood.

Harry sighed.

What to do about Dumbledore?

Sirius had suggested they could confront him, ask him about the wand. But what good would it do really? Because Harry had no problems Dumbledore holding onto the wand. He didn't want it. Putting it in the family vault was an option but Voldemort had already proven that he wasn't scared to attempt a break-in at Gringotts with the Philosopher's stone.

No, Dumbledore was right that it was better he kept hold of it.

But what if Harry holding all three Hallows was the important thing? What if Harry needed the Elder wand to discover some unknown power (although he really didn't want to be known as the Master of Death)?

He wished the prophecy hadn't been so woolly. He wished that it had actually specified in great detail just what the power was that he had that Voldemort didn't. But, of course, he couldn't be that lucky. And he needed to do better than he had at the World Cup. He knew he'd let his anger rule him and he couldn't afford that. He needed to be sensible; responsible. He grimaced and pushed his glasses up his nose.

Dobby popped onto the grass in front of him. "It bes about to rain, Harry Potter, sir."

Harry nodded. Dobby was incredibly good at predicting the weather.

"Something troubles Harry Potter?" Dobby asked worriedly.

"Just…thinking, Dobby." Harry assured the house elf.

Dobby pulled on his ear. "Perhaps Dobby can offer advice like Master Yoda?"

Harry smiled. Dobby loved the original Star Wars trilogy. "What advice would you give me then,
Dobby?"

"Named your fear must be before banish it you can." Dobby said promptly.

"You may have a point." Harry mused. What was his fear? He was afraid that he'd never find the power to defeat Voldemort. He was scared of losing the people he loved like he had lost his parents. He was worried that the Headmaster's habit of keeping secrets would lead to both those things. It wasn't the wand that was the issue; it was the keeping secrets that the Headmaster needed to be faced with.

"Thanks, Dobby."

Dobby's ears flapped with pleasure. "Dobby will be making Harry Potter some hot chocolate."

Harry got the message; he should go inside. He sent Hedwig aloft and made his way back into the house. He knew Sirius had probably been watching him from the study and he made his way there.

Both Sirius and Remus sat at their respective desks. Both of them looked up when Harry knocked softly on the open door.

"Hey."

Harry saw the lines of worry bracketing Sirius's eyes and berated himself for rushing off after seeing the memories. "Hey. Can I talk to you?"

"Always." Sirius pointed at the comfy visitor's chair and Harry hurried over to it. "I take it you've thought about the issue of the wand?"

Harry nodded. Dobby popped in, handed him a mug of chocolate and popped away again.

Remus looked enviously at the mug before gesturing impatiently at Harry. "And?"

"I think the wand is safest with Professor Dumbledore until we know more about the power the Hallows are supposed to have and how bringing them together is supposed to help defeat a Dark Lord if at all." Harry began. "The Headmaster's had it for years so I don't see the point of him giving it to me and arguably it is his wand legally anyway."

Remus and Sirius exchanged a quick look between them and Remus looked smug. Harry's eyes narrowed; had they bet on his reaction?

"That's a well thought out position." Remus praised him, folding his arms and sitting back in his chair.

"Well, the wand isn't really the problem, is it?" pointed out Harry.

Remus frowned. "It's not?"

Harry shook his head and took a sip of his hot chocolate. "Professor Dumbledore's keeping secrets again. Well, not again so much as he's continued keeping secrets even when he said he wouldn't. He must know that the Hallows could be the power referred to in the prophecy." He sighed heavily. "I'm just tired of him making decisions about what he thinks I should and shouldn't know about things that are directly related to me. And if he's keeping this a secret, what else is he keeping secret?"

Sirius threw Remus a triumphant look before his eyes met Harry's. "What do you want to do?"

"Unfortunately, I think someone needs to confront him." Harry said. "But I don't know if it should
be me, or you, or both of us."

"There is strength in numbers." Remus said immediately. "I don't think you should talk with him alone at any rate, Harry."

"Neither do I." Sirius agreed.

Harry fidgeted with the mug in his hand, stroking the rim idly. "I think maybe you should talk with him without me."

Sirius raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"I don't think having a row with him just before I go back to school is a good idea." Harry admitted.

"I can see your point." Sirius said evenly. "And I assume you'd like me to wait until you're settled in for a couple of weeks before I have the discussion with him?"

"Don't deny that you'd more than likely use the threat of Harry not returning if you did it sooner, Sirius." Remus said.

Sirius rolled his eyes.

"Besides," Harry said brightly, "you can say more without me there and...and be more direct about what you say."

"True." Remus agreed.

"You agree with him?" Sirius asked Remus bluntly.

"I do," Remus said simply. "Harry's right. The wand isn't the issue per se but that he's withholding information – information that could be vital in our defeating Voldemort. When you think about it the wand is not the only thing he hasn't confided. He might have told you there is a prophecy but he hasn't offered you the details and you're Harry's father now – he should have told you. Maybe he's assumed you've gone to the DOM to hear it, maybe not. You're also the one he lied directly to about the wand whereas his not informing Harry could be seen as a lie of omission. You're the leader of the War Council; you're the leader of the political faction most likely to take full control of the Wizengamot in the next session. You're the one who should face him with this."

"What he said." Harry motioned with his mug towards Remus.

Sirius nodded and raised his hands in surrender. "I guess I volunteer?"

"Well done, Padfoot." Remus said dryly.

Harry gave a chuckle at the incensed look on Sirius's face and figured a prank war would break out as soon as he left for school.

"What about the rest of what was in the memories?" Sirius asked, turning his attention back to Harry.

"Are you OK with everything?"

He gave a shrug with a brief lift of one shoulder. "I guess the stuff on the family magic and the Hallows is interesting? But I just have more questions really."

"We need to track down the Lumiere source Ollivander spoke about." Remus agreed. "I have another couple of places to try before I approach Ollivander himself."
"I think the family magic thing is right?" Harry offered uncertain how they'd respond. "It feels right."

"Feels right?" Remus's keen gaze scoured Harry's face.

Harry nodded. "I can't really explain it more than that." He sighed and rubbed his temple. "But I don't know how I could call all the family magic, I just feel like I could, but I…" he trailed away unsure how to explain further.

"But?" prompted Sirius gently.

"But I don't think there would be a way to use it without paying a price." Harry said eventually, unable to think of another way of phrasing it.

Sirius stilled; his entire being freezing in one position that was so unlike him that Harry took a sharp intake of breath that he only released when Sirius started moving again by lurching to his feet.

"A sacrifice of life and magic." Remus said out loud, sounding stunned. "I can't believe we didn't think of it."

"Well, that definitely rules the family magic out as a possibility." Sirius stated firmly, whirling around to point at Harry. "You are not sacrificing your life and magic until you're very, very old, and grey, and wrinkly."

Remus nodded absently. "So we focus on the Hallows." His eyes narrowed. "You know that might make more sense when you consider Morgana's words to you at the blessing. She did say something about you mastering Death."

Harry pressed his lips together. He appreciated the sentiment, felt warmed by the love and care of both his new father and honorary uncle, their want to keep him alive and safe. But just as he knew deep in his bones that somehow it would come down to him and Voldemort in the end, he knew there would be a price – a balance to be kept. Even the Hallows suggested that magic, or rather Death in the story, had exacted a price from each of the Peverells eventually.

"All of which means I really do need to speak to Albus." Sirius slumped back into his chair and regarded Harry with mischievous grey eyes. "And there's nothing I can do to convince you that I should do that before you go back to school?"

Harry rolled his eyes.

Remus sighed heavily at Sirius's antics. "Are you going to be alright with the Headmaster?"

"I think so," Harry said, "I'm not really angry with him just disappointed. I don't think…I can't trust him to be upfront with me and that's sad."

Sirius nodded sharply. "Do you have any other questions about the memories?"

Harry began to shake his head but stopped and frowned. "What happened to that woman who gave up your cover?"

"Kelp?" Sirius raised his eyebrows and smiled. "I don't honestly know. I don't think she's still with the department."

"I looked her up after I saw the memory. She was held overnight for her part in what happened but was released from holding the day after. She got a note of censure in her file for not following protocol and endangering a fellow officer who was the Heir to an Ancient and Noble House and a
son of another. It most certainly would have hampered her future career. She got married in November nineteen-eighty to a muggleborn and they moved to the States ostensibly to get away from the war." Remus offered.

"She didn't get charged?" Harry asked, angry. She'd almost gotten Sirius killed!

"It was war-time, Harry," Sirius said mildly. "We tried not to put our own side in jail if we could help it. But her marriage and departure explains why she wasn't around when I went back to work as a Hit Wizard in the January of 'eighty-one." He must have caught the curiosity in Harry's eyes. "Most of my injuries had healed by the time you were born but I had months of physical therapy because of the spinal injury that affected my walking. I could have gone back to desk duty in the October but Charlus, your grandfather, was sick and then in December he passed away and your Dad needed me."

"That was when Dad resigned as a Hit Wizard?" clarified Harry, remembering the memory with his mother and Arcturus at Christmas.

"Yeah, he had the Potter estates to manage and truthfully, he was hit hard by the loss of your Granddad." Sirius said.

Harry sipped his chocolate as he took in the grief in Sirius's eyes and he remembered his Mum had said Sirius had taken Charlus's death just as hard.

"What about you, Padfoot?" asked Harry quietly. "How are you after seeing the memories?"

He didn't notice that Remus beamed proudly at him for his compassion and caring.

"It was weird the first time." Sirius admitted. "I never realised my…that Grandfather honestly…cared for me. I'm very glad he was there for Lily and, despite his appalling decision not to get you away from the Dursleys, I appreciate all his work to help us as much as he could."

Harry thought Sirius might have just been reassuring him, but Sirius's eyes remained calm and there was a peace that glimmered there for a moment, suggesting that his words were more than bravado.

Healer Allen was very good, Harry mused silently.

"By the way, we received a message from Amelia." Sirius said, changing the subject in a blunt manner that had Remus sighing. "Since some of the evidence is sensitive and will give away Tag the Death Eater, they've decided on a tribunal approach for the Death Eaters who were caught. Albus will sit as the principal judge, to be joined by two members of the Wizengamot. The Wizengamot members are being solicited for nominations. The tribunals will take place on the Friday after the Wizengamot session on the Thursday."

"Who are we nominating?" asked Harry, interested. The u-turn he'd made about his view on politics from the start of the Summer was remarkable, he mused to himself, but he was pleased because Sirius was delighted with his response if the grin on his face was anything to go by.

Sirius leaned back in his chair. "Good question as I was going to discuss it with you. My first nomination would be for Gideon Baron. He's new to the Wizengamot, not entrenched in the alliances, neutral pretty much."

"And his legal background will be invaluable." Remus commented.

"Exactly." Sirius picked up a quill and started playing with it. "The problem comes with the second nomination; someone from the Potter alliance would be the obvious choice."
"Isn't there a conflict of interest?" Harry questioned, chewing his lip.

"There's nothing linking the Death Eaters that were caught with the attack on the tent." Sirius explained.

"But for appearances' sake, it would probably be better to have someone not directly affected by any of the attacks, even if it's not completely necessary." Remus answered.

"So we're looking for someone outside of the alliance but sympathetic?" Harry sighed, scratching his forehead.

Sirius shifted in his seat and pointed the quill at Harry. "Daniel Greengrass would be our best option. While we will be announcing the Potter and Greengrass alliance at the next Wizengamot, it's pretty much an open secret among the Ancient and Noble Houses so everyone knows. He's staunchly neutral and has a reputation for fairness." He explained. "The other option is Nora Zabini but frankly…"

"Her reputation has more to do with husbands than politics." Remus said dryly. "She'd be a wasted nomination."

Harry felt his lips twitch but nodded in agreement. "I guess our vote goes to Dan then? He was the nicest of that neutral bunch."

Sirius nodded. "I thought that you had more of a connection with him than the others."

"He seemed genuinely interested in me rather than giving lip service." Harry said, remembering the dinner they'd had with Dan and the other neutral Heads of Houses. "He also asked me about my agenda rather than asking you."

"He did," Sirius said, waving the quill about, "which got brownie points with me too."

"So, Baron and Greengrass it is then." Remus said.

"Are we communicating our choice to anyone?" Harry checked. Neville would probably owl him about the nominations.

Sirius smiled. "Augusta has already requested a brief meeting of the Potter alliance tomorrow morning to discuss options. I have a feeling most of them will also choose Gideon but there will be variation on the second choice." He paused and set the quill down. "I'm going to owl Malfoy and tell him I would hope one of his choices is Baron. I'll leave the other to his discretion. I suspect Malfoy will pick up quite a few votes himself – most of the purebloods are likely to ignore the fact that Narcissa was in the tent."

Harry grimaced but said nothing. He and Draco had managed to maintain their trust for the week and he hoped it would continue at Hogwarts but he would never like Draco or his father. Narcissa was alright but she was better when she was with Andy as though her sister enabled her to be freer and show more of her personality.

"Are you all prepared for school?" asked Remus.

Harry gave him a grateful smile. "Yeah, just have to get packed." Sirius had gone to Diagon Alley to do his school shopping after they had said goodbye to Simeon, Anna and Jason. Sirius had suggested that the following Summer they'd go to Australia and visit them which Harry thought sounded fantastic.
Sirius peered at him with concern. "You don't sound all that enthusiastic."

"Just..." he shrugged and set his mug aside, "it feels like a long time since I was at Hogwarts since we had the time in the States too, and..." he felt the heat of a blush across his cheeks, "well, I've never really had something...family that I minded leaving behind before." He figured he was about the shade of a ripe tomato.

Sirius grinned at him though, and his look of delight made Harry's minor embarrassment more than worth it. "We'll miss you too."

"We'll be seeing Harry every Wednesday evening." Remus said amused.

"It's not the same." Sirius and Harry said in concert.

They both looked at each other and laughed.

Sirius gestured at him. "It is going to be weird seeing you only once a week but once you're back at Hogwarts you'll remember why you wanted to go back and you'll be fine." He smirked suddenly. "You know we should get your new Marauder name sorted before you go back."

Harry cringed and shrank back into the armchair. "Please!" He said dramatically. "Not this again!" Sirius had spent all of Sunday tossing names at him. All of which he'd turned down.

"I don't know what's wrong with Bran..." Remus teased, stretching and looking far too pleased with himself.

"Or Edgar!" Sirius jumped in. "I really liked Edgar! Or Poe!"

"Canute was also a good one..." Remus continued, ignoring Harry's pointed look to discontinue or suffer the consequences.

"Huginn and Muninn..."

"Yaahal..." Remus added. "But leaving mythology behind, you could choose something to do with the attributes of your form."

"Feathers!" Sirius cried triumphantly.

Harry glowered at him.

"Beaky!" Remus suggested brightly.

"Claws?" Sirius mused out loud and shook his head. "Wings is too generic..."

"Snitch," said Harry firmly. "I'm calling my raven form 'Snitch.'"

He had already decided but had held off telling them just to torture them for a while. He had named all his forms; the stallion he had called 'Lord PB' because it represented his future, the Head of House and leader he would become. The lion and the snake were called Gryff and Sly respectively for obvious reasons. He'd tried very hard to find another name for the wolf cub but the one that stuck in his mind was 'Freak' because of the cub's representation of his orphaned self who was so desperate for a family because he'd been denied a home with love by the Dursleys. The bouncy puppy, on the other hand, was and always would be 'Pronglet' as it represented his baby self who would always be the son of Prongs, and of Padfoot since it was Padfoot's form it imitated. But 'Snitch' fitted his raven form – at least he thought so.
Sirius was outraged. "It's a piece of Quidditch equipment!"

"No, Padfoot," Remus said, staring at Harry with renewed pride, "it's perfect. What is the Snitch but a very fast flying entity whose sole purpose is to remain free, tricking its pursuers and defending itself with speed and skill. It's just like a raven which is a free spirited bird that refuses to be caught and uses every trick to fight and live."

Harry started smiling. Remus got it, he thought proudly.

"When the Snitch is caught, the game is over," Remus continued thoughtfully, "and in mythology if ravens were to leave the British Isles, the kingdom would fall. It's a lovely analogy, Harry."

"Thank you, Moony." Harry said delighted Remus approved of the name. He turned back to Sirius a little anxious about his father's reaction.

Sirius heaved a sigh and nodded, but his grey eyes were bright and mischievous. "Snitch it is then." He wagged a finger at Harry. "But if you call my first grandchild Quaffle I will never forgive you."

"How about Bludger or Broomstick?" asked Harry cheekily.

Sirius tossed a cushion at him as Harry laughed.

"I don't know, Padfoot," Remus joked, "Bludger Potter-Black has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" He avoided the quill Sirius threw at him and raised his hands in surrender. "I'm going for a shower and a change of clothes before dinner. I'll leave you two to it." He escaped through the door as both Harry and Sirius sent a barrage of cushions his way.

Sirius shook his head at their dismal aim before he shifted to look at Harry with an intent expression.

"In all seriousness though, are you going to be OK going back to Hogwarts?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "I am looking forward to it in some ways, it's just…” He took a deep breath, trying to find the right words, "it's been the best Summer and I think a part of me is worried that when I go back to Hogwarts, I'm going to wake up and find it's been a dream or something..." He gave a self-deprecating chuckle and dropped his gaze, "stupid, I know."

"Not stupid." Sirius assured him. "I have to pinch myself some days." He fidgeted for a moment before turning to his desk. "Maybe this will help. It's a present. I was going to wait and give it to you on September 1st but…" He opened a drawer and reached inside to pull out something wrapped in brown paper. "This is your Dad's old communication mirror."

Harry couldn't stop the grin that split his face in two. He pushed out of his chair and took the gift. He held it reverently with one hand gripping it firmly while the other played over the edges as though to confirm it was real. He remembered Sirius telling him about the mirrors in the early days of their stay in the States when they'd exchanged tales of their school years.

"You just have to tap it with your wand and call my name – or rather 'Padfoot'. You can talk to me whenever you want." Sirius's voice was thick with emotion. "I probably should change your mirror to respond to 'Snitch' rather than 'Pronglet' thinking about it."

"No..." Harry said, trying to keep a hold of the swell of love that was bubbling up inside of him, "maybe 'Pronglet' can be your way of calling me son, like we agreed 'Padfoot' is my way of calling you 'Dad.'"

Sirius pulled him into a fierce hug. "I'd like that."
Harry held onto his godfather, his father, and bit his lips as the words he so wanted to say, hovered at the back of his throat and the front of his mind.

"I love you, Padfoot."

But he couldn't quite say them.

He wasn't ready. He wasn't sure why he wasn't ready but he knew he wasn't. He knew Sirius knew that he loved him just as he knew Sirius loved him.

It was only words, Harry thought defensively, but as Sirius patted his back and let him go with a push towards the door and a brisk instruction to go change for dinner that belied the storm of emotion in his grey eyes, Harry made a silent promise.

One day, Harry thought determinedly; one day soon he'd say the words.
Albus sat down in the chintzy armchair he had conjured and smiled benevolently at the gathered Professors. He so loved the start of a new academic year, the buzz of excitement as the castle became alive again in preparation for the children arriving.

He gazed around the room and felt his lips twitch at the Odd Couple of Severus and Alastor sat in the same corner glowering out at the others. He had no idea what had spurred them to form a friendship of sorts (and he was absolutely certain neither man would say it was a friendship if asked) but he was pleased. Both men tended to keep themselves far too isolated, and if the small thought entered his mind that both had contrived the relationship on the principle that one kept friends close but enemies closer, he ignored it.

Minerva sat beside Albus. She had assured him that, apart from her pride, she had fully recovered from her injuries incurred at the World Cup. She had also informed him that she had accepted an offer from Sirius, Remus and Harry to move into their home during the holidays going forward. Her delight was evident and Albus would not spoil it with his concerns. Their relationship continued to be frosty although both had strived to ensure the impact on the school's operations was minimal. He hoped they would one day regain their former closeness, but he knew it would take more than a box of chocolates to smooth over the decisions he had made, and forced Minerva to make about Harry, without informing her of her own claim to the boy.

Filius was on Albus's left and chatting happily to the new Duelling Instructor, Tobias Hilliard – a bright twenty-eight year old with blond hair and startling blue eyes who was sure to be the recipient of many school girl crushes. Filius had embraced the changes to the school's curriculum and had helped Minerva with much of the administrative complications of the new electives.

Albus's eyes strayed to the other new elective teacher, Doctor Helen Jordan; she would take the Healing elective. He felt a warm glow of satisfaction at the result of his reaching out to Noshi Blackhawk for assistance in filling a Healer position within the school who would take over management responsibility for the school infirmary.

It had been Poppy's suggestion for improvement. She had pointed out that when she had first been hired Healer Gareth Baggins had been on staff, but when he'd left Baggins hadn't been replaced and some of the practices such as mandatory health checks for the students and the staff had fallen away due to lack of resources. While Poppy's mediwitch credentials were second to none, she admitted that she sometimes felt out of her depth and the Healers at St Mungo's weren't always readily available for a consult; that with her advancing years she was feeling the strain of always being on call. She was delighted with Helen's appointment and the two had become fast friends. Poppy had been extremely helpful to their new staff member who had embraced the opportunity to work abroad for a couple of years.

Pomona had also been extremely helpful after approaching Albus with her suggestion for improvement; mentoring Hagrid. She sat beside Hagrid talking quietly. She was ensuring that the animals he showcased in his classes were age appropriate and keeping an eye over Hagrid's
enthusiasm (and already he suspected that they had dodged a safety issue over some breeding plans Hagrid had concocted – Pomona had immediately put paid to those). Hagrid himself had been delighted at Pomona’s mentorship; keen to improve his teaching so he could convey more fully the wonders of the animals he loved so much.

Indeed, Albus mused with delight, his existing staff had all been wonderful in embracing improvements. Even Sybill who had arrived last in a whirlwind of brightly coloured scarves had agreed to the withdrawal of Divination as a standard elective, agreeing fervently with the view that it would allow her to spend quality time with those who had a real gift. The current sixth and seventh year would continue to NEWTs; the fifth and fourth years to OWLs but the current third years who had opted for Divination would have to undergo a test before being allowed to take the subject and if they failed to show a gift, they would have to take another elective.

The basic theoretical parts of Divination would be covered in a foundation class that all second year students would attend going forward. It was hoped that the potentially gifted would be identified through the class. Albus had secured a different teacher for the foundation year – the centaur Firenze. It was in his opinion quite a coup (although a bemusing one since it had been Firenze who had approached Albus and informed him that he had been instructed by the herd stallion to teach now the Raven had been found – and Albus resolved to think again on what that meant because no doubt it meant something). Sybill was happy because she felt the foundation class beneath her while Albus figured Firenze would be competing with Hilliard on the crushes front. Aurora Sinistra had warmly greeted the centaur and Albus was happy to see the usual stand-offish creature respond to the Astronomy Professor's overtures of friendship.

He let his eyes drift over the remaining staff members; Bathsheda Babbling, the Ancient Runes Professor, was engaged in a lively debate with the new Muggle Studies Professor, Alison Bunting, and the returning Flying Instructor, Rolanda Hooch. A second trio of woman sat together nearby but much more sedately, sipping tea and in quiet discussion; Irma Pince, the Librarian, Septima Vector, the Arithmancy Professor, and the new History of Magic Professor, Matilda Memoire. Matilda had come highly recommended from Beauxbatons. Her grandmotherly demeanour and story-telling approach was a complete contrast to Binns who had moved on rather than haunt Hogwarts.

The final staff member had taken up a position by the door and was glowering at everyone; Argus remained firmly miserable and Albus’s remonstrations to him about his professional conduct and attitude with the students didn’t seem to have made a dent. Albus sighed. He so hoped Argus would take his advice to heart because if he failed to change, Albus would have no other choice but to let him go.

He gave an internal sigh and pushed the matter out of his head to focus on the meeting. He raised his wand and was happy when the entire staff became instantly quiet.

"Thank you," Albus said warmly, "and welcome to all! This is our first full staff meeting of the year. In a change to previous years we will meet twice a term…"

"May I ask how often you met previously?" asked Matilda cutting in.

"Once at the beginning of the year and once at the end which clearly was not enough," Minerva supplied. "The new regime is part of a number of improvements we are making to the school this year."

"Indeed," Albus smiled gratefully at Minerva. "So, as I mentioned this meeting will take place twice a term. The agenda will be to ensure all staff are informed of school wide policy changes and initiatives, to have an open discussion about the school’s progress through the year, and to provide a forum for you all to raise any concerns about the school or individual students."
He was pleased at the satisfied and hopeful looks on the majority of the staff.

"Excellent!" Albus said brightly. "So firstly, our changes. Minerva, perhaps you could give a brief overview of the academic changes."

She shot him a disgruntled glare but she briefly outlined the changes to the existing curriculum and the new electives.

"In addition, Albus and I will make random audits of your classes through the year." Minerva said as she finished.

Septima's elegant eyebrows shot up. "Random audits?"

"It is our intention to sit in on one of your classes." Albus replied, gesturing with one hand. "Nothing to be worried or concerned about. We will observe only and provide constructive feedback in private to the individual Professor afterwards. Nothing will be shared with your colleagues beyond that which you choose to share."

There were a lot of unsettled looks from the existing Professors but the new additions to the staff didn't seem perturbed.

"Any questions or shall we move to the next item?" Albus asked gently. They all shook their heads and Albus nodded at Minerva who swished her wand. Instantly, a parchment was delivered to each member of staff.

"This is a copy of the school guidelines for detentions and points." Minerva explained briskly. "I'd like to give my thanks to Filius for his work in updating the former copy. It details quite explicitly what behaviour or actions are worthy of setting a detention and what kind of detentions can be set," her eyes flickered to Hagrid and to Argus, "detentions that take place in the Forbidden Forest, for example, are disallowed. The guidelines also elucidate what behaviour or actions constitute taking of points and how many, and the opposite; what behaviour or actions constitute awarding of points and the suggested number of points to be awarded. I will be monitoring detentions and the points system daily and will reverse any decisions not in line with these guidelines. Filius will act as my check in this matter and will monitor my performance."

A stunned silence enveloped the staff room.

"You are not seriously suggesting we comply to the letter of this?" Severus raised his parchment with disgust.

"We are," Albus confirmed, "since it has been noted by our Board of Governors that our disciplinary policies have fallen into disrepair of late, and the staff's interpretation has not been equitable leading to some students being punished for behaviour while others are not, some rewarded for behaviour while others are not. I do expect all of you to comply and these are not new guidelines; as Minerva said, these are simply a revision of our existing guidelines."

"Well, as someone new to teaching I appreciate the guidance," Hilliard said cheerily, "this will come in very handy." He waved his parchment gaily and ignored Severus's sneer.

"A copy of these guidelines will be posted in each Common Room." Filius added. "The students will have full access and can appeal to their Head of House for any unfair detentions or points deductions as they could before. They will however run the risk of the punishment being doubled for any appeal that is found to be malicious or mischievous in nature."

"If there are no further questions?" asked Albus gently. He didn't wait for the nods before he smiled
and swished his own wand. A second piece of parchment appeared. "This is our new Anti-Bullying Policy. I would thank Poppy for her input here."

Poppy beamed proudly.

"As per the discipline policy, all bullying behaviour is strictly prohibited from name calling to physical intimidation. Students may confide bullying in any member of staff with assurance of anonymity and any medical treatment will also be provided under the same assurance. All reports should be forwarded to Doctor Jordan who will lead a weekly review meeting with the Heads of Houses to determine the best way forward for the victim and the bully."

Albus personally thought it was overkill but Sirius's admonishments still rang in his ears.

"Further," Albus continued gravely, "any reports of staff bullying the students will be dealt with most harshly. You will receive one verbal warning on a first offence; a written warning for a second; and a third will lead to automatic dismissal. Any physical harm to a student will bypass the warning system and lead to an automatic dismissal – there are obviously caveats for classes where injury may occur in the course of teaching. If any of you has concerns, please discuss them with me."

"You should also note," Minerva added, "that the warning system will also be used with students who are bullying. A student causing deliberate physical harm to another, outside of the duelling club or a class where minimal injury may have been expected such as DADA, will automatically be expelled. The muggles, I believe, call this a no tolerance policy."

"Again, the Anti-Bullying policy will be posted in the Common Rooms and outside the Great Hall to ensure the students' awareness." Albus added.

"I would encourage the House Heads to explain in face to face meetings within the first week of school." Minerva jumped in. "This way none of the students can claim that they missed being informed. While there will be some leeway during the first week as older students adjust to the new policy, there will be none beyond it."

Filius nodded happily. "An excellent idea, Minerva."

"Excellent," parroted Severus but Albus knew the Head of Slytherin would keep his House informed. Severus might not like teaching but he took his duties as Head of House quite seriously.

"We have one last policy change to cover. If you would, please, Alastor." Albus nodded at his old friend who heaved a sigh and swished his wand, revealing a third parchment.

"New Security Policy." Alastor said succinctly. "We patched some weak points around the Forest and various passageways in and out of the castle. The wards have been updated to notify the Headmaster if an animagus is on the grounds in addition to Minnie."

"About time." Septima said briskly.

"Additional security wards have been added to the Infirmary Stores and the Potions Stores; these can only be accessed by identified staff members. An Automatic Recall ward has been set in the library for overdue books or books restricted to the library." Alastor continued gruffly. "The wards on the Broom Store and Quidditch Pitch are acceptable."

Rolanda looked vindicated while Irma smiled pleasantly at Alastor, pleased at the addition of the new ward.

"Students will not be allowed out of the castle between the hours of nine o'clock in the evening and
seven o'clock in the morning. Curfew for first through third years is set to nine o'clock; curfew for fourth through fifth years is set to ten o'clock; sixth and seventh to eleven o'clock. Fifth year Prefects will perform bed checks at ten o'clock for the lower years. All missing students will be reported to the Head of House. Fourth through seventh years will not be given a bed time or a bed check as a privilege."

Albus's lips twitched at Alastor's disgusted expression and Minerva's satisfied one.

"Sixth and seventh year Prefects will patrol the main corridors and areas between eight and ten." Alastor said. "This should enable them to be within their Houses for curfew with plenty of time to spare. Additional Prefect duties will involve patrolling on the Hogwarts Express; monitoring their own year and one of the lower years at the House table during meals; providing assistance to any student during the Hogsmade weekends outside of school grounds, and providing assistance to their Head of House as needed in administrative or tutoring duties. The Prefects' Bath remains a privilege and we have also established an inter-House Prefects Common Room near to the library. The Head Boy and Head Girl…"

"This year's Head Boy is Robert Ogden and the Head Girl is Natalie Warren." Minerva interrupted to announce. "Mister Ogden is a Hufflepuff and Miss Warren is a Ravenclaw."

"As I was saying," Alastor threw Minerva a chiding look, "they will have their own rooms and baths within their respective Houses as a privilege. They will also have a study just down from the Prefect Common Room. One of them will be expected to be present in that study between the hours of seven and eight in the evening to be available to students either for assistance in tutoring or to listen to student concerns. Their old duties remain including; assigning the Prefect rota and managing the Prefects; providing student feedback to the Deputy Headmistress; performing duties for the Deputy Headmistress as required; and, representing the school when needed. They've received copies of the disciplinary guidelines, the Anti-Bullying policy and this," he waved his parchment, "they are expected to brief the Prefects at a pre-journey meeting at ten-thirty before the Hogwarts Express leaves King's Cross."

"The Prefects have been notified of their earlier rendezvous time." Minerva jumped in.

Alastor's magical eye whirled in her direction. "Finally, staff have no curfew although one was suggested…"

Severus snorted.

"…final patrols will be between ten and eleven-thirty, and cover the usual areas."

A chorus of approval broke out at hearing that news. The old patrols had lasted until after midnight.

"While I will remain in charge of overall security, there will be a Day Watch Supervisor who will oversee breakfast and lunch, and will generally make themselves available to the Prefects if they require assistance through the day. There will also be a Night Watch Supervisor who will oversee the time from the beginning of dinner at six through to midnight. Rotas are at my discretion and all staff will participate unless they have a signed note from Albus excluding them. They will be the first point of contact for any emergencies during that time. It's expected that in-House emergencies during the night will be dealt with by the House Heads. New communication mirrors have been affixed within the Common Rooms and the living quarters of the House Heads to allow the Prefects to contact them in a timely way. However, two former colleagues of mine; Mary Hartley and Kenneth Day will be patrolling Hogwarts as night security staff from midnight until seven."

He grasped the parchment tighter and sighed.
"Hogsmeade weekends will continue every month during term time. Two staff will be responsible for providing a point of contact for students within Hogsmeade itself; the Day Watch Supervisor will remain behind in Hogwarts." Alastor cleared his throat. "We'll discuss staff presence during Yule and Easter another time, but otherwise the final thing to mention is the floo access. You've all got communication capability cleared for the floo in your quarters. I've shut down the Common Rooms but they can be overridden by the House Heads. However, the transportation facility is no longer under your control and it is locked down. If you wish to have a visitor, I will facilitate floo access."

"That's rather an invasion of privacy, isn't it?" Aurora complained. Albus noted that a number of the Professors looked unhappy with the new rule.

"We can't have unknown people wandering around the castle." Alastor said bluntly. "You may think you're inviting a friend to have a drink or a meal in your quarters but rumour has it there's an improved Polyjuice potion about and given the clear and present threat to Potter, we're monitoring who is allowed inside the wards."

"May I also remind you all that there is a professional code of conduct and guests should not be within the castle walls unless explicitly allowed by either myself or the Headmaster." Minerva said sternly. "With the exception of the House Heads who are expected to remain within the castle at all times, you do have the option of leaving if you are not on patrol or assigned as the Night Watch Supervisor."

"Outward unrestricted floo access will only be allowed from my office floo, Minerva's, and Albus's. Inward travel to mine and Albus's for the most part." Alastor confirmed. "The infirmary is restricted to travel between it and St Mungo's only."

"If you're thinking of leaving the castle on foot and flooing from Hogsmeade," Albus said seeing unhappy faces, "you may, of course, choose that option. But you will still need to leave word with Minerva to ensure that if an emergency does happen, someone knows of your whereabouts."

"And to check your identity on your return." Alastor commented.

"That's fair." Aurora said, conceding.

"That's me done." Alastor said with relief.

"Helen, perhaps you could cover the changes to the infirmary?" asked Albus softly.

"Yes, of course," her American accent twanged exotically as Helen sat forward, "firstly, I'll introduce myself; I am Helen Jordan, a fully trained Healer and I also hold a muggle Doctor's qualification. I specialise in pediatrics or children's care. I've worked for years at The Valley Clinic in the United States but I've had two years abroad in France and Australia before and I am pleased to be here in Scotland."

The rest of the staff were charmed by her forthright manner and Albus smiled.

"I am now in charge of the infirmary, allowing Poppy to fully focus on her duties as the school mediwitch." Helen continued. "Poppy will continue to be the initial point of contact for first aid and triage. She will determine whether I am needed to provide addition treatments. I will handle on-going treatments and check-ups where there is extensive damage. We will split night calls probably taking alternate weeks – a schedule will be posted. Neither Poppy nor I will be unhappy if you make a mistake and contact the wrong person but we would hope that you will endeavour to choose the right one so we both have a chance of rest and a week of uninterrupted sleep." She paused and looked around the gathering. "Any questions so far?"
Everybody shook their heads.

"OK, then, as of this term we will revive the practice of mandatory annual school health checks for all students. A notice will be sent to parents and guardians during the first week. They will have until the second week to refuse permission but if they do they must produce evidence that such a health check has been performed in the last twelve months for their child and there are no issues that we need to be concerned about." Helen said firmly.

"Some parents will be unhappy." Filius noted.

Helen shrugged. "More often than not those would be the parents of the children most in need of such a check. They will be informed that an attempt to withdraw the child will mean a mandatory visit from Aurors. I have more authority as a Healer to deal with suspect cases than Poppy does as a mediwitch. I understand we have twelve at-risk children? With another three whose immediate situations have been resolved but may still require assistance in coming to terms with their abuse and making a full recovery?"

Albus nodded gravely. "I'm afraid to say that we do."

"I've engaged another Healer who specialises in mind healing," Helen informed them, "he will visit as appropriate to the individual child's needs. A room has been set aside in the infirmary. Healer Allen will be arriving and departing through the infirmary floo in line with new security regulations."

"Thank you, Helen." Albus said.

"A couple of other things to mention," Helen said quickly, "one, if you wish for a full medical check-up in confidence as staff you are entitled to ask for one, and; two, after much discussion with the house elves, the menus have been revised to provide healthier options – I'd be interested in your feedback. And I'm done!" She sat back and held up both her hands.

"So, onto more pleasant things." Albus said briskly. "As you were all informed over the Summer, the Tri-Wizard Tournament will be hosted here at Hogwarts." He smiled out at his staff and was bemused when he took in the lack of enthusiasm. "Come, come! This is marvellous news! And a wonderful honour for Hogwarts!"

"Headmaster, as a historian, I am aware of the number of fatalities that have occurred in previous tournaments, what is being done to prevent a death occurring in this tournament?" Matilda prompted.

Albus beamed at her. "Thank you for your very good question, Matilda. The tournament has been revised. Only those of age by October 31st – seventeen – will be allowed to enter. The tasks have been discussed and designed to be challenging with a hint of risk to the student but no danger of imminent death. Additional security measures will be brought in during the tournament – I'm sure Alastor will brief us all at the relevant time."

"While I know it is an honour," Alison offered, "I am concerned about whether we're going to get inundated with a large number of students from the other schools in our NEWT level classes?"

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will number thirty each with two staff members in attendance including the Headmistress or Headmaster. Madame Maxine has informed me that her students will not participate in Hogwarts' classes as at least five of her likely students will be Veela or part-Veela. Headmaster Karkaroff has also to date indicated a preference to school his own students." Albus explained. "They will take meals with us, and will of course have access to our infirmary and library. I believe we're also setting aside a communal Common Room where all the schools can congregate. It will not be available to those below sixth year. Otherwise I don't believe..."
we will be that inconvenienced."

Rolanda huffed. "No, you're only growing a maze over the Quidditch pitch from the Easter holiday."

The room erupted.

Albus rapped the table sharply and brought order. "Everyone, please!" He glared at Rolanda who glared back unrepentant. "Some sacrifices will be made and once the tournament is over the pitch will be returned to its former glory. However, we will still have a Quidditch season albeit compressed into the Winter and Spring terms."

"That's barely enough time." Minerva pointed out.

"We did discuss cancelling the Quidditch season altogether." Albus pointed out crisply. "This was the compromise. Rolanda?"

"Try-outs will take place on the first weekend. The first match will be held in October with another two matches held before the Christmas break in the usual slots; one match will play in February; two in March before the Easter break. Whatever the disadvantage of playing in the likely poorer weather or first or last will hopefully be spread evenly across all four teams." Rolanda sighed.

"Any sixth or seventh year of age planning to enter the tournament may not play Quidditch." Albus informed them. "It is likely that should they be chosen by the Goblet of Fire, the demands of the tournament would be too much for them to also continue to play effectively for their team. Any other questions about the Quidditch?"

"Not a question about Quidditch but about Yule and the Ball mentioned in your announcement note." Alison said. "Is it mandatory?"

"Fourth years upwards are invited to attend. It will be mandatory for the Champions, and for the delegations from our visiting schools." Albus explained. "From a staff perspective, the House Heads have generously agreed to give up their holidays to remain within the castle."

Minerva gave a small harrumph beside him and Albus knew it was because he hadn't actually given them a choice in the matter.

"Any other staff member would be welcome to remain for the Ball or to volunteer as a Day or Night Watch Supervisor during the period. I would ask you let Minerva know by October 31st what your individual plans will be." Albus said briskly. "Would anybody else like to ask something?"

"Albus, in light of the sanctioning of the duelling club, Professor Hilliard and I thought we might suggest a Tri-School Duelling Competition. It would only involve those not chosen as champions and be limited to the sixth and seventh years. Perhaps the Quidditch rule would also apply." Filius said.

Hilliard leaned forward eagerly. "We're thinking a team of four from each school would take part. Three rounds with the winner awarded a small cup or trophy."

"Oh, what an excellent idea!" Albus said brightly. "Please write up the proposal and I will give it to the other Heads immediately for consideration."

"There seems to be a lot focused on sixth and seventh years with this tournament, Headmaster, although admittedly the Ball will be fourth years and up," Bathsheda spoke up for the first time, "however, I wonder...what about our younger years?"
"An excellent point." Albus admitted. "Perhaps I can prevail upon you all to think of some way we can make the tournament inclusive for our younger years apart from their obvious role of spectators and bring me some ideas."

The staff exchanged looks amongst them.

"Well, I believe we are now on the agenda item where I listen to any concerns you may have and open this up for discussion." Albus said. "I suggest we simply go around the room. Alastor, why don't you start?"

"You know my thoughts already." Alastor said bluntly. "Cancel the tournament. The security exposure is enormous."

Albus sighed and moved on. "Severus?"

"I agree with my colleague; the tournament will be nothing but trouble." Severus said smoothly.

"Your concerns are noted but let's move on, shall we? Are there any other concerns besides the tournament?"

"I do have one," Septima said when everyone else remained quiet, "the death threats against Harry Potter? The improved security is welcomed but the attacks at the World Cup were frightening to read about."

"The suspect is an unknown Death Eater using a reformed version of Polyjuice potion to hide his identity and he owns a house elf which causes another set of issues." Alastor replied. "The house elves are taking care of the latter and so long as the traffic in and out of the castle is monitored, we shouldn't have a problem."

"Will Potter come on the Express or is Black making special provision for him?" asked Severus.

"We are not releasing that information." Minerva glared at Severus.

Septima cleared her throat. "What about the safety of the other students? If this...madman decides to attack the boy on the train, others will be at risk. Surely it would be better for him to floo in and for that to be released to the press?"

Albus noted there were a few nods of agreement around the room. "The safety of all the students remains a top priority. Lord Black and I are still finalising the decision regarding Harry's travel."

"It's good thing to question. We should all consider the safety and the security of the school every day." Alastor said bluntly. "If a colleague or a student starts to show unusual behaviour, report it to myself or Minnie. Personally, I've been appalled at the security and safety deficits of previous years. I'd like to think we won't have these issues if we all practice CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Albus smiled brightly at Alastor and ignored his ringing ears. "Well said. Are there any other concerns? No?" His gaze swept around the room. "Then, let's have supper and toast the beginning of another year!"

He decided to ignore the eye rolling of the rest of the staff.

o-O-o

*September 1st 1994*
Harry tried very hard not to laugh at Remus's appalled expression as he regarded himself in the mirror of the guest cloakroom on the ground floor of Black Manor.

Sirius sniffed at him. "What?"

"Why do I have to be the woman?" asked Remus bluntly, running his hand over the dress Sirius had hustled him into a mere ten minutes before.

"There are just so many comebacks to that, Moony, I can't settle on one." Sirius smirked at him.

Remus glowered at Sirius.

Harry snickered.

Remus arched his eyebrow at Harry. "We could always dress you up as a girl, Snitch."

"Ah, but then I'd tell Aunt Minnie and she would yell at you." Harry said confidently.

"Aunt Minnie is going to yell at us anyway." Remus adjusted his new cleavage and swore. "Bras are torture devices – why the hell do women wear them? And whose bright idea was this anyway?"

"Yours!" chorused Sirius and Harry together.

And it had been. Remus had stepped in and fixed the issue about how Harry was getting to Hogwarts rather ingeniously. There had first been a leak to the press that Harry would not be on the Express, followed by a confirmation to Dumbledore that Sirius would take care of ensuring Harry arrived at Hogwarts. But all the while the Marauders had planned to sneak Harry aboard the Express; going incognito to King's Cross was part of the plan.

Remus sighed.

Harry took pity on him. "I really do appreciate it, Remus. I really want to ride the Express and you've been brilliant thinking this up." He paused. "If it helps, the dress really, uh, suits you?"

"That doesn't help, but thank you, Harry." Remus said, smoothing down the folds of the plain navy blue dress. He turned back to the mirror and pointed his wand at his face and hair. It changed slowly; the faint scars of his werewolfism faded away under the glamour, replaced by a peaches and cream complexion. He changed his eyebrows to a plucked elegant shape and his nose and chin became more refined. His hair sprouted suddenly, growing and shaping itself into a tidy chignon. He looked like a respectable lady.

"Nice, Remus." Sirius pushed him away from the mirror. "My turn." The glamour took effective immediately as he tapped his head with his wand. His black hair was replaced by a short nondescript brown cut peppered with grey. His eyes shifted to the same brown colour while his face aged and took on more wrinkles. He swept the wand down his clothes automatically transfiguring the leather blazer, white t-shirt and smart jeans into a muggle suit in a non-descript black. He turned to Harry. "Your turn."

Harry felt the wand tap his head and he could feel the magic wash over him. He hurried to take a look in the mirror and grimaced. His hair had turned the same dull brown as Sirius, his face had taken on a more rounded shape reminiscent of Neville in first year and his eyes had been turned a muddy brown. Fortunately, Sirius hadn't transfigured his clothes into something else; his blue jeans, favourite green t-shirt and grey hooded fleece had been left alone.

"Right!" Sirius ordered briskly. "It is now…" he silently did the tempus charm and the time glowed
briefly in the air for a long moment. "Huh. Exactly ten o'clock." He ushered them out of the bathroom and down the corridor to the reception room and the floo.

Harry's trunk sat on the floor near to the fireplace. Dobby had helped him pack the night before, ensuring everything was clean and tidily packed away. Hedwig had decided to fly rather than travel by the train so her cage wasn't needed.

Sirius picked up the trunk. "Are you sure you've got everything?"

Harry nodded. "Dobby was very efficient." And much better at packing than Harry. Dobby had cleaned, pressed and folded the clothes very carefully; arranged all the books, equipment and the potion ingredients so that everything would be easily unpacked at the other end.

"OK. I'll go first, you follow, then Remus." Sirius said briskly.

Harry took a deep breath as Sirius went through; he followed with an encouraging look from Remus and emerged out into a floo tucked away into a corner of platform nine and three quarters. Sirius nudged him and he moved away so Remus could floo through easily. The Express was already prepped but there were only a few families already on the platform. Strangely, hardly any families arrived early; most people arrived within twenty minutes of the departure time creating a frantic platform.

"Come on, let's get you on board." Sirius said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. They chose a compartment near to the arriving prefects.

Sirius placed Harry's trunk in the luggage rack, after Harry had retrieved a picnic basket containing lunch, his school robes, and a book from it. Meanwhile, Remus finished placing a number of charms on the compartment; a notice-me-not which would only allow Harry's friends to find him and an alarm charm that would create a serious banshee like sound if someone with intent to harm Harry tried to get into the compartment.

"OK," Sirius said with false cheer, "I guess this is it."

Harry met his gaze and nodded. He felt choked up; unable to speak. He moved towards Sirius and got pulled immediately into a fierce hug.

"If you want to come home at any time…" Sirius began, before he stopped abruptly. When Harry felt Sirius take a shaky breath, he realised Sirius was struggling to keep his own composure.

"Thank you, Padfoot." Harry said; his words were partially muffled as they were said into Sirius's shoulder. "For everything."

"I love you, Pronglet." Sirius whispered.

Remus gently cleared his throat.

Sirius sniffed loudly and loosened his hold, allowing Harry to inch back enough to look at him. Sirius's eyes were suspiciously wet but he had a determined smile on his face. "Now, remember; do your best, have lots of fun, kiss lots of girls or boys or both…"

Harry blushed bright red.

"…and most importantly, use your Dad's cloak for pranking!"

Harry laughed at the last and gave Sirius another quick hug before stepping back.
"I guess it falls to me to be the sensible one." Remus said, opening his own arms in a request for a hug which Harry complied with speedily. "Stay safe. You see, hear or otherwise sense anything suspicious, tell Moody or Minnie or call us; OK?"

"OK." Harry moved back and made a face. "You know that hug was kind of weird with your, uh… additions."

"The girls?" Remus looked down at his bust. "Yes. I could see how it might be a little disconcerting."

"And on that disturbing note…” Sirius reached over, pulled the blind down on the window, and tapped his wand on Harry's head returning him to his usual form. "All done."

They all looked at each other.

"Best Summer Ever." Harry declared softly.

Sirius smiled. "Call me on the mirror once you're back in the dorm after the feast to let me know you're safe."

"I will." Harry promised.

"OK," Sirius said firmly, "we're leaving."

Neither he nor Remus moved.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm going to be fine."

Sirius sighed, gave him another gentle hug. "Be good, and if you can't be good, don't get caught." He dropped a kiss on the top of Harry's head and when he stepped away from Harry, Remus caught Sirius's arm and gently dragged him out of the compartment, closing the door softly behind them.

Harry threw himself at the nearest bench and worked on not crying for a good minute. It was stupid, Harry thought miserably; he was going back to Hogwarts – he should be happy. But there was an ache in his chest, a desperate urge to pick up his trunk and leave – return home.

Home.

He had one now. And it was filled with love and banter and belonging. Finally, belonging.

Merlin, but he missed Sirius already; Remus too. And Dobby.

He blinked back tears and told himself to stop being a baby. He was fourteen! And this was his fourth year! And it wasn’t as if he wasn’t ever going to see them again! He was seeing them every Wednesday for his usual duelling lesson! He shouldn't be bawling his eyes out like a first year.

There was a soft knock on the door and Harry immediately stood drawing his wand. Hermione opened the door and smiled at him happily.

"There you are!" Hermione shooed him back while she got her trunk into the compartment and he sprang forward again to help her, levitating the trunk up to the rack and sheepishly musing he should have done the same with his own.

"How did you know I was on the train?" asked Harry once Hermione settled on the bench opposite him.
"Dobby popped by and gave us a note from Sirius ten minutes ago." Hermione explained. "We decided to floo instead of driving because I didn't like the idea of you sitting alone on the train for a whole hour by yourself brooding."

Harry frowned as he considered if he was totally predictable in his reactions.

Hermione's eyes narrowed on him. "I figured that you would probably feel how I felt in first year."

"How's that?" asked Harry, staring at the corner of the compartment.

"Like you want to get off the train and go home." Hermione said bluntly.

Harry's gaze jerked back to her.

Hermione smiled self-deprecatingly. "I'd never been away from home before and I was nervous and I missed my parents as soon as I said goodbye to them and…I think I volunteered to go look for Trevor because it meant I had something to do and I could just stop thinking about home so much."

"But I'm not eleven and it's not like this is my first year," argued Harry, "you must think I'm pretty stupid to…"

"Be homesick?" Hermione supplied. "Oh Harry!" She dived across the compartment and hugged him before settling next to him, wrapping her arms around his right arm, snuggling into his side with her head on his shoulder. "This…" she said a little hesitantly, "this is the first time you've really had, well, people to miss, isn't it?"

Harry nodded, knowing she could feel the movement even if she couldn't see it.

"Well, see? It's perfectly normal." Hermione squeezed his arm.

For a while, Harry soaked up her comforting empathy as outside of the train the platform started to fill with families dropping off students.

"How…" Harry said eventually, "how did you cope with it?"

"Honestly?" Hermione answered, "I didn't at first. I cried myself to sleep every night for the first couple of months composing the letter I was going to write to my parents begging them to let me come home."

Harry felt incredibly guilty. He'd had no idea she'd felt that way. "And after that?"

"I had you." Hermione said simply. "And Ron, of course. It made everything better."

Friends.

Of course. Harry smiled and slipped his hand into hers. They sat in a comfortable silence for a while before there was another knock on the door and Neville poked his head inside. He grinned at the sight of them and Harry blushed a little self-conscious that he had been caught holding Hermione's hand and cuddling with her. He got up to help Neville with his trunk as Neville confirmed they'd received a Dobby delivered missive from Sirius that morning too.

Neville took the seat Hermione had vacated and Harry slipped back into his own although there was an inch of distance between himself and Hermione that hadn't existed before Neville had entered.

"I have to admit," Neville said brightly, "I'm looking forward to going back this year."
"Yeah?" Harry smiled pleased for his friend.

Neville waved his new wand. "After all the tutoring and everything, I might even keep up in class."

"I'm sure you will, Neville." Harry assured him sincerely. Neville wasn't a bad spell caster; he just needed practice. "Maybe we can help each other outside of class? I can always do with help in Herbology."

"You're on!" Neville grinned.

"That's a wonderful idea!" Hermione said. "I have to admit I just don't have a talent for the practical side of Herbology."

"Hermione, you get straight Os so I think you might have some talent!" Harry said dryly.

Hermione blushed but laughed along with Neville and Harry.

"Where is Ron?" wondered Harry. He was sure if Sirius had sent Dobby to Hermione and Neville he'd have sent him to the Weasleys too.

"You know the Weasleys," Hermione said with a smile, "they'll probably arrive at the last minute."

Another gentle knock on the door had Neville motioning Harry back into his seat as he went to see who it was.

Harry's face lit up when he spotted the blonde girl in the doorway. "Luna! Come in!" he said, unaware Hermione was gaping in surprise.

"Hello, Harry! Did you know you have Eebeebees guarding your door?" Luna asked dreamily.

"Remus put up some charms." Harry explained as he got up and helped Neville with Luna's trunk. "Do you know Neville? And Hermione?"

"We've never been formally introduced." Luna said as she sat down next to Neville opposite Hermione. "I'm Luna Lovegood."

"Neville Longbottom." Neville smiled at her warmly.

"Hermione Granger." Hermione gave her a small wave. "I thought your Dad's article about Harry was the best of the three published."

Luna's delight shone from her face and happy smile. "Thank you. He'll be pleased to hear that."

"Did you get a note delivered by Dobby telling you Harry was on the train too?" Hermione asked, clearly wondering how Luna had found them.

"Oh no," Luna said shaking her head, wide-eyed, "I was just looking for somewhere to sit and I saw the Eebeebees and knew Harry must be inside."

Hermione frowned at her. "You mean you sensed the charms?"

"If we all looked at the world the same way it would be very boring, wouldn't it?" Luna replied, deepening Hermione's frown.

Harry smiled widely and decided he should change the subject before Hermione got wound up and started to question Luna's world view too much. "You really helped me the last time we talked."
"I got your 'thank you' note." Luna said suddenly a little shy. "It's the first letter I've ever received. It was almost like having a friend."

"More than almost I hope." Harry said impulsively. "I'd like to be your friend."

"I'd like that too." Luna said simply.

Hermione's expression had softened with sympathy as though she was finally remembering the conversation about Luna that they'd had with the others at Longbottom Manor during Simeon's introduction party. "Harry was my first real friend."

"Mine too." Neville agreed.

Harry felt his cheeks heat up but he held Luna's gaze. "Ron Weasley was mine. I met him on the Hogwarts Express in my first year."

"Ginny and I used to have play dates when I was small." Luna commented. "But when we started lessons, Mummy and Mrs Weasley didn't agree on what we should learn so we stopped."

"That's a shame." Hermione said, shifting on the bench slightly. "I guess it doesn't help that you're separated by the Houses at Hogwarts either otherwise you could have renewed your acquaintance again."

"That's part of it." Luna agreed softly.

"My Gran said there's going to be an Inter-House Common Room for the upper years," Neville informed them, "for the thing we're not supposed to know about."

"You mean the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" Luna said with a knowing smile.

Harry's eyes widened. "Your Dad showed you the press release?"

Luna nodded, kicking her feet out to stare at her toes. "He's very excited."

"We know about the tournament but have been told not to say anything," Hermione said, staring at Luna's toes herself as though trying to work out what was so fascinating, "the Headmaster wants to surprise everyone at the feast tonight. But never mind that, what does the tournament have to do with the lower years not getting a Common Room?"

"The other schools aren't bringing anyone below sixth year." Harry said. "The Common Room is supposed to encourage international sharing and bonding."

"I think we should request one Common Room for first through third, and another for the fourth and fifth years." Hermione said, taking out her organiser and making a note. "We might not be able to do the international sharing but it should encourage inter-house bonding."

"But all feet need a big toe." Luna said suddenly.

For a moment they all stared at her.

"You mean someone to make it work? Right. Robert will see to the upper years," Harry suggested, "he's Head Boy this year."

"You'll manage the fourth and fifth years." Hermione said and as much as Harry wanted to argue with her, he knew it would be expected.
"What about you for the lower years, Luna?" asked Neville gently.

Luna looked surprised and shook her head sending her blonde hair flying. "Oh, nobody follows something they can't see."

Harry felt his anger stir again at how Luna must have been treated for her to make such a comment. "Who would you suggest?" He asked instead.

"Matthew Inglebee." Luna said simply.

Lydia's twin, Harry mused. Matthew was a good-humoured likeable guy with an easy-going personality. He'd gone into Hufflepuff but he was smart and ambitious if a little overshadowed by his more talkative and effusive Gryffindor twin sister. Harry enjoyed talking with him when Lydia wasn't around.

Harry nodded. "Matt would be a good choice."

"I think so too." Neville said. "He's very popular in his own year."

Hermione agreed. "I've seen him helping the younger years out in the library."

"So, Neville and I can talk with him when we get to Hogwarts." Harry said.

"We still need to get permission." Hermione cautioned him, but her brown eyes were shining with enthusiasm. "A petition maybe?"

"Sounds good." Harry said. "We should talk with the prefects too. If they support it and offer to spend some time in the Common Rooms 'supervising' we'll probably get permission for it."

"If we organise that in the next couple of days before school starts on Monday, maybe we can have the Common Rooms up and running by this time next week." Neville said enthusiastically.

"It's ambitious," Hermione tapped her chin with her quill, "but doable. Let me see, we'll need…" she bent her head over her organiser scribbling notes and Neville shot Harry a smirk as they both looked at her.

"Are you looking forward to the tournament, Harry?" Luna asked, sitting back and folding her hands over her stomach.

Harry lifted a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "It might have been nice to have met some foreign students but as the ones who are coming are all older than we are, I doubt they'll socialise with us much."

"I'm with Harry," Neville said, "I'll go along to watch the tasks and cheer on the Hogwarts Champion but I'm not really that fussed about it."

Hermione sniffed. "Personally, I think the tournament's aims are good but its record is very spotty; two of the Champions died in the third task last time."

"My Daddy thinks it's a very bad idea." Luna agreed. "One of the Champions that died was his friend."

"Oh, how horrible!" Hermione exclaimed, looking up. She frowned. "Your Dad went to Hogwarts though, didn't he? I thought the two who died were from the other schools."

"Francine was friends with my Mummy – she went to Beauxbatons instead of Hogwarts because
Grandmére was French." Luna explained. "Daddy lived next door to Mummy growing up so…"

"So he got to know her friends from school." Hermione finished. "How awful that your Dad and Mum had to go through something like that!" Her gaze drifted to Harry and he gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Harry said firmly, "I have no intention of entering the tournament. Sirius says they're putting a whole heap of protections around the artefact so it'll be impossible for someone underage to enter."

"It won't stop some people trying." Neville commented, raising his voice to be heard over the clamour of people shouting on the platform outside. "Tri-Wizard Champions used to be able to write their own futures after winning; they had the pick of the available Mastery slots and the open job positions. Then there's the fame and the money."

Harry shrugged. "I don't need any more fame and I'm comfortable. I'm quite happy for someone else to go ahead and get the glory while I have a quiet year for once." He sighed. "You know how I was thinking of Quidditch after school?"

Neville and Hermione nodded while Luna looked on curiously.

"Terry started with his team and he was saying that there's a lot of publicity and talking with the fans and…" Harry gave a mock shudder. "I just want to play Quidditch!"

"So maybe a Quidditch playing career isn't for you." Hermione said practical as ever. "You have a lot of other options." She motioned at Luna across the compartment. "What about you, Luna? What are you thinking of doing after school? Are you going to follow your father into journalism?"

Luna seemed shocked someone had asked her a serious question. "Well…I was thinking of writing books about rare magical creatures perhaps a travelogue where I would write about my adventures trying to find them." She confessed with an easy smile.

"That sounds like a very good plan." Hermione said briskly. "I want to go into Healing, combining muggle and magical techniques like The Valley Clinic in the States."

Luna's silvery eyes went unfocused for a moment and she spoke without seeming to realise she was speaking. "Yes, the most successful plants are always well-rooted so their flowers can reach for the sun."

It was a strange comment and Luna smiled dreamily at their bemused expressions. She was covering up her self-consciousness at the manifestation of her gift behind a mask of oddity, Harry realised.

"So Hermione will be successful if she remains well-rooted in both worlds?" Harry said interpreting her words.

Luna beamed at him.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at Harry but she turned back to Luna with a warm smile. "That's a lovely insightful thought, Luna. Thank you." She motioned at Luna. "I have to admit I've had some doubts about Divination but…how long have you had your gift?"

"For as long as I can remember." Luna admitted. "Grandmére was a full Seer. Compared to her, I only see glimpses." Her silver eyes blinked back her surprise at having her words recognised as Seer insight instead of craziness. "I don't have a lot of control over it. Most people find it disturbing."
And therefore most people found Luna disturbing, Harry mused sadly. He was glad that he’d welcomed the younger girl into the compartment and resolved again to be her friend.

"I think that's because most people hate hearing the truth." Hermione said firmly. "So, if you come from a line of Seers maybe you can answer my questions about Divination?"

Harry and Neville exchanged a knowing look as Hermione and Luna settled into a lively discussion about the subject Hermione had walked out on the year before. The boys chipped in when they could but mostly watched on.

"GET A MOVE ON, RONALD!"

The yell from outside arrested all talk within the compartment.

"Was that…" asked Neville nervously.

"Molly?" Harry nodded. He checked the time. It was almost eleven. The Weasleys were cutting it very fine.

A few moments later, Ron staggered into the compartment, the door sliding shut behind him. Neville and Harry assisted him with his trunk.

"You owe me one, mate!" Ron said as he collapsed onto the bench beside Hermione.

Harry retook his seat with a grin. "I do?"

"You should have heard her when Dobby popped in with Sirius's message! 'How could he leave him there on his own!'" Ron mimicked his Mum's voice. "'What was he thinking?!'" He snorted. "Like Sirius doesn't take every precaution known to a wizard where your safety is concerned! She's going to send him a Howler – I'd bet you anything she does! I delayed her as long as I could so she couldn't come aboard and give you an earful!"

"Thanks, Ron." Harry smiled at him as the whistle blew outside.

Ron frowned as he looked around the compartment, doing a double take at Luna before giving her a polite nod. "Where's Ginny?"

Harry, Hermione and Neville looked at each other questioningly and back to Ron.

"She had a sleepover with Lydia last night." Ron explained. "I guess she hasn't found the compartment?"

"Well, not everyone understands the Eebeebees are guards and would understand why they're here." Luna pointed out.

Ron gaped at her in bewilderment.

"The charms Remus put on the compartment were supposed to turn away those Harry considers a threat or who are a threat but let any of Harry's friends through," commented Hermione logically, "but maybe if Ginny doesn't know Harry's on board, she hasn't looked?"

"True," Ron said, "she wouldn't have known. We thought Sirius was going to floo with him until Dobby turned up."

"Or maybe Harry considers her a threat." Neville teased, smiling at Harry.
"Well, Ginny and Lydia together are a threat!" Ron said with a grin. "They're a threat to Harry's virtue!"

Harry reached around Hermione and whacked Ron on the head as they all laughed. "Oy!"

The train lurched forward. They were on the way back to Hogwarts.

O-O-O

"Stop sulking, Sirius." Remus threw a sandwich wrapper at him across the train compartment. He'd lost the female form he'd had when they'd hidden themselves away, lost the bra (Sirius never wanted to see Remus go topless ever again) and he'd transfigured his clothing back to plain wizarding robes.

Sirius glared at his friend. "I don't know why we couldn't have stayed in the same compartment with Harry." He had also ditched the disguise and was much happier back in his jeans and leather jacket ensemble.

"Because Harry's experience of travelling on the train with his friends – the experience he wanted – wouldn't be the same if we were in the compartment with him!" Remus stated with more than a little exasperation, which Sirius understood since it wasn't the first time they'd had the discussion since deciding on the plan to get Harry to Hogwarts.

"You were in his compartment last year!" Sirius whined anyway.

Remus rolled his eyes. "More like he was in mine. Look, Sirius, Harry needs to get used to being away from us – you! You need to let him go. The moment of goodbye at King's Cross is traditional. Harry's subconscious and your subconscious will acknowledge it as such and recognise it as a traditional parting of ways for parents and children. If he knew we were aboard or if we'd travelled together, it would have been delayed until Hogsmeade making things more difficult for you both."

He was right but Sirius wasn't going to give Remus the pleasure of admitting that. He took another bite of his own sandwich and wondered if Harry was enjoying the picnic basket Dobby had made up for him and his friends.

He'd been pleased to see Hermione arrive early and followed fairly swiftly by Neville. Luna's entry into Harry's compartment had been a surprise since Sirius hadn't sent her a message but that she'd found Harry had to mean Harry accepted her as a friend. Ron's late arrival wasn't unexpected – the Weasleys as a family ran on their own time. Sirius had hunkered down hearing Molly's strident tones on the platform. He suspected that he had a Howler in his future despite the fact that Remus's plan was quite ingenious.

They'd arrived early at the platform disguised to ostensibly drop off a child; check. They then warded Harry's compartment to the hilt and made it so only his friends could enter; check. They notified a few of his closest friends so they could find him; check. They took up a position in the next compartment which they made all but invisible to everybody just in case someone had sussed out the rest of the plan; check.

The latter was handy because they had to go to Hogsmeade anyway and move into the new house. Sirius wasn't actually looking forward to that. He loved Griffin House. The new house wouldn't have memories of Harry sprawled on the living room floor watching a movie, sat at the dining table eating treacle tart, or curled up in an armchair by Sirius's desk reading while Sirius worked.

On the other hand, regardless that Griffin House was a floo away from Hogwarts, Sirius was comforted with the knowledge that he'd be physically closer to Harry with the new house. If
anything happened…

And he couldn’t shake the feeling that something might happen.

Noshi’s warning kept ringing in his ears; how Harry would be injured and Sirius would take him back to Noshi to heal.

No.

No, it wasn’t inevitable. Hadn't he and Noshi discussed how prophecies and visions might give the impression of things that really weren't what they seemed?

Sirius would never stop believing that he could keep Harry safe. But he had to admit that he hated turning Harry over to the care of Hogwarts; of Albus Dumbledore who had already failed on so many levels to keep Harry safe.

Not that Sirius thought he was doing a bang up job of it himself either since Harry had almost been kidnapped at the World Cup.

He sighed.

He'd admitted his mistake in leaving Harry at all and not getting him away as soon as the news of the stadium fire had reached him. Harry had admitted his mistake in running after the bastard that had attacked them. They’d both learned. And it was a major part of why Sirius felt he was making another mistake, he acknowledged to himself. Hadn't he learned leaving Harry in someone else's care meant that he wouldn't be there to keep Harry safe? But Harry had promised – *promised* – that he only wanted a quiet normal school year; that he had his animagus project to keep him occupied; that if anything strange or unusual or mysterious occurred that got his attention he would tell someone – he wouldn't go charging in himself.

"Will you stop worrying? I can hear your mind whirling from here!" demanded Remus, looking up from his book to glare at Sirius. "And for Merlin's sake, finish your sandwich!"

Sirius did the mature thing; he stuck his tongue out.

His mirror buzzed.

Sirius immediately dumped the sandwich on the seat beside him and yanked the mirror from his inside pocket. "Padfoot here."

Minerva's face appeared in the mirror. "Sirius."

"Minerva." Sirius said brightly, inwardly wincing.

"The Headmaster has asked me to contact you regarding Harry's arrival."

In other words, Albus was bugging Minnie about when Harry was expected to arrive and by what method since Sirius had point blank refused to tell him.

"We're on the Express." Sirius informed her briskly. "Harry's in the next compartment." He continued cheerfully. "According to Remus we can't travel with him or he won't experience the full Express, um, experience."

Minerva closed her eyes as though trying to remain calm. She opened them again to glare at him. "Then he'll arrive with the other students?"
"Yes, that's the plan. Remus and I will disillusion ourselves, see him onto a carriage and follow it up to the gates." Sirius said firmly.

"You do know the press is going to have a conniption fit." Minerva sighed.

"Serves them right for printing rumours and leaked information!" Sirius retorted. That had pissed him off although it was part of the plan.

Minerva nodded. "I'll be at the doors to make sure he gets inside safely."

Sirius nodded back, his eyes roaming over her tired features. "How are you, Minnie?"

She sighed. "I'm all recovered." Her features softened a touch; the stern lines easing. "Try not to worry, Sirius." The mirror went blank.

Sirius tucked it back into his pocket. He picked up his sandwich and discarded it again. He shifted restlessly, an urge to sneak to the compartment next door and just check on his son. Of course, he reflected, he would probably have to stun Moony first.

"You're not stunning me and checking up on Harry." Remus said, startling Sirius. He looked up in amusement at Sirius's shocked face. "You're very predictable, Padfoot. Eat your lunch and do your correspondence. I thought you wanted to write some letters?"

"How am I supposed to focus on letters?" Sirius complained forcefully. He got to his feet and paced. He hadn't felt so adrift since…since he'd lost Lily and James and Harry. He lurched to a stop. "It's like I've lost him again, Moony."

The wave of emotion as he confessed the truth of the sick aching feeling in his gut had him immediately seeking a refuge…his usual refuge; he turned into Padfoot, slumped to the floor and gave a miserable whine.

Remus immediately set aside his book and dropped to the floor of the compartment. He patted the floor next to him and Sirius sidled up to him, eventually settling with his head on Remus's thigh, Remus's strong hand stroking his head gently.

"Forgive me, old friend," Remus said softly, "you've been doing so well, I forgot you see. You've hardly done this since you came back from the States."

Sirius knew he'd been Padfoot a lot at the beginning of the Summer when he'd had too many painful emotions to cope with despite his want to be there for Harry. But once he'd been given Harry coupled with the healing he'd had…he'd needed to be Padfoot a lot less. Moreover, he hadn't wanted to be Padfoot. But right at that moment…Padfoot was safe.

"You're doing brilliantly." Remus said firmly. "You've given Harry a home and he…he loves you beyond anything, Sirius. He's going to come home; you're not going to lose him; I promise."

But Moony couldn't promise that, nobody could promise that. And that's what scared Sirius.
Hermione frowned as the carriage cleared Hogwarts' gates. Harry had brightened up during the train journey to Hogwarts but he'd fallen quiet again when they'd arrived at Hogsmeade, and during the ride to the school he had been positively moping. She wound her arms back around Harry's left arm and gave him a sympathetic squeeze.

Her eyes caught on the silvery gaze of Luna across from her and Luna gave an imperceptible nod of pleased understanding at Hermione's action. Hermione had come to appreciate the quirky Ravenclaw during their time on the Express. Yes, Luna had odd moments – very odd moments – which were disconcerting, and some of the creatures she talked about Hermione was sure Luna had made up, but Luna was otherwise very sweet with a remarkably sharp intellect that Hermione had quickly come to respect. Their discussion on Divination had been fascinating and Hermione thought she might try and look up some of the references Luna had quoted to get a good understanding of the subject. Although she didn't take the subject anymore but she didn't want her knowledge to be lacking.

Ron caught her attention and he unsubbly looked at how she was holding onto Harry and back up to her with wide questioning eyes. Hermione tried to indicate Harry's state of mind by looking deliberately towards Harry, who was staring out the small window of the carriage with a pensive expression, and gesturing with a subtle jerk of her head. Ron frowned but nodded in understanding.

Hermione sighed heavily.

The carriage came to a halt.

The noise outside was the usual maelstrom of childish chatter. Neville got out and helped Luna down. Ron clambered down and surprisingly held out a hand to Hermione who took it with a murmured thank you. Harry exited last, and his reluctance told in his hesitant glance toward the castle.

"Mister Potter." Professor McGonagall's Scottish burr washed over them as she hurried to the group. "Glad to see you've arrived safely."

Harry managed a smile. "Thank you, Aun – I mean, Professor."

"I'll mirror call Lord Black while I wait for Hagrid. You should get yourselves inside for the feast." Professor McGonagall ushered them towards the doors and they complied swiftly.

They'd barely made it past the doors when other students started to converge on them. Malfoy beat everyone else by a mile, and he had regained his minions of Crabbe and Goyle.

"Weasley, Longbottom, Granger." Malfoy's eyes took in Luna and a small frown appeared. "Lovegood." He turned his gaze to Harry. "My father said you would arrive with everyone else." He proclaimed grandly. "I thought it best not to seek you out beforehand."

"Thank you, Draco." Harry said dryly. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Entertaining for the rest of us." Nott said, falling into step beside Malfoy, Goyle dropping back to let him. "Parkinson has a plan to get her arrangement with Malfoy reinstated." He said in a stage whisper.

Malfoy blushed bright red. "Thank you for sharing that with the world, Nott."
Nott grinned at him. His dark eyes slid over Luna sandwiched between Harry and Neville. He raised an eyebrow. "Protected?"

Harry followed his gaze and nodded. The Slytherins peeled off as they crossed the threshold to the Great Hall.

"Harry!" The girlish shriek had them all wincing. They turned to find Lydia and Ginny barrelling towards them, along with another third year girl, Jessica, who was Lydia's best friend.

"Save me!" whispered Harry urgently.

Hermione stifled a giggle and gave Harry a nod. "Harry," she raised her voice a touch, "why don't you and Neville escort Luna over to the Ravenclaw table? Ron and I will save us some seats."

Harry shot her a grateful smile. Neville immediately offered his arm to Luna and Harry hurried to follow his example. The young blonde girl gave a delighted smile and winked at Hermione as they led her away. Hermione saw Harry was aiming for Michael and Anthony; no doubt Luna would be given over to their care.

Hermione pushed Ron towards the benches but their progress was arrested by the arrival of Ron's sister and the two other girls. Hermione felt a surge of irritation with the youngest Weasley. She couldn't exactly blame Ginny for grasping the others' offers of friendship – Merlin knew she knew herself what it was like to go without close friends – but it made a mockery of Ginny's professed desire to seek a genuine friendship with Harry when she hung around with girls who so blatantly wanted the Boy Who Lived not Harry.

"Who is that with Harry?" demanded Lydia.

"Luna," replied Ginny absently, tucking a strand of red hair behind an ear, "we used to play together when we were small."

"Luna who?" Lydia frowned.

"Lovegood." Hermione supplied. "Is there something you wanted Ginny because we'd like to sit down?"

Ginny flushed. "When did Harry arrive?"

"He was on the train." Ron said pushing past his sister to get to the table where he slid onto the end of the bench near to the door. Hermione sat down next to him as he moved up a space, exchanging a quick look with him that confirmed Harry would take the seat in between them when he returned.

"What do you mean he was on the train?" Ginny sat down opposite her brother and her new friends quickly took the spots next to her.

"Sirius put him on the train this morning and sent Dobby with a note to let us know so we could find him." Ron said succinctly.

"You could have found me on the train and told me!" Ginny argued fiercely.

Ron shrugged. "Couldn't give Harry's position away, could I? It wouldn't have been safe and Sirius would have had my head, not to mention Mum."

Ginny opened her mouth and snapped it shut again, obviously realising the validity of Ron's words.
"Why's Looney with him?" Lydia asked snootily, casting a look back over her shoulder to where Harry and Neville were stood by the Ravenclaw table.

Hermione pursed her lips disapprovingly. "Luna," she stressed the girl's name, "is Harry's friend." She shot a look at Ginny who got her meaning immediately if the bright red blush was anything to go by. She ignored her own twinge of jealousy that Luna might fit Harry's criteria for a girlfriend since it was clear that she saw him for himself and not for his titles.

"Ron!" Lavender took the seat next to Ron and smiled at him coquettishly as Parvati took the seat beside her.

Hermione blinked. Had Lavender just batted her eyelashes at Ron?

Lavender ran a hand over Ron's arm. "I love your new robes! Very stylish! Where did you go? This isn't Madame Malkin's work."

Ron swallowed hard. "Um, well, Bill has this mate and…"

"Oh, does he do women's clothing?"

It was all Hermione could do to not to start laughing herself silly at the utter horror on Ron's face at the question.

"No!" Ron said immediately.

"That's a shame, but he obviously does good work," Lavender smiled again. "You look smashing!" She suddenly took on an air of concern. "I was really sorry to hear about your family getting attacked, Ron!"

"It looked awful in the papers!" Parvati commented, settling her robes around her.

"Awful!" echoed Lavender. "But you were a real hero rushing into the tent to save your Dad!"

"And Neville and Harry are heroes too, of course!" Parvati frowned, her lips forming a perfect pout. "Where are they?"

"Over there at the Ravenclaw table." Lydia remarked sourly, pointing behind her.

"Here, budge up, Gin-Gin! Angelina wants to talk with the team over dinner" Fred slid onto the bench, immediately followed by the Chaser girls and then George. They forced Ginny and the other third year girl to slide further up the bench and away from where Harry would be sitting.

Fred grinned at Hermione and she mouthed 'thanks' at him. She craned her head to sneak a peek at Harry who had been accosted on his way back to the Gryffindor table by some of the Potter alliance Heirs including the new Head Boy. Neville had stayed with him.

Ron followed her gaze and sighed. "They never give him a minute of peace, do they?"

"Well, politically he is their leader." Hermione murmured unhappily but she was in agreement with Ron. The alliance members were great but they needed to remember Harry was just Harry now he was back at school.

"Children!" Professor Dumbledore's voice rose above the babble and commanded silence. "Please take your seats! Our first years are awaiting their Sorting and I'm sure we are all hungry enough not to wish to delay our welcoming feast any longer than necessary."
Everyone not seated immediately scattered for the tables.

Harry slid in between Hermione and Ron as Neville took the seat Hermione had left at the end for him with a grateful smile.

Hermione gave Harry a quick smile as the side door opened and Professor McGonagall led the first years in. They looked so small and scared. Hermione knew intellectually that she and her peers must have looked the same but it seemed so unlikely.

The stool and the Hat were placed solemnly, and the Hat opened its mouth.

"I am the Sorting Hat
Not a mat, a bat, a cat.
I will Sort you once tonight
Making sure your home here's right.
Those with cunning,
Slytherin bound.
Those with loyalty,
Hufflepuff sound.
The brave and noble,
Gryffindors be.
Knowledge and witty,
Ravenclaws, see?
But the cunning need
To watch for greed.
And the loyal may hide
A too trusting side.
The brave always fall
To the reckless call.
Thinkers fail to look
Further than a book.
But you are all these things
And our battle will be won
Only when this truth is known
And Hogwarts stands as one.”

Hermione absorbed the words of the Sorting song and sighed. It was paradoxical to harp on about Sorting people by attributes one moment and to talk about unity in the next. Of course, their idea for an inter-house Common Room was the same foolishness in some respects but maybe that was the Hat’s point; that they should try to see beyond the differences of their House placements and see the similarities of being Hogwarts’ students. She politely clapped as the first student was Sorted into Hufflepuff.

Harry fidgeted beside her and she heard Ron tell him in a loud whisper that the first years were midgets. Hermione shifted against the hard wooden bench and tried to keep her mind on the Sorting. It was a traditional part of the school, she berated herself firmly; she should pay attention and be respectful. It was an effort. Ron continued his side whispers to Harry the entire time despite her chiding looks which were partially because she felt jealous that she couldn't be as sanguine as he in ignoring the Sorting. Harry only came alive as a Michael Gilligan was sorted into Ravenclaw, clapping loudly and cheering. She remembered that the boy was the first recipient of the Lily Potter scholarship.

The Sorting Hat finally finished and the Headmaster made his usual bizarre and eccentric welcome of odd words before food appeared.

Ten minutes later, Harry sat beside her, poking at his chicken dinner without enthusiasm.

"Eat, Harry!" Hermione remonstrated in a whisper. "You can talk with Sirius as soon as the feast is over."

"Luna said pudding would cheer me up." Harry muttered, pushing his chicken away and reaching for the treacle tart.

"You're going to be starving by breakfast if that's the only thing you eat." Hermione pointed out, exasperated. "It's just sugar!"

"Save a slice for me." Ron said, waving a forkful of mashed potatoes.

Hermione noticed Ron was eating much more neatly than ever before. She wondered if it was Andy’s influence or the new robes Ron wore. Perhaps, she considered, having new things had increased his want to keep them nice whereas he'd never had any respect for his second-hand things, not even his wand.

Harry's plate consisted of a huge slice of treacle tart, a large blob of cream, and nothing else but he was at least eating it. Hermione sighed.

"So, I wanted to talk to you about Quidditch, Harry." Angelina spoke up, gaining Harry's attention. "You're my Seeker right?"

"I meant to say congrats at getting Captain." Harry grinned. "And sure, if you'll have me!"

Angelina beamed with pride and rubbed the shiny badge that was pinned to her robes. "$\text{"}Course I'll have you; you're the best Seeker here! We need a try-out though; apparently we're allowed a reserve for each position this year and we need a Keeper.$"

"Ron's going to try-out for Keeper." Harry said immediately, nudging Ron who almost dropped his fork.

"Yes…me." Ron managed to get out as Angelina pinned him with an interested stare.
"Well, you're a Weasley which is a good start." Angelina nodded sharply. "You've been practicing?"

"All Summer." Fred chimed in.

"Him and Ginny." George added.

Angelina peered down the line of her Quidditch team on their bench to the younger Weasley. "Chaser or Seeker?"

Ginny almost swallowed her tongue. She went bright red but her chin was up. "Chaser but I didn't think I'd get a place till next year."

"Charlie helped us practice when he was over from Romania." Ron blurted out.

Angelina smiled. "Well, try-outs are this weekend."

"This weekend?" Ron went white under his freckles.

Harry scooped up more tart. "Don't worry, Ron, we can have a practice session tomorrow evening."

Ron calmed down a bit.

"Can I come along, Harry? I'd like to get some more practice in too." Ginny asked.

Hermione's eyes snapped to Ginny, surprised she'd been brave enough to ask. Maybe her advice to Ginny for her to find something Ginny and Harry both liked as common ground was actually helping Ginny overcome her timidity where Harry was concerned.

"Sure," Harry motioned at Angelina, "we could make it an official practice session for anyone wanting to try-out, right?"

Hermione bent her head to head her smile. Poor Ginny. Harry was either completely oblivious or far too knowing for him to have suggested that. She was thinking oblivious.

"Sounds good to me. I'll get the pitch booked soon as dinner is finished." Angelina said, grinning. "I want that Cup, Harry!"

"As long as you don't drag me out of bed at five o'clock in the morning like Oliver, I'll do my best." Harry countered, grinning back at her.

Angelina gave a very unladylike snort. "No chance! And if you catch me making airy-fairy speeches to motivate you, you have my permission to douse me with cold water?"

"So," asked Fred.

"How are you going…" continued George.

"…to motivate us?" Fred leered at her. "I vote for…"

"Kissing!" chorused the twins.

Harry went red and almost choked on his tart.

Hermione patted his back and handed him some pumpkin juice.

Angelina snickered. "I'll consider it for Harry," she said with a wink at Harry, "but definitely not for
you two!" She laughed at the over-the-top outraged expressions on the twins' faces.

Hermione laughed along with the others and tried to ignore the plummeting sensation in her tummy at the idea of Angelina kissing Harry. Angelina was very beautiful. This, Hermione reminded herself, was why she had originally decided looking at Harry as a potential boyfriend was a very bad idea.

A clinking sound of a goblet drew their attention towards the Headmaster.

"Ah! Thank you for letting me interrupt the end of your splendid meals!" Professor Dumbledore smiled benevolently around the Great Hall. "I have some announcements…" he presented the new members of staff and everyone politely clapped.

Hermione spotted Harry's wide smile at the announcement of the new Healer. "Do you know her?" She whispered.

"She was one of my Healers at The Valley Clinic." Harry said.

Hermione brightened. Perhaps she could go and talk to Doctor Jordan? It would be useful to get an idea of what she needed to do from someone who had already attained both a Healing Mastery and a Doctor's qualification.

There were yells of approval for Tobias Hilliard and Hermione rolled her eyes at how Parvati and Lavender squealed. Great, she mused; no doubt she'd have to listen to endless rambling about Hilliard's eyes and his hair and his perfect duelling body – not that she paid attention to that kind of thing herself.

Lockhart, prompted her conscience. She mentally stuck her fingers in her ears at the memory of liking that insufferable obliviating prat.

She sighed.

"Now, some serious notices." Professor Dumbledore intoned, regaining her attention. "We have a new security policy which does affect curfews. Please take a moment to read it as it is there for your safety. It will be posted outside the Great Hall and in your Common Rooms. There is also a new Anti-Bullying policy, again posted in areas where you can read it but the gist of it states that we will not tolerate any kind of bullying behaviour."

His surprisingly stern gaze swept over the student body.

"Associated with this, the policy on detentions and points has been updated and republished. Please give it your full consideration. Your Heads of Houses will hold a House meeting within the next few days to cover the necessary details."

Hermione glanced over toward the Slytherin table and bit her lip as she took in the disgusted looks; the anti-bullying policy was going to be a shock to them. Or maybe it wouldn't be. It was one thing to have a policy on paper – another to actually put it into practice.

He clapped his hands. "On a more cheerful note, I have exciting news! We will be hosting the Tri-Wizard Tournament this year!"

The Hall erupted as students cheered, hollered and clapped. Hermione applauded politely, but she was more interested in watching everyone's reactions. The teachers had fixed smiles and were also only clapping politely (Professors Moody and Snape were both glowering); many of the muggleborn in the Hall were whispering frantically with their wizarding friends trying to understand why it was a
big deal; a lot of the purebloods looked excited.

"Order, everyone!" Professor Dumbledore quietened the room. "Now, only those of age on October 31st when the names will be drawn will be allowed to enter…"

"AW!"

Fred and George turned to each other and pretended to weep copiously.

"The other schools, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, will arrive the weekend before the draw so they can settle into the castle and get to know you all. There is a new inter-House, inter-school Common Room for years six and seven just along from the library." Professor Dumbledore smiled out at the listening students.

"Those entering the tournament should also be aware that they will no longer be eligible for playing Quidditch should they be chosen to compete." Professor Dumbledore continued. "Speaking of our Quidditch season, it will be compressed to accommodate the tournament; the captains should meet tomorrow morning with Madame Hooch to agree the match schedule."

He waited until the unhappy murmurs about what that meant for the Quidditch Cup died out before speaking again.

"I am also thrilled to announce that we will have a Duelling Club this year. Notices are posted in your Common Rooms." Professor Dumbledore waved a hand towards Professors Moody, Flitwick and Hilliard. "The Club will be primarily led by our three illustrious Professors but fourth year will be led by Lord Black and our former DADA Professor, Remus Lupin."

A cheer went up in the Great Hall. Hermione couldn't help noticing how Professor Snape sneered at the mention of Sirius and Remus.

Professor Dumbledore regained order. "Finally, I will remind all students that the Forbidden Forest remains forbidden to all; that items listed on the door of Mister Filch's office remain banned; and that learning should always be fun so let's sing!"

Hermione cringed and mouthed the words of the school song. Harry and Ron didn't even attempt it. As the song ended and the prefects stood to call together the students, Hermione climbed out of the bench and fell into step beside Harry, Ron and Neville as they made their way to Gryffindor Tower.

The three boys were talking about Quidditch leaving Hermione alone with her thoughts. She was exhausted, she mused tiredly. Somehow the travelling to Hogwarts always left her tired and ready to climb into bed as soon as they got back to the Tower. She almost stumbled through the portrait but Ron reached out and steadied her.

"See!" Harry proclaimed with a smile. "You're a natural Keeper! You caught Hermione!"

"Are you suggesting that I look like a Quaffle, Harry?" Hermione teased.

"No!" Harry immediately said. "No! That wasn't…" he caught the glint of mischief in her eye and mock glared at her. "Funny!"

"I thought so." Hermione said satisfied.

"Harry!" The twins descended on him. "Our man! Our biggest fan…our…”

A sharp whistle broke through the chatter in the Common Room. They all turned to find Tanya
Liddle, the seventh year prefect, stood on a table.

"Right, now I have your attention, Professor McGonagall has called a House meeting before breakfast tomorrow at seven o'clock." Tanya whistled again as protests were shouted across the room. "Seven o'clock." She said again. "The Gryffindor Lecture Theatre will be opened up. This is on the floor below us. The staircases that usually lead to your dorms will also go down another flight tomorrow morning to lead you there. Any questions? No. Good."

Hermione yanked her arm down and muttered under her breath. Why ask for questions if you weren't going to answer any?

The students began to disperse, the fifth year prefects leading the first years up to their dorms. Hermione covered her mouth with her hand as she yawned.

"I'm off to bed!" announced Harry, taking a step towards the stairs.

Hermione gave him a knowing look. "Say hi to Sirius from me."

Harry grinned at her and disappeared up the stairs.

"See you in the morning!" Ron shouted as he and Neville followed Harry.

She shook her head, feeling the bounce of her frizzy brown hair and made for her own dorm room. Lavender and Parvati were sprawled on Lavender's bed gossiping. Hermione got her nightshirt and toiletry bag out of the trunk and made for the bathroom. A quick change of clothes and her night-time routine completed, Hermione went back to the dorm room. She drew the curtains around her bed, set an alarm charm, and climbed under the covers gratefully.

She closed her eyes and tried to block out the chatter of how good Ron's robes looked; how cute Neville was; how hot Harry looked...Dear Merlin! Was she going to have to put up with this prattle all year, Hermione thought...although Harry really did look hot...

It was her last thought as she slipped into sleep.

o-O-o

September 4th 1994

"...but thankfully Ron made this great save and Angelina put him on the team!" Harry finished his tale of the try-outs, laughing. He was so pleased that Ron had made the team; he knew how important it was to Ron and his future aspirations.

Sirius grinned at him through the mirror. "Sounds like an eventful afternoon between the Slytherins trying to steal the pitch..."

Although to be fair to Draco he'd looked completely miserable and hadn't said a word as the rest of the Slytherin team had tried to claim the pitch only to find out exactly how great an aim Angelina had with a Quaffle.

"...and the Harry Stalkers' antics."

Harry went red but he nodded. Ron had coined the phrase after Harry's first three days at Hogwarts had found him followed everywhere by the trio of Ginny, Lydia and Jessica. The boys' dorm room was quickly becoming a sanctuary and Harry thanked Merlin he had his Dad's cloak.
"I swear they have a tracking charm on me!" complained Harry.

Sirius chuckled. "At least they haven't followed you into the showers yet."

"Don't say that!" Harry protested. "You'll give them ideas!" He adjusted his position on the bed. "Anyway, that's it for me! How are you and Remus? Where is Remus anyway?"

The werewolf usually said at least hello at some point during the nightly conversations between Harry and Sirius. Harry had to admit that it had helped his feeling of homesickness a lot being able to talk to Sirius and he felt guilty that the rest of his school mates didn't have the same ability to communicate with their parents.

"We had an issue in Russia which led to us thinking we need to do a review of the overseas properties; he's in Moscow for the rest of the week." Sirius admitted, and Harry saw a flash of loneliness cross Sirius's features before it was pushed away.

"Did he really need to go now?" worried Harry out loud. Harry had a feeling Sirius was missing Harry just as much as Harry missed Sirius, and for Remus to go away now of all times…Hermione had been right that it had helped Harry over the worst of it – they'd helped him feel better. He was sure Remus was doing the same service for Sirius.

Sirius shrugged. "We wanted to make sure he didn't have to go away once the Tri-Wizard Tournament begins. Between the Potter and Black estates we have enough abroad to keep him gone a month but he's going to break the trips up – home one week, abroad the next – over the next couple of months. He should be done by Halloween."

Harry frowned. It made sense but he didn't like Sirius being alone so much. "Why can't he go after the tournament starts?" He could see Sirius debating his answer and wondered why.

"Because we're concerned someone will try and include you in the tournament." Sirius confessed.

"Oh." Harry's eyes widened.

"Look, it's a concern but a small one. Like I've said to you before there'll be plenty of security around the artefact that's being used to decide the Champions for each school but…"

"But you think someone will try to make it choose me anyway." Harry sighed. Probably the 'someone' was Voldemort. "I understand why you're concerned. It'd be just my luck if someone did that."

"Well, besides that, there's also the fact that security at Hogwarts will be compromised during the tournament. You'll have Ministry officials on the grounds; the other schools; the press is being allowed in – not to mention on the days of the tasks, there'll be spectators around." Sirius ranted in a familiar way that made Harry miss him all over again. "We want to make sure both of us are around if you need us so…Remus is going now and then he'll be back for the tournament and won't have to go again until next Summer."

Harry nodded but something of his lingering concern must have shown on his face.

"Hey, don't worry about me!" Sirius reassured him. "Penny has me booked up with so many meetings, lunches and dinners I'm barely going to be home myself."

"And you're OK?" pressed Harry.
"I'm OK." Sirius said firmly. "I miss you lots, but like you I'm continuing to see Healer Allen, and as long as I can talk to you so I can see with my own eyes you're OK, I'm OK. OK?"

"OK." Harry shifted against his pillows. "I mean, I, um, miss you lots too." He coloured rapidly. Talking and seeing Sirius helped him although he was going to confess that; it was embarrassing enough admitting that he missed him.

Sirius's grey eyes lit up though and made the effort of telling him worthwhile. "We'll see each other on Wednesday for your first duelling club session." He promised.

Harry nodded enthusiastically. He'd almost forgotten about that.

"Go get some sleep, Pronglet. You have classes tomorrow and Minnie will yell at me if you're too tired for them." Sirius said.

"Goodnight, Padfoot." Harry carefully ended the call once Sirius wished him goodnight in return and he gently placed the mirror under his pillow. He snuggled down into the comfortable covers to sleep.

In some respects he knew the mirror was a crutch. It kept both him and Sirius from having to deal with the reality of their separation too much. Harry also knew that apart from the first night when Sirius had asked him to confirm he was safely at Hogwarts, there was no real reason or expectation for him to call Sirius every night.

Just a nagging instinct that he should.

On the other hand, Healer Allen had thought the mirror was a good idea while they adjusted. He was going to continue to see the mind healer using the new therapy room in the infirmary early on Sunday mornings. Harry figured he was eventually going to have to tell Ron or Neville; his excuse that day that he'd gotten up early and hadn't wanted to wake them would only work a couple of times.

He chewed on his lip. He didn't want to tell anyone about the mind healing. Mostly because it raised questions of why did he need healing, and he didn't want to tell anyone about the Dursleys…and he couldn't tell anyone about the prophecy.

Except he already had, hadn't he? He'd told Neville. And Neville would understand the need for discretion about mind healing more than most.

Harry winced.

Ron would go nuts if he knew Harry was confiding in Neville and not him. He sighed and rolled over. He'd just have to deal with the fallout if it happened. Maybe Ron would understand.

Maybe.

He either confided in Ron or he didn't. It wasn't a question of trust but safety. The more people who knew the prophecy, the more the danger of it getting out – and if Voldemort thought Harry's friends knew the prophecy…it would place them in immense danger. It was bad enough that he had told Neville but Harry felt deep down that Neville needed to know, deserved to know why Voldemort's supporters had targeted his family.

He fell asleep still turning the problem over in his head with no resolution.

The first Monday dawned bright and early. Harry made it out of bed at six. He did his yoga and tai chi by his bedside to the sound of his dorm mates snoring; it was strangely relaxing. He woke Ron
and Neville before diving into the shower. Half an hour later he was dressed and waiting in the Common Room.

Hermione clattered down the girls' staircase, looking slightly flustered. "Morning, Harry. Have you been up long? Are you worried about the results of the Runes exam we had yesterday? I think I am. I don't think I really answered the essay question at all and…"

"You probably aced it, Hermione." Harry reassured her as he pulled her down to sit on the sofa and wait for Ron.

Her brown eyes narrowed on him. "Why aren't you worried?"

"I did my best." Harry said simply.

And he was really not bothered about whether he skipped ahead to the fifth year Runes class or stayed with the fourth year. It would be an achievement but if it didn't happen Harry was content to stay with his own year group. He just hoped that whatever happened, he and Hermione stayed together – which probably meant that he should be rooting for good marks and progression because there was no way Hermione hadn't gotten through to the fifth year class.

He poked her. "I know you did your best so…we'll find out this morning and we get the reissued schedules if they're needed, yes?"

Hermione nodded, her hair cascading over her shoulders. Ron and Neville joined them and they all trooped out to breakfast.

Harry decided on a bacon sandwich and he assembled it as he watched Ron serve himself a full English. Neville had gone for poached eggs on toast smothered in brown sauce. Hermione had porridge with a side of fruit.

"Have to admit I was kind of expecting to see your stalkers by now," Ron admitted as he tucked in.

Hermione hummed. "I think someone snuck into their dorm and cancelled their alarms."

The three boys looked at her in shock.

"I had nothing to do with it!" Hermione said quickly. "I just overheard Parvati and Lavender giggling about it this morning."

Harry shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich. He owed Parvati and Lavender a thank you. It was the first restful breakfast he'd had since he'd gotten back to Hogwarts.

"I don't have the faintest what's gotten into Ginny, mate." Ron said somewhat apologetically. "I mean, I know she, uh, liked you but…"

"Not your fault." Harry quickly said.

"I think it's a mob mentality." Neville offered. "She's just going along with Lydia and Jessica, well mostly Lydia." He frowned. "I only hope they're being true friends to her and not just you know…"

"Using her to get to me?" finished Harry grimly. It was a thought.

"They'd better not or I'll…I'll…" Ron searched for a suitable punishment. "I'll set Fred and George on them!"

"Set us on who?" asked the twins joining them.
Ron quickly explained and the dark looks that the twins exchanged sent warning bells ringing for Harry.

"Hey," he said firmly, "we don't know yet that they're doing anything other than being Ginny's friends. We should see how things turn out. If they are friends that's a good thing for Ginny, isn't it?" The timing of the friendship was suspicious though and Harry was concerned even as he smoothed the older brothers' ruffled feathers.

"It is." Fred sighed heavily. "If they are her friends…"

"…for the right reasons…" George slipped in.

"…it's a good thing." Fred completed.

"How do we know?" demanded Ron, who looked very much like he was in favour of trapping the girls in a room and interrogating them.

"We don't." George admitted.

"Some things…"

"…have to be worked out for themselves." George sighed unhappily. "Ginny has to be the one to decide whether they are her real friends or not."

"We'll just have to wait and see how it plays out, Ronniekins." Fred didn't seem any happier about it than Ron who sported a scowl that could have felled dragons.

"Why can't she be friends with someone smart like Luna?" Hermione said as she placed her napkin down finished with her breakfast. She loved the healthier options that the house elves had started to provide.

Harry snagged an apple to make up for the bacon and rubbed it absently on his robes. Luna had slowly become part of their wider group. He knew the Ravenclaws in the Potter alliance had befriended her and were looking out for her within their House. But Harry had used the Map to track her down during the weekend and they'd all ended up sitting together by the Black Lake talking about many interesting creatures much to Hermione's bemusement.

Hermione and Luna made an odd friendship but they were solidly progressing in that direction. Maybe, Harry considered, Luna finally provided Hermione with someone who could give her an intellectual challenge.

"Why did they stop being friends anyway? Luna said they used to play together when they were younger." Hermione asked bluntly.

The Weasleys exchanged looks.

George was the one evidently elected to answer; he cleared his throat. "Luna's mother followed the Old Religion."

"Mum didn't want Ginny to pick that up." Fred said.

"Wiccan magic based on worshipping the Goddess?" Hermione asked, surprised. "I thought it wasn't practiced anymore."

"It isn't openly." Fred confirmed. "A lot of it is blood based."
Like the protection his mother had given him.

Neville and Ron darted a look in his direction obviously remembering the blessing ceremony.

Harry sighed. "It doesn't sound so bad to me."

"It isn't..."

"...really. Just..."

"...not done." George finished. He slapped his twin's shoulder. "Tabby is on the prowl. We should..."

"...go." Fred snatched some toast from Ron's plate but before Ron could do more than bellow a 'hey!' the twins had disappeared.

"Mister Weasley," Minerva said sternly walking up to them, "a little decorum, please."

"Sorry, Professor." Ron mumbled.

Hermione practically vibrated off the bench. "Professor?" She asked hopefully.

Minerva's lips pressed together, trying to prevent the smile that made them twitch from emerging. "Congratulations to you, Miss Granger, and to you, Mister Potter. You have both made it through to the fifth year Runes class." She produced two new schedules as Hermione almost squealed. "You will be joining Mister Goldstein and Miss Greengrass."

"Oh Harry!" Hermione suddenly hugged him hard for a second before she released him. "Isn't this wonderful!?"

"What's so wonderful about having to sit an OWL this year?" Ron said grumpily as Minerva walked away.

"Have to agree with you on that." Neville commented.

"We get one out of the way and have one less to sit next year." Hermione answered logically. She nudged Harry. "Come on! We have double Defence first thing."

Harry bit back a smile at Ron's rolled eyes but he gathered his things and followed Hermione out of the Great Hall.

Robert Ogden stopped them just outside the entrance. "We got the permission for the lower year Common Rooms!" He grinned at them. "Didn't think Dumbles would go for it but he did! Must have been mentioning your name!" He waved at Harry. "Find me in my office tonight, yeah? We can talk about how it'll work!" He sped away.

"Honestly, that Robert! He's the Head Boy! He should show some respect!" Hermione remonstrated as Harry pushed her gently to get her walking forward again.

"I dunno," Ron said deliberately to wind her up, "I quite like the name Dumbles."

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione began.

"We're here!" Harry said loudly.

They split up, Neville sitting by Ron and Harry sliding in beside Hermione. Professor Moody sat
imposingly at the front of the Defence classroom on the desk.

Draco slid in just before the class was due to start, followed by Crabbe and Goyle. He gave a respectful nod to Harry before finding his seat.

Moody closed the door with a swish of his wand and it slammed shut with a bang that startled Lavender into a shriek. "CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Harry tried to hide a smile and failed. Moody's magical eye whirled in his direction.

"Professor Lupin informs me that you lot have potential." Moody said gruffly. "But you've got a lot of catching up to do." He motioned at the blackboard behind him and the chalk sprang to life.

"Situational Awareness." It wrote elegantly across the black.

"Mister Potter," Moody growled, "when did you realise your first DADA Professor was possessed by a Dark Lord?"

Shocked looks were the order of the day in the rest of the students, Harry noticed as he grimaced and tried to think. "Um, probably just before he tried to kill me."

There was an outbreak of whispering that quickly stopped when Moody's hard glare landed on the perpetrators.

"And in hindsight, what would you all say the signs were?" Moody asked sharply. "Come on! Don't be shy! Miss Granger?"

"He stank of garlic probably to cover up the smell of decaying flesh caused by his possession."

Hermione replied, dropping her arm.

The chalk wrote up her suggestion on the blackboard.

"Good. Anyone else?" Moody looked around the other students.

Nott put his hand up and Moody nodded at him.

"His fake stammer, sir." Nott said.

"Correct." Moody said. "A fake stammer should have been a warning sign."

Lavender raised her hand nervously. "The turban, Professor?"

Moody's good eye blinked and the magical eye snapped to Crabbe snickering. "You think that's funny, lad? Girl's got a sharp eye. Odd dress accessories or just oddly dressing might be a cause for concern."

"Does that mean the Headmaster's possessed then?" Seamus asked in a loud voice.

"Good question, lad," he motioned at Lavender, "why don't we ask the expert here?"

Lavender squirmed in her chair and nervously flicked her hair back. "Professor Dumbledore has an unique style; he likes clashing colours and abstract patterns often featuring cute creatures and beautiful flowers. So...I would say he was possessed if he suddenly began to wear something different, Professor? A more sedate wardrobe or an even more over the top one?"

"Excellent observations and deductions, lass! Take ten points for Gryffindor!" Moody said firmly.
His wand pointed at the chalk and the item of 'change of dress/odd styling' made its way across the black. "Anything else?"

Harry raised his hand warily and almost regretted it when Moody nodded at him. "My scar hurt in his presence, Professor." He tried to ignore how everyone turned to stare at his forehead.

"Curse scars caused by Dark magic often will be pained in the presence of more Dark magic or certainly the one who gave you the scar in the first place." Moody agreed as the chalk wrote it up on the board. "Course, not everyone has useful scars like ours, Potter."

There was a smattering of chuckles in the classroom.

"Let's move on." Moody said. "Weasley, when did you realise that Lockhart was an obliviating fraud?"

Ron gaped a little before he snapped his mouth shut. "Uh, I think we realised the fraud part when he didn't teach us anything and set the crate of Pixies on us. The obliviating bit…" his eyes briefly met Harry's, "well, like Harry said, just before he tried to, uh, well, he didn't try to kill us just obliviate us."

"Same question to you lot. What gave him away way before he got the opportunity to try and obliviate your school mates here?" Moody asked.

Hermione's hand was ignored in favour of Daphne's.

"The timeline of his books was inconsistent and filled with errors." Daphne said succinctly. "The impossibility of it should have alerted people to the fact that he was fraudulent and therefore had to have acquired the inherent facts of events in some nefarious fashion."

"Good. What else?" Moody's chalk was writing up 'blatant lying' on the blackboard.

Parvati was given the nod. "Um, he wore impractical clothing during his heroics according to his books. A real hero doesn't pay attention to what they're dressed in."

Her dark eyes fell on Neville who blushed bright red.

"You've got the heart of it right, lass." Moody agreed. "Why so much time spent on his appearance and dress? You don't wear Acromantula silk when traipsing through muck."

Draco put his hand up and Moody motioned for him to speak.

"Lockhart was easily defeated in a duel." He said crisply.

"Heard about that, and again, you'd be right about the main point. A man with Lockhart's reputation shouldn't have been taken by surprise although your Head of House is no slouch at duelling so there may have been extenuating circumstances – a difficult opponent." Moody's chalk wrote up 'weak performance.'

"His spells never worked." Dean offered.

Moody nodded again. "Example?"

Dean sent Harry a sympathetic look. "He banished Harry's bones instead of healing them."

"Bloody idiot." Moody muttered, obviously meaning Lockhart as he sent a proud look in Dean's direction. He waved his wand at the chalk. "Let's move on again."
Harry's heart sank; he had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"Miss Granger, when did you realise Professor Lupin was infected with lycanthropy?" Moody asked roughly.

Hermione frowned at him, almost disapprovingly. "After I completed the essay on werewolves Professor Snape set when he deputised for Professor Lupin."

"Who else realised Professor Lupin's condition before it was revealed to the masses?" Moody asked.

Greengrass, Nott, and Zabini put their hands up.

"What gave him away for you, Greengrass?" Moody pressed.

"Like Granger, it was the essay that prompted it. I did an analysis of the times he was absent with the occurrence of the full moon." Daphne answered crisply.

Moody huffed. "Anyone have a different reason?"

Zabini threw an apologetic look towards Harry, understanding that Harry was uncomfortable with the discussion revolving around someone he cared about. "I put it together during the boggart lesson when his boggart turned into the full moon. That coupled with his distinctive scars made me conclude he was likely a werewolf or had been marked by one."

Parkinson raised her hand and shot Parvati and Lavender a smug look. "His shabby clothes also gave it away in hindsight."

"I suppose they would." Moody said flatly. "Werewolves are labelled as Dark creatures and struggle to find work especially since most of them don't have the advantage of the education Mister Lupin was able to undertake." He said grimly. "Most folk forget that the majority of them are wizards who had no choice in whether they were bitten or not. Wolfsbane, if they can get it, keeps them docile during the full moon unless they feel their pack is threatened."

Parkinson sniffed. "You're not suggesting werewolves should be treated the same as wizards, Professor, are you?"

"They are wizards." Harry retorted angrily.

"The lad's right." Moody glared at Parkinson. "Put it this way: who was the more dangerous out of your previous three Professors? The one possessed by a Dark Lord, the idiot who had no idea what he was doing when he held a wand in his hand except when it came to the spell to make you forget your own name, or the one who took Wolfsbane and locked himself in his office on a full moon?"

Harry felt vindicated as he saw some of the students beginning to understand.

Moody turned back to Harry. "However, you shouldn't forget that without Wolfsbane they are dangerous even ones who don't want to hurt anyone. Defences?"

"Silver weapon curse." Tracey Davies offered.

"Silver in general." Nott added.

Neville put his hand up. "A plant called aconite."

"Yes, that's very poisonous to them." Moody agreed.
Harry raised his hand. "Being an animagus."

Moody smiled at him. "Yes, if you're animagus, a werewolf's bite won't turn you if you're in your animal form when bitten. Werewolves will also accept an animagus as part of their pack if they recognise them and not attack, but an animagus outside of the pack will sometimes be viewed as prey."

The chalk had fallen silent.

"Right," Moody said, "how could you determine if I'm the real me?" He gazed around the room. "What's to say I'm not a polyjuiced imposter who's got the real me locked up somewhere?"

"We could do a detection spell?" offered Nott.

"Standard protocol for aurors. But the spell has issues with Polyjuice." Moody said swiftly. "Who knows why?"

Draco raised his hand. "The potion properties distort the detection spell."

"And there's the issue of genetics." Nott added. "If someone polyjuices themselves as a member of their own family, the detection spell can't work out there's a difference."

"What else could you do to discover if I'm me?"

Hermione raised her arm. "We could trap you into a room so you couldn't renew the Polyjuice as it has a limited working time."

"Good although you may have to wait twenty-four hours to be certain there isn't an improved version the imposter is using." Moody gestured out at the students. "Any other ideas?"

"Blood identification." Zabini offered.

"Good," Moody agreed, "a blood identification will reveal the real identity of someone although you run into problems if the person being impersonated shares the same name with the person impersonating them. What else?"

Harry put his hand up again. "Well, I've met you before so I could ask you something that I know only you would know."

"You're on the right lines, Potter." Moody agreed gruffly. "What would you ask me?"

Harry ran through various options and settled on something he hoped wasn't too embarrassing. "Um, what was the first story you told me about my Dad?"

"An alright choice, Potter. It's something personal so a tick there but I told you that story in front of Amelia Bones so she would know you told me it and might have informed our imposter." Moody said. "What else might you ask me?"

"Um, where was my wand the first time we met?" Harry felt his cheeks heat up.

"Excellent choice!" Moody said. "And for the record it was in your bedroom but I won't say where in case you actually need to ask me in the future."

Harry blushed.

Daphne raised her hand. "Wouldn't a code word be a better choice as confirmation?"
Moody nodded. "If it's something you've arranged beforehand because you have an expectation of someone trying to be an imposter, that's a grand idea." He pushed himself off the desk. "Split into pairs; one Gryffindor, one Slytherin; a boy and a girl to each pair. We tend to see things differently. I want you to spend the rest of the time working out how you would spot if someone was impersonating each member of the staff. So, what are things that would be suspicious for Professor McGonagall? Professor Snape? Madame Pomfrey? Write it up on parchment; you hand them in at the end of the lesson."

Harry got up and made his way over to Daphne who was motioning for him to join her; he absently noted Draco had slipped into his seat by Hermione.

Daphne smirked at him. "Shall we get started then, Potter?"

Harry nodded, happy with the assignment and his partner – Daphne was snarky and wonderfully free of any kind of awe for him. They wrote out a list of the current staff and started through them methodically. Daphne was a good partner; she was very observant with a fine eye for detail; Harry provided the more off-the-wall suggestions. Harry's previous knowledge of Doctor Jordan and Firenze proved useful; Daphne's family turned out to be related to Hilliard's which meant they had information on him. Both of them only had political information about Alison Bunting and nothing on the new History of Magic professor.

With about five minutes to go, Moody called a halt and collected the parchments. He sat back on his desk. "So, the first part of situational awareness is people. Most murders and violent crimes are not done by strangers but by someone known to the victim. Why? Because they're the ones that have the most access and opportunity. Be aware of who is around you; be aware that they might not be all that they seem. Anything suspicious, report it to someone you know is who they say they are."

The bell rang.

"And remember: CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" Moody dismissed them.

They all trooped out.

"That," Ron declared, "was bloody brilliant!"

And Harry had to agree.
"Padfoot,

Harry's farm in Russia is in lovely condition. The house elf here – Glumpy – reminds me a bit of Dobby – keen and enthusiastic. He makes his hot chocolate with a splash of vodka.

Good to hear that Harry has settled back into Hogwarts. Remember not to panic if he doesn't call you on the mirror every night. You'll see him every Wednesday night for your duelling lessons.

Stay safe, Moony."

Bloody Moony, Sirius thought morosely.

He sighed. It wasn't Moony's fault that the estates needed visiting, and Sirius had agreed for Moony to go so it was all done and dusted before Halloween. They'd already put it off during the Summer so Remus had the chance to properly get to know Harry. But he knew from the daily missives Remus was sending him that his friend was concerned especially after Sirius's minor, very minor, breakdown on the train.

A man couldn't turn into a dog for a couple of hours without it becoming a big deal, mused Sirius grumpily.

Healer Allen had been more sanguine about the whole affair, noting that some backsliding was to be expected now Sirius's primary motivation for healing and keeping his emotions in check was removed from his immediate vicinity. In other words, Harry was back at Hogwarts.

Some of his malaise was simply missing his son; the evocation of similar feelings of grief and loss that reminded him of Azkaban. But Healer Allen had pointed out that Sirius had never had a chance to fully grieve for James and Lily; for the absence of Harry in his life for eleven long years. Without having to be a full time father figure for Harry, Sirius's mind and body were pushing him to finally acknowledge his pain.

But Sirius knew lurking underneath that was his fear about not being able to keep Harry safe now his son wasn't living with Sirius day in, day out. He knew some of that fear was rooted in his guilt over James and Lily; how he believed he had failed them in suggesting Peter. Some of it was rooted in his guilt over Harry's life with the Dursleys which would never have happened if he hadn't gone haring off after Peter. And a lot of it was rooted in his fear that no matter what his efforts the damned prophecy would come true anyway.

Sirius took a deep breath.

Fear about Harry's safety was rational. Allowing that fear to cripple him and prevent him from continuing with his plan to keep Harry safe was not – and it would be counterproductive. He had regular contact with Harry (and he was so relieved Harry was using the mirror every night despite feeling that it was more for his benefit than for Harry's); he would see him face to face every week for his duelling lesson.

He set aside Remus's note and forced himself to focus on the notes and reports he needed to read ahead of the Wizengamot session the next day. He only looked up when Penny knocked on the door and he realised his next meeting had probably arrived. He swore a little under his breath at forgetting to set an alarm especially given who had requested the meeting. He rose from his seat as she ushered in Nott.
Sirius covered the formal greetings, called Kreacher for refreshments, and motioned towards the seating area. "Lord Nott." Death Eater, his inner voice snarled. A Death Eater who he had a pact of neutrality with, he shot back silently before sheepishly realising that he was in effect arguing with himself. He motioned for Penny to leave; he had the sense that Nott wouldn't want the meeting recorded. He waited a moment as Kreacher delivered the drinks and cake; the elf shot a look at Sirius that told him he expected the cake to be eaten which presumably meant he and Dobby were conspiring about Sirius's loss of appetite.

Sirius repressed the urge to sigh and sat down in a chair with a languid elegance that belied his tension. "Your request was unexpected, Benjamin, I had rather thought that we had covered the salient points of this month's Wizengamot session at the meeting with Lucius, Stewart and Norman on Monday."

Apart from the détentes agreed, the others had all agreed to abstain in the vote on the Muggle Affairs report which recommended setting up the Department of Muggle Affairs.

Nott smiled at him and took a sip of his coffee. "So we did. This is not about the Wizengamot session but rather the matter of what took place at the World Cup."

Sirius arched an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware there was anything for us to discuss."

"Your Heir protected mine," Nott said simply.

Ah.

Bugger.

Sirius had hoped that Nott would not press the matter over whether there was a life debt between the Houses. Although, he noted with wry amusement, Nott was recognising that there was a life debt between the Heir of the House of Black and the House of Nott, not between the Head of the House of Potter and the House of Nott; a subtle difference that highlighted Nott's politics.

"I can understand that the Potter alliance does not wish to argue the matter," Nott said smoothly, "and indeed given the oaths between those Houses of support and protection, there is even a convincing case that a life debt between them doesn't exist. I would guess the House of Zabini is probably of a similar mind since I'm certain an alliance of mutual aid and support will be announced tomorrow."

Only years of pranking enabled Sirius to keep the information off his face. The alliances with the neutral Houses would be announced at the session but he was damned if he was going to confirm it to Nott ahead of time.

Nott's lips twitched into a facsimile of a smile. "No such oaths exist between our Houses."

"Your son was there as a guest of the House of Black," Sirius began, "albeit through the Malfoy family line. It was no more than my Heir's duty to see to his safety."

"And I would counter that no such responsibility existed for the Head of the House of Potter." Nott rejoined.

Sirius was surprised Nott had countered with that. He'd hoped Nott's abhorrence to recognise Harry's Potter status had been a sign that he wouldn't be pushed into doing so.

"The Head of the House of Potter was the target of the attack." Sirius said firmly. "As he was the reason your Heir was endangered…"
"It is hardly the fault of the House of Potter that my Heir was endangered because someone attempted to kidnap Lord Potter." Nott interrupted. "The only one who endangered my Heir is the one who decided to attack; Lord Potter did nothing but defend my son. Regardless of your son's power, the shield he established and maintained could have caused magical exhaustion at risk to his life if the attack had lasted long enough; we both know it."

Sirius stared at him hard. Nott was determined to have the life debt acknowledged; that much was clear. The question was why?

He sipped his coffee, inhaling the rich aroma and letting the familiarity of it soothe him. "Let's say for a moment that as the Regent of the House of Potter, I was inclined to accept such a debt exists between the Houses, what would you propose as settlement?"

Nott sat back and brushed imaginary lint from his robes. "The Weasley Heir is in service to repay the life debt incurred in the saving of the Weasley girl. I would not consider a lesser proposition since I am certain that I value my only son as much as the Weasleys value their only daughter."

It was extremely difficult to keep his shock from showing. "You wish to swear your Heir into the service of the House of Potter?" Why, why, why would Nott want to do that?

"I'd prefer to swear him to the service of the House of Black but you made a valid point about the duty of a host." Nott said with a sly look over his cup.

Oh Merlin, Nott was good. Sirius had to admire the man's Slytherin talents. If questioned by his pureblood allies, Nott could legitimately claim he had been pushed by Sirius into accepting the debt was between Potter and Nott.

Sirius wanted to pace but pacing would give away his unease and so he reached instead for the Battenberg cake Kreacher had left. He took a bite and thought over Nott's insistence and his proposal.

Nott had declared a position of neutrality between the Houses of Black and Nott with the détente. It could argue with Voldemort when he returned that neither he nor his son could raise a wand against Harry or Sirius. But it wouldn't stop Voldemort from demanding Nott's son be Marked as Nott was himself; from demanding that in all other respects the House of Nott side with Voldemort. True neutrality was something that Voldemort would not countenance from a man branded as his follower.

But if Nott Junior was sworn to service in the House of Potter, he could not be sworn to the service of Voldemort. Theodore Nott would be placed firmly on the side of the Light. And done under the guise of the life debt and honour, it would make it hard for anyone to argue with.

Was Nott protecting his son from Voldemort?

It seemed unlikely yet Sirius couldn't shake the feeling he'd deduced Nott's motives correctly. And yet he couldn't also dismiss the possibility that Nott was using his opportunity to place his son as a spy close to Harry.

"Answer me something truthfully, Benjamin, and I might consider taking you seriously." Sirius said slowly and ignored how Nott stiffened almost imperceptibly at the challenge. "Why do you want this life debt acknowledged so much?"

"It's what Theodore wants." Nott said simply.

Sirius's eyebrows shot up.
Nott picked up his cup. "Theodore's politics are much more closely aligned to Lord Potter's than mine."

"Most Heads would be encouraging their Heirs to follow their agenda not a rival one." Sirius said carefully.

For a long moment, Nott remained silent, regarding Sirius intently.

"Do you remember Sebastian?" Nott asked eventually. "My brother's son? When Christian and his wife died of Dragon Pox, I took Sebastian in as my own and he was a wonderful Heir. Sebastian was perfect in every way; a wonderful boy. He was devoted to my agenda and a devoted supporter of the Heir of Slytherin. When Riddle needed a sacrifice for some wretched ritual, Sebastian offered himself. Eighteen years old and he died for the cause that I had indoctrinated him into believing." His dark eyes met Sirius's.

Sirius was at a loss how to respond.

"Riddle arranged my marriage to my ill-fated Sophia to compensate me for my loss, so I could replace one Heir with another as though he had sacrificed a puppy not a person; as though one human life was simply interchangeable with another." Nott continued in the same measured tone, his words lacking the bitter edge that Sirius might have expected to hear. "I cannot even regret his pitiful and monstrous thinking because otherwise I would not have Theo. This son I raised to think for himself; to question and challenge, and come to his own conclusions. I will not sacrifice another son to Thomas Marvolo Riddle especially one who does not want anything to do with him."

"I'm almost surprised that you still want anything to do with him yourself." Sirius murmured, absorbing Nott's strikingly honest confession.

Nott harrumphed. "I know your Grandfather taught you to take responsibility for the decisions you make. I made my decision and I will live with the consequences of it. Tom was once a very charismatic and powerful wizard and I was once young and foolish and swayed to his side with promises of something new and revolutionary. At the time he made me feel excited for the future, and not foolish at all but proud and powerful to be accepted to stand by his side." He raised his cup. "I'm certain the Heirs of the Potter alliance might have felt something similar when they decided to rashly declare their fealty to your son."

Sirius shot him a ferocious look. "I think there's rather a substantial difference myself."

"Your son has a very different vision for our world, and given the power at his disposal, one hopes a very different nature." Nott agreed calmly. He allowed a small smirk at Sirius's questioning glance. "He called the family magic of the entire Potter alliance," he raised a hand when Sirius went to deny it, "and please do not insult my intelligence. No alliance could have coordinated so perfectly; he did it alone." He rearranged his robes. "You didn't really think that it was our détente alone that brought Wilkes and Selwyn to your door? That prompts Gibbon and Adams to approach you now?"

No, he hadn't but it was disconcerting to realise the other Ancient and Noble Houses might know of Harry's affinity for family magic; his skin crawled with unease.

"We've drifted from the point." Sirius said evenly.

"Yes, we have." Nott murmured. His dark gaze met Sirius's once again. "Is it so hard to accept that you are not the only father who wants his son safe, Sirius?"

Sirius inwardly sighed and stuffed the remaining Battenberg in his mouth while he considered his
answer. He set the plate aside and swallowed the last of his coffee. "As the Regent of the House of Potter, I'll accept the service of the Heir to the House of Nott for one year to actively begin at his graduation from Hogwarts. Until that time he will be considered to be in service to the House and will need to take an oath of loyalty as soon as it is possible for it to be arranged."

Nott allowed a look of relief to cross his features and bowed his head. "Thank you. I'll request a private meeting for our Heirs and ourselves next weekend at Hogwarts? I'm sure Albus will be happy to provide us with a room."

"Accepted." Primarily because it meant he could see Harry twice in a week.

They both stood up and Sirius sent a signal to Penny who immediately turned up at the study door to escort Nott out.

"Good day, Sirius."

"Good day, Benjamin." Sirius returned the formal farewell. He waited until Nott was almost out of the study before he spoke again without looking at the older wizard. "Nott, if your son ever betrays mine, I will not need my wand to kill you both; understood?"

Nott stopped and glanced back at him. "Arcturus would be proud of you, Sirius. He was right; you are a formidable Lord Black."

And with that he was gone.

Sirius wondered if he'd been complimented or insulted or both. He grumbled to himself as he checked the time and settled back at his desk. He continued to work through what was left of the afternoon, shooing Penny on her way around five o'clock. He barely touched the meal Kreacher delivered to him, picking at it absently as he went over his lesson plan for that evening. Finally, it was time to leave and Sirius headed for the Ministry to pick up his replacement assistant for the night.

He made it to the office of Amelia Bones without running into too many people and he was shown straight in by her secretary who seemed to have a problem with her eyelashes they were fluttering so much.

"Amelia!" Sirius smiled widely at the witch as he took her hand in the professional shake she preferred in the office.

"Sirius!" Amelia grinned at him. "You look well."

"Don't lie," Sirius remonstrated, "I look awful."

"Awful is relative, Sirius," Amelia said as she started to pack up, "and I assume the bags under your eyes are evidence of a few sleepless nights because of your first experience of empty nest syndrome?"

"I miss Harry madly." Sirius admitted. "And the new house doesn't feel right yet. How goes the tribunal preparation?" He asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Amelia gave a very unladylike snort. "It goes. We have the nominations in for who should sit; Gideon Baron is nominated by a land slide so he's definite. The other person...is surprisingly Daniel Greengrass although Malfoy came close. Travers continues to say nothing while the other three claim Imperius every time a guard speaks to them." She waved a hand to dismiss the topic. "Thank you for asking me along to substitute for Remus tonight, by the way."
Sirius's eyes took on a mischievous glint. "Brian's not upset I'm borrowing you, is he?"

Amelia shot him a warning look but answered anyway. "Brian thinks it's a splendid idea. I'm looking forward to duelling Harry."

He grinned. "He might surprise you."

She laughed heartily and ushered him out of her office, ignoring the jealous look cast her way by her secretary. "I'm looking forward to surprising Susan." There was a hint of evil in her grin as they made their way to the floo discussing the plan for the duelling lesson.

They arrived into Alastor Moody's floo. Moody was already there, wand poised as he cast detection spells on them before grunting and pointing at a piece of parchment.

Amelia rolled her eyes but pricked her thumb and placed her blood on the parchment. It immediately confirmed her identity. Sirius did the same before he turned and held his wand on Alastor.

"Your code word, Alastor?" Sirius demanded.

"Long John Silver." Moody replied gruffly with a nod of approval at Sirius's caution.

Amelia sighed. "I wish this wasn't necessary."

"Until we catch the prat with the improved Polyjuice, everyone's going through it." Moody said firmly. "Constant vigilance!"

"We should get to the Duelling training room." Sirius excused them before Moody could get going or Amelia got wound up by Moody's paranoia.

The Duelling training room was already filled with excited and chattering fourteen year olds. Pausing on the threshold, Sirius grimaced at the number realising all of the fourth year had turned out despite the duelling club not being mandatory.

"I thought you were a Gryffindor, Black." Amelia whispered in his ear and forcefully pushed him through the door.

Harry spotted him immediately and hurried over to give a small bow – Andromeda's etiquette lessons had been well pressed into his head. Sirius reached out to take hold of his shoulder, wrestling back the urge to hug him half to death with the internal promise he'd do it at the end of the lesson when they'd gotten rid of an audience. He drank in the sight of Harry; warm, alive and safe.

"Auntie?!" Susan's shriek cut through the babble and helped to silence the room as she bounded across for a hug from her Aunt.

"Well done, Susan," Sirius said loudly, "for introducing the stand-in for Professor Lupin for tonight's duelling lesson: Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones!"

There was a round of applause as Susan gazed in stunned bewilderment at her aunt who took a bow and grinned at the fourth years.

Sirius whistled and gained everyone's attention. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Sirius Black. I've been told that you have to call me Professor." He made a face which had a few of them chuckling. "Right. So this is how it's going to work normally: there will be a practice session in the first half where we show you a spell and you practice casting it with speed and accuracy. Then in the second half, we'll invite those best performing to duel in a demonstration with the aim of using the
spell they have been practising. For today though we're going to practice some simple duelling spells to see where everyone's level is at. Neville and Harry, you'll both work together because of our previous lessons – everyone else; find a partner." He quickly gave the instructions for the disarming and shielding spell – he and Amelia demonstrating both three times so that the kids got to see the wand actions in full.

He had Amelia check on the rest of the room while he taught Neville and Harry a freezing spell and got them to start practicing it on dummies in a corner of the room.

"Why do they get to do that?" Ernie MacMillan demanded furiously.

Sirius raised his eyebrow and banked his irritation with the memory of Minerva warning him to be patient with the students when he was teaching. "Because I've been teaching them over the Summer and I know they're well beyond disarming. Once I've assessed all your skill levels I can see which of you can move up. Why don't you show me how you're doing with the disarming?"

Ernie flushed but signalled his partner Justin. The pair demonstrated and Sirius corrected them both, telling them to continue practicing. He moved on.

Daphne Greengrass was soon sent to work with Neville and Harry, as was Millicent Bulstrode. Theodore Nott joined them along with Draco Malfoy. Sirius shook his head. He might have known that the Slytherins would be advanced. He sent Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner from the Ravenclaws; Amelia had sent Terry Boot and Hermione over along with Sally-Ann Perks and Susan Bones.

All the others needed substantial work.

Sirius spared a moment to go over to the advanced group and watched as Harry carefully instructed them, Neville helping him demonstrate. Clearly, Sirius thought with amusement as he took in the captivated students nodding as Harry spoke, he wasn't needed. Sirius moved back to the struggling students and was pleased to see how they all progressed in a short space of time with some constructive feedback.

Half an hour later, Sirius called a halt. He and Amelia quickly set up a duelling platform and seats for the students who would be only spectators.

"Right!" Sirius clapped his hands. "So duelling tonight is…Daphne Greengrass and Hermione Granger!"

The two girls both looked pleased at being chosen. They took to the dais. Amelia set up the shield dome as Sirius instructed them to keep it to non-harmful spells. The girls bowed to each other.

Sirius went to stand beside Harry. He was surprised to overhear Neville placing a bet on Hermione in a teasing exchange with Blaise. Sirius hid his smile and kept his eyes on the duelling students.

Hermione shot off an impedimenti jinx but Daphne spun away from it, and shot a disarming spell back at her. The Gryffindor girl dived to the floor to avoid it and shot ice at Daphne's feet encasing them in a solid block before she disarmed the surprised Slytherin who couldn't move away from it. Daphne accepted her defeat with a gracious handshake and Hermione bounded over to Harry with a grin.

Sirius winked at her. "Well done, Hermione!" He patted Neville on the shoulder. "You're up next! Terry Boot, you're his opponent!"

Neville smiled sheepishly and took to the dais with the Ravenclaw. Sirius could hear Blaise betting
with Draco that Neville would win.

The duel was a good one; both boys were evenly matched and they managed to evade each other's spells for a good five minutes before Boot managed to catch a tiring Neville with a mild tickling hex and followed it up with a disarming spell.

But Neville clung onto his wand despite being sent backwards. He immediately responded with the freezing spell sending it surprisingly on target to Boot's wand arm, encasing it and his wand in ice.

The duel was over.

Neville grinned at Terry as Amelia removed the freezing charm. They shook hands with Terry clapping Neville's hand jokingly with his ice-cold one. Blaise was the first to congratulate Neville as he stepped off the stage.

Sirius turned to Harry. "Right, you're up next, Harry. You and…Amelia."

There was a surprised murmur but Harry simply nodded and took to the stage.

Neville unsurprisingly bet on Harry as Sirius raised the dome.

Harry bowed deeply to Amelia – a show of his respect for the Head of the DMLE. Amelia bowed back just as deeply.

It quickly became obvious the strategy that Harry had decided upon; he cast nothing but he moved. He spun, dived and leaped across the floor as effortlessly as though he was on his broom chasing the snitch.

Amelia wasn't static either. She moved trying to counter the dance he was doing; sending stunner after stunner after him.

She couldn't catch him.

After the first minute, the students were on their feet, shouting encouragement to both participants.

Sirius could feel his own heart pounding as he wondered if Harry would tire…if Amelia would get her shot on target…if, if, if….

Harry dodged another barrage of spells, turning away from one, turning away from another, turning away from a stunner, and suddenly…

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry yelled.

Prongs clattered onto the dais and went straight for Amelia.

She swore and jumped out of the way of the stampeding stag, straight into Harry's freezing spell that forced her to bring up her wand to deflect it…

And Harry disarmed her.

The crowd went wild.

Sirius took down the shielding dome as Harry handed back Amelia's wand. They shook hands as everyone clapped enthusiastically.

Prongs nudged Harry's shoulder and Harry patted his patronus before dismissing it.
Sirius whistled and got everyone's attention. "That's it for this week! Harry, stay behind a moment. Everyone else, you should get to your Common Rooms. Thank you all for coming and I hope to see you again next week!" He watched amused as Neville trooped out, chatting with Blaise and taking his winnings.

Hermione and Ron hovered for a moment at the door before Sirius shooed them out.

"Good use of tactics." Amelia complimented Harry. "I did not expect a patronus."

"Sirius once said to me he'd used it in duels before," Harry commented, "because it can take people off-guard."

"It certainly did that." Amelia gave a rueful smile. "That was a good duel. I enjoyed it and I expect a rematch the next time I stand-in."

Harry nodded, smiling.

Amelia motioned at Sirius. "I'll meet you at Alastor's floo?"

"Thanks, Amelia." Sirius said warmly.

He barely waited until Amelia had shut the door before he opened his arms and was thrilled to pieces when Harry didn't hesitate but immediately took the invitation and hugged him. For a long moment, Sirius revelled in having his son close before he took a deep breath.

"You were brilliant tonight." Sirius said, stepping back.

Harry grinned at him. "I think she underestimated me."

"Well, she won't make that mistake again." Sirius said dryly. He rocked back on his heels. "I do have something to tell you." He explained about Nott and the life debt. "What do you think?" He concluded.

"I agree." Harry confirmed. "Theo's pretty decent. He really doesn't agree with his father's agenda." He frowned. "What are we going to get him to do as his service?"

"We'll have that discussion nearer the time, I think." Sirius said. "There are plenty of things that would benefit from having another pair of hands."

"OK." Harry said, peering at him. "You look tired."

"Not used to the bed in the new house yet." Sirius said lightly, not wanting to worry Harry with his sleeplessness. He threw an arm around his son's shoulders and urged him toward the door. "Come on; I'll walk to your dorm. So, any pranking yet?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Fred and George managed to prank the Gryffindor seventh years red and gold all through dinner on Monday."

"Ah, showing House loyalty!" Sirius said, grinning. "A wonderful thing!"

"They're planning to get them back." Harry commented with a shrug. "Angelina's already warned them if they put Fred and George out of action, she's not going to be pleased."

"Encouraging creativity! Excellent, she'll be a good Captain." Sirius joked. "And what about your lessons? How are they going?"
"They're going," Harry said lightly and shrugged, "I, uh, I'm finding the practical side easy. The essays they've assigned us are quite difficult though. What do you know of Chanker's Charm theory?"

They chatted absently as they walked, both confident of their direction after their years in the school. It seemed like no time at all before they were in front of the Fat Lady.

The Fat Lady bristled angry at the sight of Sirius. "YOU!"

Sirius shifted weight as he fidgeted at the sight of the irate portrait. "I've been found innocent! And… uh, may I offer my sincere apologies about, um, attacking your portrait last year? I wasn't quite in my right mind."

"You were never in your right mind, Sirius Black." The Fat Lady huffed. She glared at Harry. "He's not coming in even if you know the password."

"I should get back anyway." Sirius said.

Harry's face fell.

Sirius hugged him goodbye and for the first time questioned whether it was a good idea for them to see each other every week. It was going to be even harder to let go and step away.

No.

It might be difficult but it was better to see Harry every week than not to see him. Sirius dropped a kiss on Harry's head and eased back.

"Nott's arranging with Albus for us to do the vow of loyalty at the weekend so I'll see you then."

Sirius said.

"And you'll call me tomorrow?" pressed Harry. "I want to know what happens at the Wizengamot."

"I'll call you." Sirius promised. He ruffled Harry's hair. "Go on, inside."

The Fat Lady grudgingly allowed Harry in after making him whisper the password. Sirius waved a final time to him as he disappeared behind the portrait. He made his way slowly back to Alastor's office, feeling an all too familiar ache of loneliness again.

He found Alastor and Amelia sat drinking Firewhiskey and talking about the tribunals.

"Want to join us?" Alastor raised his flask.

Sirius shook his head. The mood he was in he'd start and not stop, Sirius thought morosely; his father had been the same way and he had no wish to tread that path. "I should get going. I have a stack of reading still to do for tomorrow."

It was a lie but a good one.

Amelia nodded and downed her drink. "I should get going too. Brian's expecting me for a late supper." She sighed. "And I have to 'fess up to being beaten by Harry."

"You've gotten slow behind a desk." Alastor informed her bluntly. "Time was you would never have been surprised by a fourteen year old."

"Thank you for helping to heal my wounded ego, Alastor." Amelia said dryly.
"That's Cutter's job." Alastor returned with a glint of mischief in his eye. "Mine's to keep you alive."

The words gave away Moody's sense of responsibility to every one of the Aurors and Hit Wizards he'd trained. Sirius felt comforted knowing Harry was being trained by Moody.

Amelia frowned suddenly and reached into her robes pulling out a communication mirror. "Bones."

"Director," it was Rufus who looked like the lion who'd just caught the antelope, "Rowle is singing like a songbird."

"You'd better call his solicitor on record." Amelia sighed heavily. "I'm on my way."

Sirius and Alastor said goodbye to her as she flooed back to the Ministry. Sirius didn't wait around; he said his own goodbye to Alastor and flooed to the Hogsmeade home they'd named The School House since they'd only ever use it when Harry was in school.

Dobby popped in immediately. "Dobby has Harry Potter's Paddy's supper waiting."

"I've eaten, Dobby, thank you."

"Kreacher informs Dobby that Paddy has not eaten." Dobby's ears flapped wildly. "Harry Potter beings upset if he learns his Paddy not eating."

Well, who said house elves couldn't throw guilt trips, Sirius mused as he was ushered to the table where a roast beef sandwich and a mug of tea awaited him.

"You will bes eating and then going to bed." Dobby instructed fiercely.

Sirius gave in and sat down. "So," he said to the hovering house elf, "do you want to hear about Master Harry Potter's fantastic duelling lesson?"

Dobby smiled widely and wagged his ears; he climbed into an empty dining chair and looked expectantly at Sirius. And Sirius began talking in between bites of sandwich, the loneliness eked away in the company of the happy elf.

o-O-o

Amelia wasn't happy.

Janice Mickle had both gone missing the day before. Mickle was an unmarried pureblood who had been reported missing by St Mungo's after she'd failed to attend a pre-natal check-up and they'd been unable to find her. Her mother had been hysterical when they'd told her but more about Mickle's unknown pregnancy than at her being missing in Amelia's opinion. The pregnant woman had been seen in the Market Place just off Diagon Alley around two o'clock but nothing after that.

The speedy report of Mickle's absence was thanks to the cover story that Amelia and the War Council had worked out; namely a warning issued through the Healer community that a muggle serial killer was known to be targeting pregnant women and for them to pass the warning along to all expectant parents and report any unusual absences immediately to the Aurors. It had been an attempt to prevent any pregnant witches from being harmed by Riddle but clearly it had failed.

Amelia sighed and placed the report down. She looked up at Bertie and Rufus sat across the desk from her. "Your thoughts?"

"In the normal scheme of things, I would be inclined to think it the usual missing person situation
given the girl's situation; pregnant by a muggle, unmarried, and her family likely to hit the roof when she confessed all." Rufus grimaced. "However, with the intelligence we have of this ritual Riddle could be doing…I think it's likely Mickle is dead by now."

"We can't assume that." Amelia said sharply at his bluntness. "And her mother is certainly not going to accept that for an answer."

Rufus nodded and gestured across her desk. "I suggest we follow protocol as we would normally. Hand it over to an Auror team; have them investigate."

"We'll have to inform them that there is no muggle serial killer." Amelia murmured. But she knew Rufus was right. "Bertie…"

"There is a small chance he's kept her alive." Bertie conceded, looking grim. "She fits his mother's profile almost perfectly; a pureblood witch of little status pregnant with a muggle man's child. He clearly thinks it's important within the ritual enough that he targeted her specifically rather than any other witch. He needs the amniotic fluid and if he needs more of it at some point, he may feel it would be better to impregnate a hostage rather than trying to find another pregnant woman with the same profile."

Amelia shuddered in distaste and horror. She sighed. "Rufus hand the case over to two of your experienced Aurors, Shacklebolt would be good – he'd got a decent head on his shoulders. Tell them we think Pettigrew could be involved in this thanks to some anonymous information."

Rufus nodded. He got to his feet and left the room.

Amelia slumped back in her chair. She folded her hands over her stomach, her eyes on the abandoned report. "I'm not sure if I should be rooting for Mickle to be alive or dead."

"Alive." Bertie said gently. "Perhaps she will suffer a great deal at Riddle's hands or his followers. It is all too likely that she has already lost the child she carried. But she can be healed of her wounds and her trauma in time if she lives."

"If." Amelia wasn't so certain of Bertie's assertion that healing was possible. How did someone heal from losing their child, abduction and potentially torture? Her compassionate soul couldn't help but feel for Mickle.

A knock on the door had Amelia straightening and calling 'enter' half-heartedly.

Her secretary looked in with a frown. "Amelia, Percy Weasley is asking if you have five minutes to discuss the tournament security?"

Bertie got to his feet and waved away Amelia's protest before she even got started. "I have to find where I've put my Wizengamot robes. I'll see you at the session."

Ameila nodded at her secretary. "Send Weasley in."

Percy Weasley walked in with a layer of nerves visible under his show of confidence. He took the seat she offered with an insincere apology for disturbing her. She knew from the office scuttlebutt that he was a good worker but rumour had it that his lips were firmly attached to Crouch's arse and he had none of Arthur's likeability. The news that he had worked the day after the World Cup rather than spend time with his injured family hadn't done him any favours.

"What's this about?" She took the parchment he brandished with a raised eyebrow, put on her monocle and read it with an increasing sense of disbelief. "Which moron decided this was a good
idea?"

Percy winced. "I believe Mister Bagman was initially responsible for the idea but all parties were consulted before it was agreed during the final negotiations this Summer."

She was so hexing Bagman the next time she saw him, Amelia considered furiously as she reread the parchment. The Goblet of Fire would be removed from its secure vault in the DOM and displayed in the Ministry atrium before it would be delivered to Hogwarts for the Initiation ceremony which would then begin the twenty-four hours when contestants could enter.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

"As you know Mister Crouch has been on sick leave since the World Cup. He sent me the parchment as he had some concerns about the security that Mister Bagman has been put in place…" Percy began officiously.

"Namely that Bagman hasn't put any security in place." Amelia commented dryly. Well, at least Barty was on the ball about something despite his Wizard's flu lingering like the smell of rancid fish.

"That would be the problem that Mister Crouch has identified." Percy admitted. "His proposal is included." He pointed at the parchment.

Amelia nodded absently as she reread the section. Barty's suggestions were good; an escort of Aurors at all times while the Goblet was in the Ministry, the Goblet placed in a glass case for the showing to ensure it couldn't be tampered with, and for him to personally take the Goblet to Hogwarts rather than Bagman.

"Leave it with me." Amelia said. She'd have to confer with Rufus and probably the War Council for a wider view. The whole thing seemed to be a disaster waiting to happen in Amelia's book. They were trying to prevent situations where the Goblet could be interfered with and a public display was the exact opposite of what they were trying to achieve.

Percy didn't seem to get the hint. He fidgeted in his chair. "Mister Crouch asked for an immediate response."

"If Barty wants an immediate response he can come back to work and arrange things himself." Amelia said brusquely. "I have a Wizengamot session and four tribunals to prepare for. Inform Barty he'll be informed of the security arrangements once I've had the chance to work them out with the relevant parties. Understood, Mister Weasley?"

Percy nodded quickly.

"You're dismissed." Amelia stated bluntly. She shook her head at the departing figure of the young man and wondered whether she should have a word with Arthur. In her opinion the Head of the Weasley family was finally getting the acknowledgement he deserved and he didn't need one of his sons messing that up by being a priggish arse.

Her secretary gave her a ten minute warning for the beginning of the Wizengamot and Amelia quickly shrugged into her robes and gathered her files. She made it into the chamber with time to spare and spent a few moments exchanging pleasantries with Arthur while inwardly wondering how to bring up the matter of Percy to him. It didn't surprise her to see Sirius enter with Cornelius; it was a show of strength on Sirius's part, Amelia mused, the visible indicator of who was the power behind the Minister. Cornelius didn't view it that way; he positive preened in the reflected power and glory of Lord Black.
Sirius gave her and Arthur a warm smile of acknowledgement as he crossed the floor. He took the stairs to his seat and Amelia watched as not just the Ancient and Noble Houses but all of the Houses who held Wizengamot seats rose as a mark of respect for him, only sitting when he was seated. She almost laughed at Dumbledore's surprised expression as the Chief Warlock called for order and the chamber to be sealed. Clearly the old wizard hadn't surmised that one of the implications of Sirius's and Cornelius's power play against Voldemort in the Wizengamot would be a rise in power and status for the incumbent Lord Black, the regent of the House of Potter.

Amelia shook her head and tried to get comfortable. It was going to be a long session.

The clerk Dullard got to his feet and cleared his throat as he got to the first item on the agenda and announced Lord Black. The alliance with Zabini wasn't a surprise; Amelia noted Nora, who looked a million galleons in new dress robes purposely designed for the cover of the Daily Prophet, was smugly assured in her response to confirm the alliance. She no doubt considered it a step towards getting Sirius into bed or into marriage whichever came first. Amelia figured Sirius was too focused on Harry and the situation with Voldemort to consider any kind of romantic liaison and that Nora was likely to be very disappointed. The Black détentes with Gibbon, Selwyn and Wilkes raised eyebrows and Amelia kept her eyes pinned to the Minor Houses of the pureblood alliance; she anticipated most would be signed up by the October session.

Dullard moved on; Bunting's proxy was named, Longbottom announced a similar mutual aid and support alliance with Zabini; Livingstone formally announced his Heir…and finally, it was back to Sirius but this time in his role as the regent of the House of Potter.

Sirius rose from his seat and smiled sharply. "The House of Potter is pleased to announce the addition of the following members to the Potter political alliance; the Ancient and Noble Houses of Cavendish, Greengrass, Goldstein, Rickett, Smith, and including the House of Zabini and the Order Houses of Ample, Belby, Brocklehurst, Bunting, Carter, Davidson, Farley, Higgs, Livingstone, MacNeill, Samson, Toke, and Warren."

Amelia looked around as the rest of the Potter alliance rose, as the new alliance members stood up to be counted, as the Heirs of age and present made their way to the floor.

"Who speaks for these Houses?" Sirius asked.

Daniel Greengrass straightened his shoulders. "I, the Head of the House of Greengrass, speak for these Houses."

"Who speaks for these Heirs?" Sirius asked.

It was twenty-two year old Simon Cavendish who took the step forward as the eldest of the Heirs present. "I, the Heir of the House of Cavendish, speak for the Heirs." His blue eyes seemed calm and his voice assured.

The vows began and once again, the magic stirring in the air disconcerted Amelia. She had assumed Harry's presence and the presence of the totems of his family magic had been the cause the last time. But as the vows progressed to Sirius's vow of acceptance, the air was thick with magic once more.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Regent and son of the House of Potter, Head of the House of Black, accept your oath of allegiance on behalf of Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir of the House of Black, and offer to you the protection and sanctuary of the House of Potter, his wand and his magic in your defence, to lead you with fairness and honour. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

A griffin's cry screamed through the air and there was a rush of wind across the chamber causing
more than one member to shriek. Amelia wasn't entirely surprised to see the Potter griffin and the Black snake take form, sitting in the Potter chair as though they were both meant to be there.

An instant later, the rest of the totems of the Ancient and Noble Houses in the alliance coalesced next to the Heads of the Houses.

Sirius seemed unperturbed even if Amelia liked to think she knew him better than to accept his lack of reaction at face value. He continued onwards as if nothing of note was taking place, turning to take the Heir oaths. Amelia glanced at Cavendish and wondered whether the Heirs would also swear fealty. She didn't have to wait long to find out as Cavendish gave a cheeky grin but answered in the usual manner rather than following Neville Longbottom's reply.

Sirius nodded gravely, not visibly disappointed at any rate, and made the vow of acceptance with solemnity. The totems responded again with a fierce cry of approval and disappeared except the griffin which waited to exchange a mutual bow of heads with Sirius before dissipating like a golden mist.

Amelia wasn't surprised as the Wizengamot descended into chaos again. She looked up to her younger brother and Richard gave a shaky nod. Their discussion after the August session echoed in Amelia's head…

"It was the strangest feeling – just this rush and a stream of power like nothing you've ever felt." Richard said. "And suddenly, Whiskers was just there!"

Whiskers was the fond name for the silver cat who was the totem of the Bones family magic. Their ancestor Elijah Bones, had been an animagus – a cat animagus. Whiskers was thought to be a manifestation of Elijah's form.

"You didn't call him?" asked Amelia, trying to understand what had happened.

"I definitely didn't call him! And I know for a fact that Leonard didn't call the Abbott's Golden Retriever." Richard gestured impatiently. "It was Harry! They responded to him! And Amelia…" his eyes met hers with a worry he couldn't keep hidden, "I couldn't have taken Whiskers back. There was a definite sense that he wouldn't have come if I tried."

Amelia frowned heavily. That was worrying.

"It's almost…" Richard murmured before shaking his head and trying to laugh, "well, it's stupid really, but it felt almost like Whiskers was telling me he wasn't mine, ours I mean."

"I'm not sure I understand." Amelia said.

Richard looked at her worriedly. "It was like Whiskers was trying to tell me that the family magic isn't ours but Harry's; it all belongs to him. We can just borrow it because of the blood relationship of those wizards who created the magic in the first place." He sighed heavily and flapped his hand at her. "Ignore me. Maybe it's just…it should have been Edgar taking the vow; maybe that's why Whiskers didn't feel like mine."

Amelia placed an arm around her younger brother comfortingly. "Edgar would have been proud of you, Richard; I know I am."

Dullard called for order loudly yanking Amelia back to the present, but it was the Chief Warlock who finally regained silence enough to acknowledge the additional alliance members formally.

The Potter alliance sat down but Sirius remained standing.
"There is one other piece of business; the House of Potter has agreed that the House of Nott owes it a life debt for Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, protecting the life of Theodore Sebastian Nott, Heir of the House of Nott, during the events following the Quidditch World Cup."

He shifted his weight, his gaze running around the chamber as a rustle of whispers swept over the public tier.

Amelia noted that Benjamin Nott was carefully ignoring the glares from other pureblood Houses.

"While the majority of the Houses involved in the attack on the Potter alliance tent were covered by various oaths between them negating any life debt from being incurred, no such oath exists between the House of Potter and the House of Nott." Sirius stated firmly. "It has therefore been agreed that Theodore Sebastian Nott, Heir of the House of Nott, will begin service to the House of Potter for one year following his graduation from Hogwarts, and until such time, he will be considered within service to the House of Potter and under its protection."

The whispers became a raucous babble as people began commenting excitedly to their neighbours; Nott had just effectively allied his son to the Light.

Dumbledore called for order. His blue twinkling eyes sought out Nott who rose to his feet. "You can confirm this, Benjamin?"

"I can," Benjamin said evenly, "the Heir of Nott is now in service to the House of Potter to satisfy our honour in acknowledgement for the life debt incurred between us."

Clever, clever Benjamin, Amelia mused with reluctant admiration. There was no way he could have allied with the House of Potter or Black without fully renouncing his position with Voldemort but this was better, allowing him to continue to profess his service to Riddle while his son remained protected.

"The service is so acknowledged by this Wizengamot." Dumbledore said cheerfully in direct contrast to the grumpy faces on the likes of Wilkes and Selwyn.

Sirius nodded sharply and sat down.

The legislative session moved forward briskly. The allocation of the new budget was discussed again and amendments approved. Amelia breathed a sigh of relief as her request for additional aurors was rubber stamped. She had the headache of recruitment and training to go but the extra bodies was a good thing. It seemed like no time at all before the Muggle Affairs report was being presented by Arthur.

The red-headed patriarch of the Weasley House stood up and Amelia sensed a new confidence about him. Being attacked at the World Cup had roused his inner Gryffindor, she realised.

"You've all seen the report so I will not repeat it verbatim," Arthur began, "rather I will focus on the main findings." He cast a look around the chamber. "Finding One: the muggles' technology is well advanced from our records. Three technologies in particular are a threat to us. The first is this…" he waved his wand and a projected image filled the floor of the chamber.

A small box with a lens appeared.

"Camera technology is something we share with the muggles but theirs has taken a different route to our own." Arthur said. "This camera records events constantly allowing them to be replayed in actual time at a later date. Many of these cameras are affixed to muggle streets especially in areas such as shopping precincts, for example. Imagine if you will that a wizard performs magic on a muggle in a
muggle street at night. A team of our Aurors appear out of nowhere to deal with the situation, obliviate the muggle but do not see or understand the threat of the hidden camera and leave it. Unfortunately, the entire thing is caught on camera and replayed, so breaking the Statute of Secrecy."

Whispers filled the chamber.

"Here is our second threat."

It was a box with a thin board attached that had blocks with the alphabet written on them like an old muggle typewriter. Amelia frowned as she recalled the device from Arthur's report.

"This is a computer. It is linked via muggle communication technology to all other computers with a simple command." Arthur continued. "Simultaneous communication with something they call the World Wide Web. Pictures may be uploaded and viewed all across the world. Imagine that a picture of the night I have just described is uploaded onto this device and shared? Not only would our world be revealed here in Britain but all across the globe. The muggles believe this technology will only increase in popularity and improve."

The projection changed to one of a long pointed device.

"This is a missile. It carries with it an explosive bomb known as a nuclear weapon." Arthur explained solemnly. "It can be fired from land in one country, or from a muggle flying machine, targeting another country with specific coordinates. On exploding, it will destroy all life in the impact zone." He straightened. "The muggles have already used this on themselves during their last World War. They killed over a hundred thousand of their own kind."

There was a stunned and appalled silence.

"We have no defence against this weapon or against many of the other weapons they have developed or the other technologies that I have shared with you." Arthur said. "That must change. We must protect the Statute of Secrecy and find a way to defend ourselves against the muggle technology." He dismissed the projection. "To that end, the Muggle Affairs Committee is proposing a new Department of Muggle Affairs. It will have three main objectives: firstly, to establish better relations with the muggle government to ensure their scientific and technological knowledge is shared; that they work with us in protecting our secret. Secondly, a Muggle Research Department will be set-up jointly with the Department of Mysteries to document muggle technology and find ways to counter it. And thirdly, a Muggle Law Enforcement Task Force is to be set-up in conjunction with the DMLE to focus on dealing with all aspects of muggle and wizard policing issues including the misuse of muggle artefacts. The budget projections for the next year are in your reports including start-up costs. I seek permission today to progress in the set-up of the Department."

Cornelius sprang to his feet. "The proposal has the support of the Ministry."

Bertie rose from his chair. "And the Department of Mysteries."

Amelia got up. "And the DMLE."

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "Thank you. Shall we open the floor to opinions before we take a vote?"

Sirius immediately held up his wand and was instantly recognised.

"No matter what the detail of our political agendas may be, one thing is consistent across this entire chamber; our want and need to protect our children." Sirius began. "Whether we think of muggles as inferior or simply different, we cannot deny that they have advanced in technology and we have
failed to keep pace with them. They pose a threat to the secret of our world, and if they discover us in the worst possible way, they have the ability to destroy us totally. We need a closer relationship with the muggles if we're ever to catch up and understand their science and how we can counter it with our magic; we need a closer relationship with them to ensure the safety our world, our children. We need this new Department."

He paused to send another gaze sweeping around the chamber.

Amelia's lips twitched as she watched him wordlessly captivate every single person there.

Sirius sat down.

"Any further contributions to the debate?" Dumbledore asked.

Nobody signalled to say anything. The lack of debate was a thunderous acknowledgement of Sirius's political and personal power that he had silenced the harshest critic before they'd had the chance to speak; that every corner of the political spectrum bowed to his argument.

Dumbledore's thin white eyebrows rose in surprise. "Then we shall vote."

The Department was soon officially given the seal of approval.

Cornelius rose. "Thank you all. I appoint Arthur Weasley as the Head of the new Department of Muggle Affairs and…"

"Objection!"

Simon Wenlock stood up. He was a known member of the pureblood alliance but his father had fled to the Continent rather than be Marked by Voldemort. He was not tagged as a Death Eater. Amelia wondered if he could be the elusive suspect that was tormenting Harry.

Wenlock's dark eyes scoured the chamber and settled derisively on Arthur. "We are all agreed that this new Department is of vital importance to our security. Are we prepared to risk that by giving its leadership to a wizard who is known for his love of muggles?"

The chamber erupted.

Most of the Houses on the Light side were up on its feet yelling at Wenlock, others in the pureblood alliance followed Wenlock into an exchange of insults…Amelia noted Malfoy was carefully taking note of who was allowing their allegiances to be revealed in such a foolhardy move…

Sirius remained seated and unspoken; he was observing the drama with interest but not taking part in it. He really had grown up, Amelia thought. The stories of his time as a Hit Wizard often spoke of someone hot-headed and reckless.

Eventually, Dumbledore had to create a small bang to regain order.

"Please!" Dumbledore said forcefully. "We are all adults here! I should not have to step in as though I was standing in the Great Hall at Hogwarts and faced with unruly children."

The sharp words were a mark of how annoyed Dumbledore was; it took a lot to irritate him.

Cornelius stood up. "With the permission of the Chief Warlock, I believe I have the right of reply to Lord Wenlock's objection?"

Dumbledore nodded.
Cornelius threw Wenlock a disgusted look. "It is the Minister's prerogative to assign the Heads of Department. Arthur Weasley is one of the most honourable men it has been my pleasure to work with. He has led the Committee which produced the recommendation for the Department and has the most knowledge of the issues and concerns. He has also begun to build relationships with our muggle counterparts and is well liked by them. He has remained steadfast despite being the target of hatred and violence. No-one should question his integrity!"

"You may trust him but I do not!" Wenlock argued back. "His insistence on loving muggles will doom us! If you show such poor judgement in your appointments, perhaps it is time the Wizengamot should choose the Heads of Department!"

Griselda Marchbanks stormed to her feet again. "Pish and tosh nonsense! Lord Wenlock, you are a moron of the highest order!"

Dullard sprang up. "Lady Marchbanks!"

"I could declare a duel for your insult!" Wenlock snarled across the expanse of the chamber.

"And I could declare one for your insult to my honour!" Arthur's quiet assertion arrested the rising chatter.

Wenlock stared at Arthur along with most of the rest of the Wizengamot.

Arthur glared right back at him, his shoulders straight, his chin up and a glint in his suddenly steely blue eyes that would have had his family running for cover. He rarely lost his temper but when he did…

"Do not mistake the fact that the seat I hold in this body is Ministerial to mean that I do not know the traditions associated with my Ancient and Noble House, Wenlock!" Arthur stated forcefully. "You're right in that I do like muggles! I have a lot of respect for their intelligence and creativity. Rightly so given what we have uncovered! And you're right that I would hope one day we could live in a world where we don't have to hide and we could live peacefully together." He held up a hand as Wenlock went to interrupt.

Amelia looked on in pleasure as Arthur continued.

"But that day is not today! That day may not happen in my lifetime! Right now, our concern is to build a foundation of trust and cooperation so that we may be safe and secure! So that our children may be safe and secure!" He looked in disgust at Wenlock. "I have seven children! How dare you insinuate that I would ever place their safety and security at risk! Frankly, I do have half a mind to call you out for the insult anyway!"

Sirius cleared his throat and spoke before Wenlock replied. "Perhaps an apology, Lord Wenlock? We all understand how emotions can run high and I'm certain in hindsight you didn't mean to insult Mister Weasley. After all, as the Potter Regent I would be honour bound to stand as Arthur's second in a duel under our alliance of friendship, and I so did hope to keep these robes clean of blood." He smiled sharply across the chamber at a furious but rapidly paling Wenlock.

Oh, Amelia thought with amusement, that threat was very well done.

The rest of the chamber looked expectantly at Wenlock.

Wenlock bowed his head quickly. "My apologies, Mister Weasley."

Arthur nodded stiffly.
"And we are agreed that Cornelius may continue to assign who he wishes?" Sirius said smoothly. "After all, I'm fairly certain that all of us would like this body to remain firmly focused on our legislative and judicial duties rather than eroding Ministerial authority in these matters."

"I know that's my view." Nott spoke up in agreement, sending Wenlock a disgusted look, possibly for the brashness of his attempt to depose Weasley rather than the attempt itself.

Wenlock cleared his throat. "I remove my objection entirely." He sat down with the air of a man who was trying not to look like he was in full retreat and failing.

"As I was saying," Cornelius said brightly, "I appoint Arthur Weasley as the Head of the new Department of Muggle Affairs and leave it in his capable hands to establish the Department and staff it appropriately."

It seemed like everyone in the chamber took a deep breath of relief.

"The legislative portion of the session is thus concluded." Dullard said. "We move onto judicial matters. The only item on the agenda is the formal permission of the Wizengamot for the tribunals that are provisionally scheduled for tomorrow. Director Bones?"

"Thank you." Amelia rose to speak. "As you are all aware, on the night of the Quidditch World Cup, Aurors and Hit Wizards apprehended four men dressed in dark robes and white masks; two were torturing muggles; two were torturing a muggleborn family. While there is no evidence linking these attacks with the fire that was set at the stadium, nor the attack on Lord Potter or the Weasley family, to ensure a fair trial, many of those of you present will have to recuse yourselves. With that in mind, we propose instead to establish a tribunal; the Chief Warlock will sit as the principal judge, Mister Baron has been nominated to the second seat, with Lord Greengrass nominated to the final place. I seek formal ratification of the Wizengamot for the tribunal so we can proceed with the trials forthwith."

Tiberius Ogden held up his wand. "I have no issues with the formation of the tribunal, its powers and even those nominated to sit but I do worry about the lack of transparency as the proposal insists that the tribunals be held in Courtroom Ten, the public barred, and without the members of the Wizengamot present. I would like to propose an amendment for the Wizengamot to elect a witness and propose Lord Black be that witness."

Amelia saw the gleam in the old wizard's eye and somehow wasn't surprised when the motion was seconded by Norman Wilkes.

"Nobody can argue that Lord Black does not believe in justice." Wilkes barked before he sat down.

"Is Lord Black agreeable to standing witness?" asked Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling again as he glanced over to Sirius.

Sirius got up. "I will be happy to stand witness."

The motion carried and passed; and the Wizengamot session ended with the tribunals granted the legal authority they needed.

Amelia smiled in satisfaction. It was time to deal with the Death Eaters.
Pronglet Returns to Hogwarts:4

Sirius didn't miss the furious look on Wenlock's face as the wizard immediately left the Wizengamot as soon as the doors opened. Sirius stayed in his seat. There would be a three ring circus in the atrium as Cornelius had lined up a press conference to announce the new Muggle Affairs Department with Arthur, and Sirius was quite content to miss it. He'd even convinced Cornelius that his presence there would be distracting, coaxing the Minister into acceptance by pointing out the publicity should belong to him and Arthur.

Richard Bones leaned over from his chair, closing the distance between them. "Wenlock is going to be a problem."

"He is." Sirius agreed, casually erecting a privacy bubble. "What do you know of him?"

"Wenlock's kept himself pretty isolated." Richard commented. "His father went abroad in the early Seventies. Simon was educated in Durmstrang and did a Mastery in Potions. When his father died in 'eighty-five, Simon returned with his family to England. He has two sons and a daughter – all at Durmstrang. Politically, he has aid and support alliances with the Ancient and Noble Houses of Adams, Flint, Nott, Selwyn, Wilkes and Gibbon – but that's all."

Sirius turned that over in his head. All of the Houses named were known pureblood alliance supporters. All of them had alliances with Malfoy although Adams and Flint weren't part of Malfoy's inner circle. If Wenlock decided to build an opposition…

"He has nothing with the Minor Houses?" He checked.

"Nothing." Richard confirmed. "Up until now he's always acted like they're beneath him. He doesn't socialise with them; doesn't court them." He paused. "His agenda is very…" he sighed, "he hates anything that isn't a pureblood wizard with a title who thinks the same as him. It's not just the Minor Houses that he hasn't courted, he's ignored the neutral Ancient and Noble Houses too."

"So if he wants to build an opposition, he has a lot of work to do." Sirius thought out loud with satisfaction. He could get Malfoy doing some pre-emptive negotiations with the Minor Houses that followed the pureblood alliance and he'd talk with the neutral bloc; they wanted the Minor neutral houses in the alliance anyway.

"Do you really think he'll attempt to build an opposition?" Richard asked seriously.

"Grandfather used to say that nature abhors a vacuum; she fills it immediately with whatever rubbish she can find." Sirius said dryly. "The fact is that we've disturbed the natural order here in the Wizengamot. Wenlock was probably content to sit on the side-lines while Lucius held a strong position with the rest of the pureblood Houses but now…"

"I see what you mean." Richard sighed.

"Even if he does set up an opposition, we should be able to ensure it remains a minority." Sirius commented. "Something for us to discuss at the next alliance meeting."

Richard fidgeted, hesitated, and finally committed himself to asking whatever was on his mind. "Something else for us to discuss is whatever is going on with the family magic."

He thanked Merlin he'd had plenty of practice at keeping a straight face during all his years of pranking.
"Oh?"

"The griffin and the snake showing up in the Potter seat as though they're substituting for Harry? All of our family magic responding to the call of the House of Potter?" Richard said dryly. "Need I go on?"

Sirius shook his head; his heart was pounding in fear that they knew, that everyone knew about Harry's affinity with family magic.

"I realise there are secrets," Richard said hesitantly, "but the Ancient and Noble Houses of the alliance deserve an explanation for why our family magic is suddenly responding to someone else." He gestured and looked away to watch the crowds slipping out of the doors. "I thought it was me you know the last time. The magic took a long time to accept me when I did the ritual; I thought it might be because I was never supposed to sit in this chair; never thought it would be me. Merlin knows Edgar was twice as powerful as I am and Amelia could best him in a duel easily. It wasn't until I spoke with Leonard and Augusta that I realised they'd felt the same; like Harry had more of a right to the magic than any of us; that it wants Harry more than any of us." He turned and his honest brown gaze met Sirius's guarded grey eyes. "We're allies, Sirius. Trust us."

Sirius nodded slowly; his heartbeat slowing as Richard's sincerity sank into him. Richard was right. They needed to trust their allies otherwise they wouldn't be allies for very long. "We'll arrange something."

Richard nodded. "It's probably safe to make a move now."

He was right; there were very few left in the chamber, the press conference was probably over, and Sirius would be able sneak out around the crowds flowing through the atrium.

They stood and Sirius dispelled the privacy bubble with a thoughtless show of the small amount of wandless magic he could do.

"By the way, Susan wrote to us about the duel Harry won against Amelia!" Richard said cheerfully.

"Amelia underestimated Harry." Sirius said with a smile as he remembered the duel. "She won't make the same mistake again but he'll be ready for it."

"He could easily be a duelling champion," Richard commented as they made their way out of the chamber, "is he planning to enter any tournaments?"

"He's more focused on Quidditch," Sirius replied, "takes after James that way. He doesn't really like duelling for all that he's good at it."

"Amelia loved duelling." Richard commented. "It's just as well she was his opponent and not me. I would have lasted a minute if he managed to defeat her as easily as Susan made out."

"Maybe you underestimate yourself, Richard," Sirius said seriously, "whether you ever thought you'd be the Head of House or not, the ring wouldn't have accepted you if it didn't find you worthy." He brought them to a gentle halt in the middle of the corridor. "I never expected to sit in my seat either."

Richard gave a grateful nod and they started walking again.

Sirius's eyes widened at the sight of the redhead coming down the corridor towards him and Richard patted his shoulder realising he was about to be shanghaied.
"I look forward to our next meeting."

"Thanks, Richard." Sirius said absently as they drew level with Bill. Richard nodded an acknowledgement to the Weasley Heir and continued walking while Sirius stopped to talk with him.

"What are you doing here?" Sirius asked concerned. "I thought you were still confined to bed rest?" And he really didn't see how Bill could have sneaked out of the Burrow where he'd been recuperating under Molly's watchful eyes.

Bill winced and waved off Sirius's imminent remonstration. "I had an appointment at St Mungo's."

Sirius backed down but he noticed the faint sheen of sweat on Bill's brow and the pale sickly complexion beneath his freckles; Bill was anything but fine.

"Besides," Bill said, "they say everything's on track. I should be back at work next Monday. I just popped down to tell Caro." He grimaced. "You know they've put Lawrence on sick leave?"

"Yeah," Sirius nodded, "he's refused to take any more of the potion Snape created for him." Since the third member of the treasure team had purposefully put on a cursed ring to activate the Resurrection Stone to see his dead daughter, Sirius wasn't surprised; he fully believed that the dead held more attraction to Lawrence than the living. If it wasn't for Harry and Remus, Sirius has a horrible feeling he could relate more than what was considered nominally healthy.

"They think he won't see Yule." Bill continued sadly before taking a deep breath and shaking his head. "Sorry, I think the recent brush with death myself has gotten me maudlin."

"I think you've earned the right to be a little maudlin." Sirius said gratefully. "Come on; let's go find your Dad."

"How'd it go?" Bill asked eagerly. "I tried to make it over from the hospital in time to see him but they'd closed the doors by the time I arrived."

Sirius happily informed him of the Wizengamot session as they made their way to Arthur's office but waited until they were actually in the office and private before explaining about Wenlock and the potential duel of honour that was narrowly avoided.

Bill blinked in shock as he sank into the visitor chair with visible relief. "My Dad almost called out Lord Wenlock?"

"I swear," Sirius said holding up a hand as he perched on the desk, "if the moron had said one more thing, I think your Dad would have done it."

The door opened and Arthur walked in, pausing as he realised he had guests before breaking out into a wide if worried smile at the sight of his son.

"Bill, what are doing here?" Arthur asked, pulling his eldest in for a quick hug. "Does your mother know..."

"I had a check-up with the healers," Bill forestalled the question, putting his hand up, "and everything's fine. I'll go back to work on Monday."

"Hmmm," Arthur made a considering sound and peered at his son as if to verify that the healers had the right of it, "I shouldn't think they said to do anything strenuous though. You still look a little peaky."
Bill squirmed under his father's intent regard. "Well, they did say to take it easy…"

Which probably meant they'd told Bill to sit behind a desk for a week at least, Sirius thought with amusement.

"So you'll take it easy." Sirius instructed. And his work was done; one Bill delivered to Arthur intact. He slid off the desk.

Arthur smiled at him as though anticipating his exit. "I haven't had a chance to thank you yet for your support with Wenlock. Thank you; it was appreciated."

"I was actually hoping he'd say something stupider," Sirius admitted with a smirk, "dealing with him in a duel would be quicker than having to do the political dance that's about to start."

"I know what you mean," Arthur said but he was smiling, "but I can wait. And those are nice robes; you should keep them blood free."

It was an acknowledgement that Sirius would have been the one duelling not Arthur. Sirius thought, not for the first time, that Arthur was a good man. "Sometimes my reputation as a mass murderer comes in handy." He joked.

"Wenlock was certainly quick to apologise." Arthur's face took on a note of smug satisfaction.

"Well, I should get back before Dobby sends out a search party." Sirius said, keeping his voice upbeat.

Arthur's eyes narrowed on him anyway. "You'll come home with us for dinner first. It's the least I can do to say thank you."

There was an implicit order in the offer; Sirius didn't kid himself. His heart ached a little to realise that the look Arthur was levelling at Sirius wasn't too far off the way Arthur had looked at Bill earlier; as though Sirius was a son and Arthur was a concerned father.

Only Charlus had ever looked at him like that before.

"I'd give in before he floo calls Mum to argue about it until you give in anyway." Bill said cheerfully, breaking the moment.

Sirius shot him a grateful look and nodded at Arthur. "I would appreciate dinner; thank you."

Within moments they were back at the Burrow. Molly didn't bat an eyelid at Sirius's presence only checked with Arthur if they knew if Percy was coming home (and Arthur murmured something about Percy working late). She ushered Sirius into a seat at the table, handed a decent bottle of wine to Arthur to open and asked after Harry and Remus.

Sirius spent most of the very delicious meal of pork chops, mashed potatoes with roast vegetables and a divine cider sauce, talking about the kids and the duelling lesson with Amelia. He wasn't immune to the fact that Molly soaked up every word and while Arthur was less obvious it was clear that he missed his children. He thought absently on a wave of parental empathy that he should create a set of communication mirrors for the Weasleys before his inner Marauder pointed out the Weasley children might not be so appreciative of their mother calling every night to check up on them.

Pudding was a warm apple upside down cake with thick double cream and Sirius managed to eat some of it before his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten quite so much in the last week and that it was very full. He somehow managed to eat the remainder and patted his stomach comfortably,
silently promising it a stomach soother when they got home.

Bill pushed his pudding away half-finished. "I think I'm going to head up and have an early night." He admitted, chagrined.

"Is Alicia not coming over tonight?" asked Molly, whose innocent expression was so falsely innocent that Sirius had to hide his face in his wine goblet so she didn't see his appalled smirk.

"Not tonight." Bill said with a flicker of annoyance in his voice at his mother's probing. He pushed away from the table. "Good to see you, Sirius. Give Harry my best."

"I will." Sirius promised. Harry would be pleased to hear Bill was almost back on his feet. He had a sneaky feeling his son felt guilty for Bill's injury and long convalescence despite the fact that the only person to blame was the one who had attacked them.

They all watched as Bill headed up the stairs, matching concerned expressions and relief that for all Bill was recovering slowly, he was recovering which was the important thing.

Molly bustled around the table, clearing plates and eschewing help. Sirius felt warm and comfortable and loathe to move despite the feeling he should.

"You know we really should continue our weekly dinners." Arthur commented mildly, and Sirius wondered what the older wizard had seen on his face to make the offer. "We did say at the start of the Summer that we'd work on an alliance of friendship ourselves beyond that which binds our children."

"We should." Sirius replied, touched despite the lurking want to refuse on the grounds that he didn't need any kind of pity.

Arthur suddenly smiled with all of the mischief that typified his twins. "Can you imagine the look on Wenlock's face if we announced an alliance of friendship between the House of Black and the House of Weasley?"

The two of them burst out laughing.

"Really." Molly tsked at them. "I don't know what you were thinking, Arthur, almost calling someone out."

Arthur hummed.

"Although the invitation for a weekly dinner stands, Sirius," Molly said, sitting back down with a cup of tea, "we'd be pleased to have you." And she did look genuinely pleased.

"Thank you," Sirius said, marvelling at the change from the start of the Summer.

"I'm afraid it's purely selfish," Molly said suddenly with a rather sheepish smile, "you'll be seeing the children every week and well…"

It actually made Sirius feel better knowing that she wasn't being completely selfless. He said so.

Molly nodded in understanding. "We do understand, you know." Her smile went motherly. "It's hard seeing them away to school." She sighed quietly, wrapping her hands around her mug. "I almost kept Ginny home her first year to avoid having an empty home." She grimaced. "After…I really wished I had."
Arthur's hand slid across the table and Molly took it, their fingers intertwining in silent support that made Sirius think about James and Lily and go slightly wistful for the lack of his own love life.

"How's the mind healing going?" asked Sirius instead.

It was Arthur who answered with a disappointed shake to his head. "We took her to the first one and she was very…" he sighed, "Healer Allen said she needed to want to come if progress was going to be made."

Sirius made a sympathetic noise. He remembered having a similar conversation with Healer Fay over Harry's treatment, specifically the discussion where she'd told him Harry would need to want to recognise the Dursleys' treatment of him as unacceptable before he could begin to heal. Frustration hadn't even begun to cover how he felt.

"So no more mind healing until she asks?" summarised Sirius.

Molly nodded. "Maybe it'll be fine. She seems to have made some new friends this year even if they are a little boy obsessed for my liking."

And he so wasn't going to be the one to tell Molly Harry's theory that Lydia and Jessica had befriended Ginny to get to the Boy Who Lived.

Sirius made a non-committal noise and smoothed a hand down the front of his robes. "Well, I should make a move. Thank you so much for your hospitality, Arthur and Molly."

"Same day next week?" asked Arthur pointedly.

Sirius nodded and got to his feet. The goodbyes were a whirl and Sirius ended up back in The School House with a portion of pudding in a Tupperware box before he knew it.

Dobby sniffed at him, plucked the box out of his hands before he could explain and gave him a stomach soother. He was ushered into his night time routine as though he was a recalcitrant child and Dobby a harried nanny.

He called Harry in self-defence. Their chat soothed him more than the potion and he fell asleep with Harry's discussion about his first fifth year Runes class drifting through his head.

The next morning, after a breakfast that would go easy on his stomach – a surprisingly light oatmeal with wonderfully syrupy strawberries – and a worrying message from Amelia about needing to talk with him about a missing pregnant woman (because it might mean Voldemort was definitely set on the ritual), Sirius set off to the tribunals.

Courtroom Ten was quite imposing but then it was meant to be; it was a courtroom. There was a chair for the accused; stands for the prosecution and the defence, and tiers of seating that would normally be filled by the Wizengamot.

Sirius was the first one there; he looked around the empty room and shrugged. He slid into the Black seat and opened the Daily Prophet. The headline story was the new Department of Muggle Affairs. There was a good picture of Cornelius and Arthur standing side by side on the podium shaking hands and looking suitably serious. His eyebrows rose as he read the article. Rita's words ended up mostly positive towards having the new Department and the direction of Ministerial policy but rather lukewarm about the appointment of Arthur; Wenlock's challenge had been included as a side story.

Another problem to solve, mused Sirius. The publicity over the Summer had been very positive for himself and Harry but he was all too aware that journalists – and Rita in particular – would be
circling for blood in the water. It wasn't quite so much fun putting someone on a pedestal if they
didn't fall from it, or someone didn't pull them down.

He watched as the prosecution arrived; Amelia with an old female Auror with steel blue hair who
looked like a contemporary of Moody's. Rufus hovered in the background. Cornelius wandered in
and started talking with Amelia; probably a last minute plea to be the one to prosecute but Amelia
was shaking her head and looking determined.

The defence advocates started to arrive. Rowle's was first; Hermon Gelding, a solicitor with dark
sliced back hair and a bulbous nose that looked purple from Sirius's vantage point. Jugson's and
MacNair's came together; Giles Dotts and Clemence Collingworth of Dotts and Collingworth. They
were a small firm but represented many of the pureblood Minor Houses. Both were brown haired
and indistinguishable. Travers's advocate arrived last; Barry Bootle. He was polished in his
appearance; perfect blond hair, classically handsome features, good physique adorned in quality
robes. He'd been one of Regulus's friends.

Sirius's hand clenched on the newspaper and he carefully smoothed it flat again. Regulus had come
to his senses and done the right thing in the end even if there had been a moment where he had tried
to kill Sirius with Barry Bootle standing right beside him, both of them trying to earn their Death
Eater stripes. One day, Sirius would take Kreacher and go back to where Regulus had found the
locket and find his body. He would bury his brother.

He shivered, suddenly cold.

And the world started to blur at the edges as his mind slipped into a memory…

*James, dead on the floor…*

*Lily, dead in front of the crib…*

*Harry crying and bloody…*

*Hagrid holding Harry and telling Sirius he had his orders…*

*Peter defiant and yelling something…*

*The blast and shock shuddering through him…*

"I said get those Dementors out of here now!" Amelia's voice cut through the fog and Sirius came
back to himself abruptly.

He was curled up, hands over his head; rocking. He stopped and took a deep breath. He shivered
violently.

"Sirius!" Amelia was suddenly beside him. She held something out and he took it automatically,
recognising the scent of chocolate.

He stuffed it into his mouth.

"They're gone." Amelia said as though Sirius regaining his senses hadn't already told him that.

"I'm so sorry!" Cornelius was wringing his hands together. "I arranged…I thought it was best to
have extra security and I didn't think…"

"That's right," Amelia snarled at him before she caught herself, "but we will talk about this later,
Minister." Her eyes went pointedly to the gawping defence advocates.

Cornelius nodded unhappily. "Sirius…"

"I'm fine, Cornelius." Sirius said briskly. "I just wasn't prepared for them." He attempted a smile. "A cup of hot chocolate wouldn't go amiss though."

Cornelius's assistant took off immediately to go get it.

"My sincere apologies, Sirius." Cornelius said again.

Amelia handed Sirius another chunk of chocolate and he put it in his mouth, letting the sweetness melt on his tongue. He swallowed and motioned back at her table.

"You should get back to what you were doing," Sirius said firmly, "I'm fine." He wasn't – too cold and the ache in his limbs went all the way to the bone – but he wasn't going to give Bootle any more ammunition. He was already betting that the fact that he'd had a bad reaction to the Dementors would make the Prophet's headlines the next day.

Amelia's eyes were filled with nothing but understanding though. She handed him the rest of her chocolate and went back to work, Cornelius following after Sirius had reassured him again that it was fine.

Five minutes later, Cornelius's bright-eyed assistant, (Marty? Sirius struggled to remember the name), brought him the hot chocolate and Sirius held it close, inhaling the warmth and scent as he staved off the urge to turn into Padfoot. The arrival of the judges – Albus, Gideon and Daniel helped.

Albus hurried over. "My dear boy, I heard what happened. Are you alright?"

"Fine," Sirius lied, uncomfortable more with the knowledge that his reaction had already made the gossip tree within the Ministry (he was so going to kill Monty on his way out), "just could have done without the trip back down memory lane." He pressed his lips together. "Ignore me, Albus, I'll be fine. Just get this done."

"Drink your chocolate, Sirius." Albus said gently, before he moved away.

Almost unwillingly, Sirius followed the instruction. The hot chocolate was still hot; Murphy had obviously got him a charmed mug when he'd gotten it for him and told the rest of the building about Sirius's unfortunate reaction to Dementors.

Seeing Albus reminded Sirius that at some point he needed to talk with his former Headmaster about the Elder wand. The Hallows had to be the 'power' mentioned because Sirius was never going to believe that Harry needed to sacrifice his own life to get rid of Voldemort. Didn't the line 'neither can live while the other survives' suggest that the survivor would live once it was all over?

He slurped down the rest of the chocolate and watched as the mug automatically refilled. OK, Sirius thought bemused, perhaps he'd hold off on killing Murray.

Everything suddenly came to order; the Courtroom door banged shut. A rather cowed Cornelius took a seat by Amelia. The scribe, a young harried looking administrator with bright yellow hair that had to have come from a potion, slipped into position and Albus asked if everyone was ready.

Amelia stood, wonderfully authoritative in her formal robes. "The prosecution is ready."

"And the defence for our four defendants?" Albus's gaze strayed to the four advocates.
There was a chorus of confirmations.

Then, Bootle stepped forward. "I would like to make an objection on the record about the presence of Lord Black."

Sirius wasn't surprised.

Albus blinked. "He is here to observe and bear witness that justice is done as directed by the ruling of the Wizengamot."

"Unfortunately the LeStranges can no longer bear witness to what Lord Black feels is justice." Bootle said snidely.

Amelia was the one to get to her feet in response. "Objection! Mister Bootle is so far out of line he's in a different country. Lord Black's family business is just that; family business." She stared down Bootle across the courtroom. "Chief Warlock, as you are aware the Wizengamot made Lord Black's inclusion mandatory for this tribunal to go ahead. Lord Black is here to bear witness nothing more. There are no grounds to object to his presence unless he attempts to interfere in judicial process."

"I agree." Albus said firmly. "Let's move on. I believe each defendant will be tried separately?"

"Yes, Chief Warlock." Amelia said politely. "The first defendant is Thorfinn Rowle."

"Bring in the accused." Albus ordered.

Rowle had been a few years behind him in Hogwarts. He vaguely remembered a skinny looking blond haired kid who looked half-scared of his shadow and who couldn't aim a curse if it killed him. How old had he been when he joined the Death Eaters, mused Sirius; fifteen, sixteen?

Rowle was escorted to the accused's chair where he crumpled like a wet tissue, sobbing his heart out as he confirmed he was Rowle and his current address.

Amelia began. "Thorfinn Rowle, you are accused of being part of a terrorist organisation known as the Death Eaters also known as the Knights of Walpurgis, and of conspiring to commit a terrorist act on the twenty-fifth of August of this year. You would also have been charged with committing a terrorist act and committing violent spells with intent to harm except for the fact that you were found under an Imperius curse on the night in question." She stopped and raised her head. "How do you plead?"

"Guilty," Rowle sobbed, "guilty."

Sirius had the urge to tell him to buck up and took a swallow of hot chocolate to prevent himself from speaking.

"In your own time, please confirm this signed confession I am entering into evidence." Amelia said, handing over a sheet of parchment to Albus who replicated it and handed a copy each to Gideon and Daniel.

"I joined the Death Eaters when I was fifteen." Rowle admitted with a downcast expression. "I was taken by my father to a group initiation where I received the Dark Lord’s Mark."

Which meant that at fifteen Rowle had killed someone.

"I don't really remember that night." Rowle said hesitantly. He cast a look towards his solicitor.
Gelding hauled himself to his feet. "Let it be known to the court that Thorfinn Rowle was previously judged as being a minor and forced to take the Mark following the events of Halloween nineteen eighty-one."

"The court so notes." Albus said formally.

"Recently…” Rowle avoided all their eyes, "the Mark…the Mark has hurt and grown darker. Everyone…everyone thinks he is gaining in strength…the Dark Lord that is. We…we had to do something so he wouldn't be angry!"

"We?" asked Gideon, questioning Rowle as was his right as a judge.

Gelding was on his feet again. "Please note that my client cannot answer that question beyond the other three men that were arrested at the same time without violating an Unbreakable Vow."

Sirius raised his eyebrows and wondered if Rowle was lying. Lucius had never indicated that his alliance was subject to such a vow.

"Very well," Albus said anyway, "let us continue."

"Eventually, five of us volunteered to…to do something at the Quidditch World Cup." Rowle admitted. "We planned to split up; one pair would target the muggles and one would target a muggleborn family. We discussed torture and…and killing them. Dennis would then put up the Dark Mark in the sky to show…"

"The Dennis you refer to is Dennis Travers who was arrested the same night as yourself?" Amelia interjected.

"Yes…” Rowle said. "We paired up together on the night. But he…he was talking and I…I'd never done anything before. I just…I wasn't…I couldn't do it. I don't remember very much until the Auror was suddenly there."

Amelia produced another parchment – the Auror's report – and handed it to Albus. "Please note that Mister Rowle was found at the scene of a crime. His wand had evidence of several dark curses including the Cruciatus. He was, however, under the Imperius curse himself which was broken when Mister Travers was stunned by myself."

"Objection!" Bootle got to his feet. "My client is not here to defend himself from such a charge."

"I was under the impression that was why you had to be present." Amelia pointed out. "For the record, I wasn't aware that I had actually made any kind of charge against your client." She pinned him with a stern gaze. "Yet."

Sirius hid his snort in his mug of chocolate.

"You implied…” Bootle began.

"I merely related a fact: Mister Rowle regained his senses at the point where Mister Travers was stunned." Amelia said dryly.

"And I…”

"Mister Bootle," Gideon interrupted, "your point is made and I think the Chief Warlock, Lord Greengrass and I are capable of understanding that an implication is not a formal charge." His eyes swept to Amelia. "And we are also capable of separating implications from actual evidence. I suggest
we move on."

Amelia nodded briskly. "Mister Rowle, you mentioned that you were paired with Mister Travers; who formed the other pair?"

"Arnold Jugson and Walden MacNair." Rowle stuttered out.

"Objection!" Dotts and Collingworth were on their feet.

"Sit down, gentlemen!" Gideon said firmly. "You have no cause to object to an identification and you can challenge in cross-examination."

Amelia looked as pleased as punch as she sat down.

"Mister Gelding, your defence may begin." Albus instructed.

"Mister Rowle," Gelding began gently, "why did you volunteer to take part in demonstrating loyalty to the Dark Lord?"

"My father…" Rowle swallowed hard, "my father failed a mission once back in…back then." His stricken face looked up suddenly. "The Dark Lord killed my mother to teach my father a lesson. When the Mark grew dark, I was…I was scared. I have a wife! And a son! I thought if we…we were to prove ourselves to the Dark Lord…if I could prove my loyalty then perhaps my family…they wouldn't pay for my sin."

Sirius winced. It was hard not to feel sympathetic.

"On the night of the World Cup, Mister Rowle, why did you change your mind?" Gelding said softly.

"The family that Dennis picked out…" Rowle blinked hard against another onslaught of tears, "the boy…the boy is the same age as mine and Dennis wanted…he said we had to kill him. I couldn't…a child! He was just a child!"

"Objection!" Bootle said again.

Gideon stared him down, visibly perplexed. "On what grounds?"

Bootle shifted his weight. "This is hearsay against my client."

"Which we will get to when we get to your client." Daniel pointed out. "As Gideon has already said in much politer terms, we are not idiots. Sit down."

Bootle shot him a furious look but sat.

Gelding cleared his throat. "After the suggestion was made, what did you do?"

"Refused to go through with it." Rowle said clearly. "But then…I don't understand what happened because I was suddenly standing in front of the tent and the boy…" he choked and had to take a breath, "the boy was on the ground in front of me and my wand was pointing at him, and the Aurors were there, yelling at me to drop my wand!"

Gelding nodded and produced a parchment that went to the three judges. "You will see from this independent Healer's report of the night my client was arrested that he was suffering from the after effects of the Imperius curse." He turned back to Rowle. "Do you regret your actions?"
"Yes," Rowle stated baldly, "I regret ever agreeing to take part in it. I should have…I should have stayed out of it."

Gelda tapped the table in front of him. "The defence rests, gentlemen."

Albus thanked him. "Mister Dotts, do you wish to cross-examine on any part to do with your client?"

Dotts leaped to his feet. "Without wishing to strain the vow you took, how can you be sure that those who volunteered on the same day that you did, Mister Rowle, continued to be the same individuals involved with the unfortunate events on the night of the twenty-fifth of August?"

Rowle looked at him confused. "You mean apart from them getting arrested?"

Dotts had walked into that one, Sirius thought amused. "Exactly." Dotts said brazening it out. "Did you speak to Mister Jugson at all between the meeting where there was an agreement something should take place and the World Cup?"

"No, I only met with Dennis," admitted Rowle who continued to look confused.

"And on the night of the World Cup, did you speak to Mister Jugson then?" Dotts persisted.

"I, um, think so?" Rowle's uncertainty bled from his every pore.

"Why only think so, Mister Rowle, shouldn't you know who you spoke to?" Dotts asked.

"We were all wearing masks." Rowle said defensively.

Dotts grinned in satisfaction. "Thank you, Mister Rowle."

Collingworth asked the same questions and Sirius decided their defence was going to be lousy if they were going for a 'they didn't really do it' tactic when they'd been caught red-handed.

Sirius shifted in his seat as Bootle stood up and declined to question Rowle with a sneer at the quivering wreck in the defendant's chair.

Albus nodded. "Do either of my fellow judges have anything they would like to ask the defendant?"

Gideon and Daniel shook their heads.

"Then as the defendant has pled guilty, my fellow judges and I will deliberate the sentence." Albus raised a powerful privacy bubble which obscured the judges from watching eyes as well as listening ears. It was an impressive bit of magic.

Sirius felt himself being watched and turned with a frown to see Bootle glaring at him. He glared back and was happy to see Bootle drop his gaze.

The deliberation didn't take long. Albus dropped the privacy bubble and turned to Rowle with a compassionate grandfatherly expression.

"Mister Rowle, you have pled guilty and confessed to conspiring to commit a terrorist act and being part of a terrorist organisation. The last war took many lives and we cannot allow this terrorism to take hold again; as a society we cannot tolerate such outright attacks on our government and the peace so many fought so hard to achieve. Yet your defence has offered some mitigation for both charges and you have expressed regret. Keeping this in mind, this tribunal sentences you to ten years imprisonment in Azkaban's minimum security wing." Albus said gravely.
Rowle burst into noisy tears as the Aurors were ordered to take him from the courtroom.

Sirius knew he would have been tempted to sentence Rowle much more harshly but he was satisfied and certainly judicial process had been followed.

The next prisoner was brought in.

Arnold Jugson showed none of the hysterics of Rowle; instead he remained stoically grim-faced through the confirmation of identity.

Amelia's prosecution was swift; she called Wood to testify that he had arrested both Jugson and MacNair at the World Cup, and submitted the forensic tests of both wands and the muggle victims which supported the written statements from Harry and Ron and their accounts of coming across two robed and masked figures torturing muggles.

It was at that point that Dotts got to his feet and objected to the absence of Harry and Ron. Sirius noticed the surreptitious look his way that the solicitor threw him and figured he was expected to leap to his feet and protest loudly at the idea of having Harry testify, voiding the trial with his non-sanctioned interference. So instead he smiled at Dotts and let Amelia eviscerate Dott's argument as spurious as everyone had been notified of the decision not to have them as witnesses and all solicitors had been given the offer to interview the boys before they had left for Hogwarts and declined. Dotts sat back down defeated.

It was the beginning of the end…Dotts tried to get the conspiracy charge dropped on the basis of lack of evidence but Amelia produced the surveillance photos of Jugson at his meeting with Dennis Travers – the entire reason why the tribunals were sealed because the photos gave away that they were watching the former Death Eaters. The Imperius curse defence was countered by a Ministry Healer who testified.

Sirius watched in satisfaction as Jugson was found guilty on all charges and sentenced to ten years in the maximum security part of Azkaban – where Sirius had formally resided. Jugson didn't say a word as he was led out.

The recess Albus called was welcome since the ever-full mug of hot chocolate had produced a natural consequence that had Sirius finding the nearest bathroom as soon as the doors to the courtroom opened up. He decided to get some fresh air and made his way through the corridors of the Ministry to a little known balcony off on the top level, wrapping around a corner of the building, completely invisible to muggle eyes. He and James had discovered it the second week of their training as Hit Wizards and had used it as an escape to talk occasionally.

Sirius closed the balcony door, and walked around the corner to what he considered his usual spot. He had usually lounged back against the building while James had perched on the metal railing. If he closed his eyes…

He gulped in air and tried to ignore that his shivering wasn't just due to the icy wind that blew across his cheeks and sent his hair flying.

Bloody Dementors, Sirius thought tiredly.

A scuff of the door opening on the other side of the building had Sirius straightening and he squared his shoulders to be polite to whoever was about to disturb him.

"Damn it, Amos! What has gotten into you?"
Leonard Abbott's voice carried around the corner and Sirius shrank back against the building's side, quickly casting a disillusionment charm. He needn't have been worried; neither Leonard nor Amos Diggory walked around to his side of the balcony.

"Are you trying to get arrested?" Leonard continued harshly.

"I just wanted to talk to Walden!" Amos replied heatedly.

"He's about to go to Azkaban!" Leonard stated bluntly. "He's a Death Eater for Merlin's sake! What in the name of all things magical were you thinking?"

"I've worked with him for years, Leonard! He's sat at my table and talked to my son about Quidditch!" Amos replied. "I just wanted to know why! He's not a bad man; he's always been good at his job."

Sirius understood Amos's bewilderment; hadn't he felt the same with Peter? The need to know why had been a nagging constancy of Sirius's thinking on Peter ever since he'd realised Peter's betrayal.

"And now we know why! He's a murdering bastard!" Leonard snarled.

"We don't know what he's done beyond attacking the muggleborn family." Amos said defensively.

Leonard made a scoffing sound. "You must be kidding me, Amos. You forget I've seen some of the creature executions MacNair has carried out. I saw him put down a sixteen year old wizard without pause."

"A sixteen year old werewolf." Amos corrected.

Sirius shuddered, unable to do anything but picture a sixteen year old Remus in the place of the unnamed executed boy.

"I will never agree on your agenda there, Amos." Leonard said firmly.

Amos snorted. "Well, of course not! Not now Black with his pet werewolf has your balls in the palm of his hands!"

"Amos!" Leonard snapped. "We have been friends for too many years to count but you go too far!"

There was a tense silence.

"I apologise, Leonard," Amos said gruffly.

Leonard's sigh was heavy and loud enough to travel to Sirius. "What is going on with you, Amos? You haven't been right since…since you didn't get the Wizengamot seat."

"I was the best candidate, Leonard. The only reason why I didn't get it was because of Black."

"You can't solely blame him for that, Amos." Leonard retorted. "Most of the Houses that voted for someone else prefer Yaxley's view of the world or don't hold your views on werewolves and other magical creatures. They don't like the legislation you and that awful Umbridge woman forced through."

"Werewolves are dangerous…" Amos began heatedly.

"Amos, stop!" Leonard ordered. "Look, what happened with Thaddeus was a tragedy but not all werewolves are as feral as Fenrir Greyback."
Thaddeus? Sirius frowned at the mention of Amos's younger brother. They'd been school contemporaries; Thad had been sorted into Hufflepuff the same year as the Marauders had sorted into Gryffindor. Thad had gotten some job on a creature reserve in the Alps the last Sirius had heard.

"If you're about to mention Lupin; don't." Amos snarled.

Sirius stiffened.

"Amos, I'm only going to say this once; don't set yourself against Sirius." Leonard said firmly. "He's every bit as powerful as his grandfather used to be – maybe even more so. Don't go up against him."

"Thank you for the advice, Leonard," Amos's voice dripped with sarcasm, "now some of us have jobs to do."

The creak and slam of the door echoed around the corner and Sirius heard Leonard swearing under his breath before the door opened and closed again signalling his departure.

Sirius kept himself invisible until he was half-way back to the courtroom. He sneaked back in and sat back down in his chair, nothing absently that the ever-fill mug had disappeared. He sighed. He should have gotten some more chocolate or some tea.

But it was too late because the doors were shutting and Albus was calling everyone to attention as the docket moved onto Walden MacNair.

It was a hopeless repeat of Jugson's trial. All the same arguments bar the one about Harry and Ron, and all the same counter-arguments with the same result at the end of it. But Sirius knew it had to be that way. MacNair's solicitor had to tread the same ground as Jugson's or MacNair could claim a mistrial.

He was ecstatic though when MacNair was sentenced and Albus called for the last prisoner.

The Dennis Travers that walked in didn't quite fit the description of the surly prisoner holding his silence that Amelia had painted but Sirius figured maybe the trial had knocked some reality into Travers's head finally. He was going to Azkaban and probably for a lot longer than his associates since he'd been the ringleader.

Travers sat in the chair and sweat lined his brow.

Yeah, Sirius mused speculatively, Travers was beginning to understand just what was going to happen.

Amelia stood up, her expression the very definition of grim determination. "As the accused has eschewed all attempts to get him to speak since his arrest, I would ask the court to allow the use of veritaserum…"

Bootle was on his feet immediately. "Absolutely not!"

Amelia shot him an annoyed look. "We discussed this yesterday…"

"We did not!" Bootle snapped.

"If this is an attempt to cause a mistrial, Bootle, it isn't funny!" Amelia snapped. "I have the notification document here with your seal on it. What are you playing at?"

Bootle went red. "And I don't know what you're playing at! But I do know you are attempting to
falsify evidence. We didn't discuss anything of this kind in our meeting yesterday morning!"

Amelia rolled her eyes. "Not in the meeting in the morning, no, but we did discuss it in the afternoon before you visited your client."

"I didn't visit my client in the afternoon! I was sick as a dog and throwing up in my flat's bathroom!" Bootle stormed back.

The entire courtroom froze.

If Bootle was telling the truth – if someone had impersonated him…but why? Just to see Travers? And if someone had impersonated Bootle they had to know the truth would come out when they'd signed a document Bootle himself would have no knowledge of signing…

Bootle suddenly turned and stared at Travers before glancing back at Amelia. "I don't know what's going on here but my objection stands; I have received no notification, have sealed no such document and do not agree to my client being given veritaserum."

Albus motioned at Amelia. "May we see the notification document?"

Amelia handed it to him. Albus waved his wand over it several times.

"This seems to be in order. The magical seal is verified as belonging to the office of Bootle, Appleforth and Crackton." Albus briefly looked at Gideon and Daniel. "We will allow the use of veritaserum and record Mister Bootle's objection."

Bootle bristled but the ruling had been made.

Travers cringed in the chair.

The veritaserum vial was presented for authenticity and the Auror moved to give it to Travers. Unsurprisingly, Travers had to be restrained before they could get the three drops into him.

They all waited with bated breath for the few moments that were needed for it to take effect.

Amelia moved into position. "What is your name?"

"No, no, no…" Travers squirmed in his seat, tears streaming down his face in his effort to resist the truth serum. "No…"

"What is your name?" asked Amelia more insistently.

"Col…Colin Basil Summers." The words came stiffly forced out.

Dear Merlin, Sirius thought wildly; it wasn't Travers…the prisoner wasn't Travers!

"What the…!" Bootle was on his feet. "Where is my client?"

"They have him." Colin sobbed, answering automatically.

The three other solicitors looked torn between excitement, curiosity and outrage. The Auror guards looked disturbed; the scribe, bewildered.

Amelia brought her hand up and silenced everyone with a look.

"Why are you impersonating Dennis Travers?" Amelia asked snappily.
"They have my sister!" The man – Colin – sobbed. "I was supposed to go to Azkaban in his place. Please, please; they have my sister and she's pregnant and if I don't do this…they'll kill her! Please!"

Sirius’s heart leaped into his throat and his frantic gaze met Amelia's.

Voldemort had freed Dennis Travers, another loyal servant, but Sirius didn't care about that. Another pregnant woman was missing which meant there was no doubt that Voldemort was going ahead with the ritual.

And the time was long past that Sirius needed to tell Harry.
The golden Potter griffin let the golden Nott jackal bow to it before nodding imperiously. The jackal turned to look at Harry before it dissolved into mist and disappeared completely.

Harry let out the breath he had been holding. Too many odd things had happened with him and family magic for him to be comfortable with using it anymore. Across Minerva's office, Sirius smiled at him reassuringly and Harry didn't think he was making up the matching relief in Sirius's grey eyes that nothing had happened. Finally, Harry glanced at Theo who nodded at him.

"Guess I'm in truly in service to the House of Potter now." Theo said with enough satisfaction that it was obvious even to Harry who sometimes had problems reading Theo.

"Well, welcome?" Harry said with a small smile.

Theo's father interrupted before Theo could reply. "I know you'll take good care of my son, Lord Potter."

Harry stiffened but nodded sharply. "Of course, Lord Nott." He kept his tone polite.

"Sirius, if I may have a word in private before I leave?" Lord Nott asked, turning away from Harry.

Sirius frowned but accepted, gesturing at Harry. "Can you wait outside the room? I'll be with you in a minute."

"Sure." Harry said. He was eager to be alone with Sirius. He had so much to ask him since Sirius had refused to tell him about the tribunals until they were face to face.

"I'll write to you soon, Theo." Lord Nott placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "Be good."

"Of course, Father." Theo said warmly.

Harry led the way out of the room, shutting the door behind Theo once he'd stepped out. Theo hovered and Harry motioned at the nearby stairs.

"You don't have to wait with me."

Theo shrugged and leaned against the wall. "It's Sunday."

It was enough of an explanation. Nothing happened much on Sundays. They were supposed to be homework days. Harry wistfully thought back to the father-son Sundays he'd spent with Sirius during the Summer and felt a pang of disappointment that Sirius would be leaving as soon as they'd talked about the tribunals and caught up.

"Besides if I go back all I have to look forward to is Malfoy sulking about me being in service to the House of Potter and Greengrass debating about whether she should ask you to Hogsmeade next weekend." Theo continued cheerfully.

Harry's eyes snapped to the Slytherin in alarm. "What?"

Theo smirked at him. "You do realise everybody is discussing who you're planning to go with? Are you planning to ask someone?"

"I'm not." Harry replied automatically.
"Great," Theo commented with genuine cheer, "Zabini owes me a galleon."

Harry glared at him, and folded his arms. "I'm going to see Sirius." He paused. "Actually, a bunch of us are going if you want to come along."

Theo blinked at him. "You want me to come along?"

"You're part of my House now, Theo." Harry shrugged. "Ron, Hermione and Neville are all coming along too."

Theo nodded slowly. "Thanks but I have…" he shifted as though he was suddenly uncertain, "I'm going to Hogsmeade with Jeremy."

Harry's eyes widened momentarily in surprise before he realised it was kind of rude to act shocked about it and Theo was braced as though he expected something bad. "Jeremy's a nice guy."

Theo's expression smoothed and he nodded again. "He is." He bit his lip. "I would bet money Daphne is going to ask you. Her Dad is keen for her to make a good match and you…you're the one they all want to date."

"I don't…I'm not…" Harry stumbled over his words. "I don't really want a girlfriend right now?" He settled on.

"So… you may want to say that but you might want to think about dating a few of the girls you trust anyway." Theo advised. "Otherwise the others will think there's hope for them."

"Really?" asked Harry worriedly.

Theo looked at him. "You're kind of clueless."

Harry bristled but he couldn't really argue with Theo's comment. "I just…don't get why they're so interested in me."

Theo's eyebrows shot up. "Potter, setting aside the whole Boy Who Lived thing, and I know you don't think like this but you're Head of your House and you're the Heir to another really powerful House. If that wasn't enough, you're a genuinely nice guy, hero to the rescue type."

Harry felt the heat in his cheeks and wished the ground would open him up.

"And you're not a totally bad Seeker either although if anyone in Slytherin ever hears that I said that, I will deny it."

Theo waved at him. "Potter, setting aside the whole Boy Who Lived thing, and I know you don't think like this but you're Head of your House and you're the Heir to another really powerful House. If that wasn't enough, you're a genuinely nice guy, hero to the rescue type."

Harry frowned. He disliked the idea but he guessed it might work to deflect attention from his non-dating and complete inexperience. He'd talk to his friends about Theo's idea. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to go on pretend dates or maybe they could call them practice dates so Harry wouldn't be totally horrible on a real date?

The door behind Harry suddenly opened.

Sirius poked his head out. He paused seeing Theo but nodded an acknowledgement at him before motioning for Harry to enter the office again.
Harry waved a goodbye at Theo and headed straight into the room. Sirius shut the door, perched on the desk and put up a privacy bubble as Harry made for one of the comfy chairs.

"Sorry about that," Sirius said as Harry got comfortable, "Benjamin wanted to give me a heads up that Wenlock's beginning to organise an opposition, as though I couldn't work that out for myself."

Harry nodded because Sirius had already talked with him about Wenlock and the likely political shift. "So what happened at the tribunal that you couldn't tell me over the mirror?"

Sirius grimaced and changed position to fully look at Harry. "Do you remember just before the World Cup when I told you that there had been a sighting of the rat and Voldemort at Little Hangleton?"

Harry wondered why Sirius was mentioning that as he confirmed he did with a nod.

"While they were there they took the bones of Thomas Riddle…"

"Tom's Dad?" checked Harry surprised.

"Tom's Dad." Sirius repeated. "Bertie and Albus suggested that it pointed at a specific ritual to create a body for Voldemort, one that involves the bones of his father and two other ingredients."

Harry felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. "Why do I think I don't want to know what the other ingredients are?"

"One of them has to be taken from an enemy." Sirius said gravely.

"Me." Harry surmised immediately.

Sirius expelled a harsh breath. "We think so." He sighed. "The ritual is very long and very involved. But the final part requires something from an enemy who has been in fear of his life and tested for the majority of the nine months prior to the eve of the Summer solstice which is when the end of the ritual has to take place."

Harry felt his heart beating faster. "Is that why with the death threats and the…the kidnapping attempt…?"

Sirius nodded. "We think that it was a pre-emptive attempt and that entering you into the Tri-Wizard Tournament is likely to be the actual goal. The tournament holds all the right conditions to prepare you for the ritual without them doing anything else."

Harry wet his lips. "So everyone's working out a way to make sure I don't get entered?"

"It's one of the reasons why there's going to be a lot of security around the artefact, the Goblet of Fire, which is used to determine the Champions for each school competing." Sirius agreed.

But security wasn't a guarantee of success, Harry thought worriedly.

"Albus assures me that it won't happen; that Hogwarts is safe especially with all the security that Moody's put in place." Sirius sighed wearily. "But, well, we all know how safe you've been here at Hogwarts in the last few years."

Harry bit his lip at Sirius's scathing tone, knowing it wasn't really directed at him but feeling guilty anyway. But then another thought intruded and he frowned. "Wait, you said Peter and Voldemort picked up the bones when they went to Little Hangleton?"
Which meant that Sirius had known about the ritual and everything and not told him! Hurt shot through Harry like a knife.

Sirius met his eyes without hesitation. "Yes, I made the decision not to tell you about the ritual back then."

Harry surged to his feet, not sure what he was doing or wanted but not content to sit anymore.

Sirius slid off the desk to stand in front of him. "Are you willing to listen to my reasons?"

Harry folded his arms over his chest and nodded jerkily.

"We didn't know if the ritual was going to happen, whether Bertie's and Albus's suspicion of what the bones meant actually was true. There are a number of rituals that use bones of forefathers not just this one. And yes, it was the most probable but it wasn't certain." Sirius began. "I didn't want to tell you something that wasn't certain especially as you'd received the death threat on your birthday and had enough to worry about between that and the prophecy."

"And now?" Harry asked sharply.

"The bones need to seep in amniotic fluid – that's the fluid that's…"

"I know." Harry said blushing.

"Right," Sirius said hastily, "and so…Amelia had the DMLE put an alert out to Healers requesting they warn all pregnant women that there could be a threat to them but…Amelia found out one pregnant woman was missing on Thursday and at the tribunal we discovered a second pregnant woman had gone missing." He paused. "The brother of one of the missing women was discovered impersonating Dennis Travers at the tribunal. Travers is missing."

"Oh." Harry lowered his gaze as he absorbed what Sirius had told him. He understood in some ways why Sirius hadn't told him and why he was now being told since it was a certainty that the ritual was going to happen. But…

"I could have handled it." He said out loud. "I'm not a kid."

"And you're not an adult either." Sirius shot back. He held up a hand when Harry went to argue. "There is a reason why you're called a teenager, Harry." He shifted as he took a breath. "Admittedly you've been through a lot more than most teenagers and you have a lot more responsibility than the vast majority of your peers, all of which you handle brilliantly most of the time." He caught Harry's gaze again. "But I am not going to apologise for acting like a parent and deciding that my fourteen year old son doesn't need to worry about something that I know will do nothing but worry him, until it's absolutely necessary to tell him."

Harry shuffled a little under Sirius's understanding but unapologetic regard. "I just…" he sighed, "I already have Professor Dumbledore keeping secrets and now it feels like you're keeping secrets too and…" he shrugged unable to properly put into words what he meant.

Sirius took a step forward and tugged Harry into a hug. Harry went a little stiffly but he wasn't immune to Sirius's caring and he slowly put his arms his father and sank into the comfort.

"I know it feels like people are keeping secrets from you and, well, Albus is, at least until he and I have our little chat about the matter, but my intention here, and every time I make a similar decision, isn't to keep something secret so much as to protect you as much as I can from the craziness." Sirius murmured. "You have to know I debate everything a million times before I decide to tell you or not."
It drives Moony bonkers."

Harry gave a muffled huff of laughter as he imagined Remus's face after being subjected to Sirius's debating.

"I thought about telling you when we got the second death threat but…" Sirius sighed heavily, "everyone still thought getting you into the tournament was the goal, and I wanted you to enjoy the rest of your holiday and have some fun without having something else to worry about. And truthfully would it have changed anything you did at the World Cup?"

Harry wanted to say that it would have done; that he would have stopped and thought about chasing after Ron to check on the Weasleys or that he definitely wouldn't have charged after the guy who'd targeted them, but his conscience wouldn't let him lie about it. Even if he'd known he would probably have still acted the way he'd acted.

"I'm not always going to get it right, Harry," Sirius admitted, "sometimes I'm going to decide something and get it wrong but…I just hope that I get enough right that one day we both might not need to keep seeing a mind healer."

Harry gave another huff of laughter at Sirius's dry tone. "That's why you moved my appointment with Healer Allen?" He had disliked his early morning appointment being changed to a later time when he might be spotted going to the infirmary.

Sirius rubbed his back. "You've just been told that rather than a vague threat of Voldemort trying to get you into the tournament, there is an actual real threat with a whole nasty ritual involved that already has him kidnapping pregnant women and digging up the bones of his father. So yes, I moved your appointment so you can talk to Healer Allen if you want to about it."

"Do we know more about the ritual?" asked Harry, easing back finally to look Sirius.

"We do but…" Sirius sighed and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, "Bertie is still researching to see what the effect would be of us screwing with it. If I tell you any more of the details than I already have…it may screw with the ritual."

Harry frowned. "Don't we want to screw with it?"

"Say the ritual is like a potion that involves you stirring a cauldron five times," Sirius explained, "so you know you need to stir five times but you purposefully think you can screw up Voldemort's plans by stirring three times or two times. Only three times means that the potion explodes and takes you with it and two times means that the potion not only works but gives the user superpowers. Do you think it was wise to stir less times now?"

Nope. Not at all.

Harry sighed and decided to focus on something else. "What's happening about Travers?" Because it certainly hasn't been reported in the press. The Prophet had run a piece on the tribunals the day after stating all four had gone to Azkaban.

Sirius dropped his hands and nudged Harry back into the chair. "The Rat Squad's been given the task of chasing Travers down and we know Travers was switched the day before by someone pretending to be his solicitor. Identification checks haven't been performed on Ministry visitors to date only Ministry employees – that'll change as of tomorrow. We had everyone in the courtroom swear a vow of secrecy and released a cover story to the press because the guy who was switched said he'd been told they'd kill his sister if he didn't pretend to be Travers. He's actually staying in a
They?" questioned Harry, concern beginning to creep along his spine again.

"Our mystery attacker, Pettigrew and Voldemort." Sirius listed.

Harry nodded. He rubbed his upper arms, feeling suddenly chilled.

"We know the Polyjuice Man is clearly in and out of London – both pregnant women were taken from the Market Place and…and he knows what's going on in the Ministry so he's still getting in and out somehow, although the identification checks on visitors will hopefully eliminate that. He picked Travers who is the only one who didn't denounce Voldemort or say something to the Aurors. We think Voldemort and Pettigrew are hiding out in the countryside somewhere remote where they can keep the women locked up. Travers may have been sprung to help guard them." Sirius said.

Harry shivered. It didn't sound very positive.

"Amelia is doing all she can." Sirius said.

But was it going to be enough, mused Harry. It was a thought that stayed with him as he walked Sirius out, knowing his father was stealing more time with Harry by walking to the gates, rather than simply leaving through the floo like Lord Nott had done.

By the time Sirius had hugged him near to the end of the path, it was almost time for his rescheduled Healer appointment, and Harry made his way to the infirmary as soon as he got inside the castle, managing to avoid being seen by taking a short cut that he'd found on the Marauder's map the year before. The room set aside for mind healing was warm and cosy; a small office with comfortable chairs at one end next to a hearth and a table set up with therapy activities at the other.

Harry greeted Healer Allen quietly as he entered and took a seat. He really didn't want to talk; he'd barely had time to think about what Sirius had told him.

The greying older wizard watched him with kind brown eyes. "Would you like to draw this morning rather than talk?" He asked gently.

Harry poked the floor with the toe of his shoe and nodded. He made his way over to the table and picked up a sketch-pad and pencil. His drawings weren't that good but the process of focusing on trying to get the lines on the paper right let his head clear, his thoughts drifting over everything Sirius had told him.

When he finally came back to himself, the paper was filled with a remarkable resemblance to a certain artefact in his past.

"May I see what you've drawn, Harry?" Healer Allen asked.

Harry walked over and gave him the sketch. He sat and burrowed into the cosy chair opposite the healer.

"Would you tell me about the drawing?" Healer Allen invited softly.

Harry rested his head back on the cushions of the chair and stared at the ceiling. "It's the Mirror of Erised."

"What do you think prompted you to draw it?"
Harry sighed. "What do you think prompted me to draw it?"

Healer Allen hummed in agreement ignoring Harry's surliness because it was fairly obvious that Voldemort threatening his life was the easy connection between what Sirius had told him and the Mirror.

"All my first year here Voldemort tried to kill me." Harry said out loud. "And now…"

"And now he's doing it again." Healer Allen stated gently. "What did you see in the Mirror when you looked the first time?"

"My parents." Harry said with a lump in his throat. It always hurt to think about the nights he'd spent in front of the Mirror just looking.

"What do you think you'd see now?"

It was a good question, though Harry taken aback a bit. He'd wanted so desperately to have a family back then and his parents had been mythical creatures that he wished would ride to the rescue and save him from the Dursleys. But he hadn't known about Padfoot then or Moony; hadn't realised his stern Head of House had once changed his nappy and babysat him when he'd been a few months old. Harry didn't yearn for his parents anymore and, while he was sad about that, he knew it was because Padfoot loved him and Padfoot was who his parents had wanted to take care of him; he had a family. He might wish occasionally that his parents were alive to be part of it but…he loved Padfoot.

But despite the fact that he had a family now, one thing hadn't changed…

"I want to be able to have a life without thinking about Voldemort, without him trying to kill me." Harry said out loud. He shifted position to look at Healer Allen. "Every time something good happens to me, he's there screwing it all up again."

*Neither can live while the other survives.*

"It feels inevitable." Harry said slowly.

"The prophecy?" prompted Healer Allen.

"Like I can't stop it and I can't get what I want until…" Until he vanquished Voldemort for good with some power that Harry didn't even know about but which might or might not be the Hallows, or might or might not be the family magic. And everything had a price, Harry thought again tiredly. The prophecy didn't actually say he would live in the aftermath.

Wasn't that part of the reason why he'd drawn the Mirror? Because in the end the Mirror had been destroyed.

"And what you want is to live without Voldemort constantly threatening you."

And the people he loved because his parents had died to protect him from Voldemort and he didn't want that to happen to Padfoot. And Padfoot would do it; he'd step in front of Harry to protect him and…

Harry couldn't bear the thought of losing Padfoot.

The session ended and Harry made his way back to Gryffindor tower with his thoughts still churning. He walked through the portrait and into the Common Room and paused when the
conversation stopped dead at his arrival.

He felt his cheeks heat a touch but there was nobody who he knew to explain what he had supposedly done to become the centre of gossip so he quickly strode across to the staircase and went up to the dorm, trying to convince himself he wasn't really running away from the strangeness in the Common Room.

He came to a halt just inside the dorm room at the sight of Hermione and Neville in front of Harry's trunk, carefully repacking it, Dean and Seamus hovering beside them and occasionally handing them something.

"I can't believe Ron did that!" Hermione complained. "He had no right to just…"

"What's going on?" Harry asked bluntly.

All four of them froze.

It was almost comical.

Dean looked at Seamus who looked at Neville who looked at Hermione who sighed and closed her eyes.

Dean pushed Seamus towards the door. "We should…we have that…"

"Yes, yes. That thing." Seamus said emphatically. He pushed the bundle he was holding – Harry's spare robes – into Hermione's arms and dragged Dean the rest of the way, past Harry, out of the room and down the stairs.

Harry folded his arms and stared at Hermione and Neville.

"OK," Hermione began, "but you have to promise me you won't freak out?"

"You know you saying that kind of makes me want to freak out." Harry said.

Hermione glared at him.

Harry waved a hand at her.

"So, Ron thought you'd come straight back to the tower after the loyalty vow with Nott," Hermione started to explain, "and when you didn't, he started to think maybe Lord Nott had done something, or Theo had done something or…" she gestured weakly in Harry's direction, "someone had done something."

Harry walked over to them and sat down on the bed. Ron getting worried wasn't unusual. "I guess he took my trunk apart trying to find the map then?" He pointed at the parchment by Hermione's knee. "So he could find me?"

Hermione and Neville nodded.

"And he realised I was in the infirmary." Harry continued and sighed, falling back on his bed with a groan.

This was bad, Harry thought frantically; this was very bad.

"He, uh, thought you'd been injured?" offered Neville.
"Neville worked out why you were in the infirmary since the map showed you with Healer Allen," Hermione said gently, "and tried to stop Ron from leaving the dorm but…"

"He wouldn't listen." Neville finished with a sigh.

"So I tried talking to him too but I think I made everything worse?" Hermione said in a small voice that made Harry sit back up and look at her.

She looked chagrined, her bushy hair falling all around her face to hide her embarrassment.

"Basically, Ron then thought you'd told us about seeing your, um, healer but not him and…" Hermione continued.

"And he stormed out." Neville completed.

"After hitting Neville and accusing him of trying to steal his best friend." Hermione added, outrage stealing back across her face.

Neville flushed. "He just kind of pushed me. I'm fine."

Harry frowned at him but he did seem fine.

"I fell on my bed." Neville said pointing across to his bed.

"The thing is, Harry," Hermione began nervously, "well, the thing is…"

"Ron was kind of yelling." Neville said with a visible wince and pointed at the open door.

Harry quickly added up the strange looks he'd gotten in the Common Room and the fight and the yelling and groaned, slumping back again. "Everyone thinks I'm crazy?"

"Yes."

"No, of course not!"

Harry peeked at his two friends as Neville and Hermione glared at each other. Hermione turned back to Harry with a chagrined look.

"It's not that people think you're crazy," Hermione cast another stern look at Neville, "but just…"

"I'm nuttier than a fruitcake?" Harry said dryly.

Neville snorted.

"There's nothing wrong with seeing a mind healer." She offered in a small voice, brushing her hair back out of her face. "Some people can't appreciate that it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you. They just don't understand why."

There was a hint of curiosity in her voice which meant Hermione wanted to know why Harry was seeing the mind healer.

He felt irritation skate across his nerves. "You'd think the fact that I've received death threats would be some clue as to why, Hermione."

She grimaced and lowered her gaze.
"Bugger." Harry sat up again and rubbed a hand over his face.

What was he supposed to do?

What he wanted to do was close the curtains on his bed, hide and hope the whole thing went away. But he knew that was not going to happen. He needed to deal with Ron too. Ron was stubborn as a mule when he got something into his head and Harry was very tempted just to let his friend stew since he was primarily responsible for everyone now knowing he saw the mind healer. Ron probably wasn't talking to him anyway.

But... they did have an alliance of friendship and Ron's initial motivations had been good. He should probably go and sort it out with him. And then he should probably call Sirius on the mirror and warn him that the Prophet was probably going to run 'Boy Who Lives is Nuts!' as its headline the next day.

He gestured at the Marauder's map and it flew into his hand. He didn't see Hermione's and Neville's awe at the display of wandless magic as he unthinkingly released his wand to tap the parchment and give the password. He quickly spotted Ron down by the Quidditch pitch.

Harry sighed and shut the parchment down, tossing it back into his trunk. "You guys don't need to keep repacking my trunk. I'll do it when I get back from talking with Ron."

Hermione and Neville exchanged a look and shook their heads.

"We'll do it." Hermione said firmly. "I mean, we are partially responsible for the whole..." her hand made a circular gesture which Harry took to mean 'letting the world know Harry Potter is crazy' debacle.

Harry shuffled off the bed and out of the door. He flushed brightly as everyone stopped talking again as he walked through the Common Room. He hurried out and down the stairs.

He was half-way to the Quidditch pitch when he ran into Draco, Crabbe and Goyle. He gave a nod and went to move past them but Draco moved to block his path. He glared at the Slytherin; he had thought they were past that. "Malfoy..."

"I'd thought you'd like to know that Weasley told everyone that you were crazy." Draco's sharp features seemed more pointed than usual. "If this had been last year I would no doubt have revelled in the easy material of Potty is Dotty but as this isn't last year..."

"Thank you for your restraint, Draco, and I was aware of the latest news to hit the Hogwarts gossip network but thank you for making sure I was fully informed." Harry said dryly.

"No problem." Draco smiled sunnily and moved off.

Harry adjusted his glasses and continued onto the Quidditch pitch. Ron sat in the Gryffindor stand. His demeanour wasn't inviting; he was hunched over, folded arms, and his lips were set in a thin unhappy line.

Harry sat down beside him and put a privacy bubble.

"I'm not talking to you!" Ron said loudly.

"You just did," Harry pointed out tersely, "and if anybody should be not talking to somebody, it should be me! You managed to tell the whole world that I'm seeing a mind healer!"
"Well, maybe if you'd told me rather than everyone else…" Ron started back heatedly.

"I didn't tell anyone!" Harry yelled.

"You told Neville! And Hermione!" Ron waved a hand back towards the school. "They both knew!"

"I didn't tell them!" Harry insisted, anger stirring at Ron's dismissal of his words; did he really think Harry was a liar?

"So they just miraculously guessed?" Ron sneered angrily.

Harry was tempted to get up and walk away. If Ron really thought he was lying about it… "Neville said he recognised the healer's name, and Hermione…" he gestured vaguely, "well, she's Hermione." And maybe in hindsight he'd given her enough to work it out when he'd talked to her about his time in the States.

"As if that's…" Ron broke off suddenly and grimaced, swiping a hand over his face and leaving a streak of dirt on his forehead, "well, that probably does explain Hermione." He glanced at Harry quickly before looking away shamefacedly. "You really didn't tell them?"

"I'm not in the habit of lying, Ron." Harry snapped.

Ron flinched but nodded. "I know. I'm sorry, mate." He stared down at his trainers. "And really sorry about the whole…you know."

"Telling the world?" sniped Harry because he was a little irked. More than a little, maybe.

Ron flushed and nodded. "I was just…you didn't come back! And you know Moody said to watch for strange behaviour and Sirius is the closest person to you so if you were going to be kidnapped by anyone…"

"I get it, Ron." Harry sighed and pushed his glasses up his nose. "I thought about telling you last week about, uh, Healer Allen, because I knew I was going to need cover eventually but I hadn't gotten round to deciding about it, because, you know, I didn't really want to have to tell anyone, and then Sirius changed my appointment time today because he thought I would need to speak to Healer Allen afterwards and…" he shrugged.

"Did…why did you need to…uh…" Ron trailed off at Harry's raised eyebrows and he flushed brightly as he registered just how personal his question was.

"Sorry." He muttered.

Harry relented with a sigh. "They've got some credible information which they think means Voldemort is going to get me into the Tri-Wizard Tournament as part of some ritual to give him a body."

Ron grimaced and pulled at his laces. "That's…pretty crappy. Sorry, mate." He paused again. "So, that's the reason then?"

It was hard to keep hold of his want to keep it all secret when he heard the concern in Ron's voice. His best friend wasn't asking to satisfy his curiosity but because he was worried about Harry. And thinking about it, Hermione had probably asked for the same reason.

Harry kept his eyes on the opposite stand as he lifted one shoulder in a gesture meant to convey it
didn't matter. "I guess now, yeah. I mean, at the start it was, uh, the Dursleys mostly."

"Oh."

"And, you know, what happened with Quirrell and the basilisk." Harry continued. He made a weak hand gesture. "Then…this Summer…just other stuff and now this."

"Ginny refused to see the mind healer." Ron replied.

Harry knew it wasn't as much of a non-sequitur as others might think; Ron usually had a point to his tangents.

"Mum and Dad dragged her to one but…she didn't want to go." Ron sighed. "I offered, you know, to go with her? I mean, sometimes…sometimes I dream the prat actually obliviated us and Ginny died so you know I thought maybe it wouldn't hurt for me to go too."

Harry nudged his shoulder, unable to talk because that right there was why Ron was his best mate. Because Ron was the type of friend who would confide his own deeply hidden secret thought about needing a mind healer just to make Harry feel better about seeing one.

"She told me no." Ron shrugged as though it didn't matter but Harry knew better. "I was going to ask you to talk to her about it, see if you could change her mind about going but then…well, she turned all stalkerish and," he blew out an exasperated breath, "I don't know what's with her but it wouldn't be fair to you to ask so…"

"I can still try," offered Harry, although the idea of talking with Ginny was excruciatingly painful, "or maybe the fact that she knows I'm seeing one will get her to go to one too."

Ron winced again. "Yeah, I'm really sorry about that."

Harry sighed. "It probably would have gotten out anyway. It's not like people don't follow me around constantly." He shivered as a harsh gust of wind slapped over the stands. "Come on. Let's go inside and see if we can get lunch from the kitchen."

"Yeah." Ron stood up eagerly. "We can get Hermione to come along too."

"You're just hoping it'll get you out of her 'I told you so' lecture which it won't!" Harry got to his feet and poked Ron as he laughed in agreement. "You owe Neville an apology too."

The look was fleeting – just a twist of lips and a glower that shimmied through Ron's expressive eyes for a moment – but Harry caught it. He grabbed hold of Ron and pulled him to a stop as he made to leave.

"OK, what was that?" demanded Harry.

Ron shuffled his feet and avoided Harry's gaze. "It's…nothing."

Harry rolled his eyes, pulled Ron back down so they were sitting again and glared at him.

Ron huffed out a breath and folded his arms across his chest. "Why is Neville always hanging around with us now?"

It wasn't as though he hadn't known the discussion was going to happen at some point, Harry told himself as he wrestled with his irritation at Ron's jealousy.

"Why is it a problem?" Harry asked bluntly. "Neville's a good guy and he's a good friend."
"I know but..." Ron frowned heavily and averted his gaze from Harry's hard glare. "Look, I know it's stupid but I liked it when it was just you, me and Hermione. Now there's all these other people, including Neville and..." he shrugged again.

Harry guessed at what Ron didn't say; that he didn't want to share Harry and maybe even Hermione with other people.

"Those other people are not going away, Ron." Harry pointed out crisply. "I have alliances and responsibilities and...and, you're my best friend, and that's never going to change," he saw Ron's face brighten, "but I also like having more friends than just you, me and Hermione."

He sensed Ron's confusion.

"At the beginning of the Summer, I was thinking about how we stopped talking to Hermione over the Firebolt, you remember?" Harry said.

Ron nodded.

"And I thought if you and I had fallen out, who would I have spent time with? Hermione, sure, but who else? I realised I'd kind of, uh, hidden behind you and Hermione because of all the Boy Who Lived stuff." Harry admitted. "So, there wouldn't have been anybody else because I didn't know anybody else."

"Except Neville." Ron muttered.

"Not really." Harry said simply. "Neither of us have paid much attention to Neville these last couple of years, which was pretty bad of us when you think about it, because we had each other but who has Neville had? He's never said anything but it can't have been great us and Dean and Seamus ignoring him all the time."

"Not all the time." Ron said defensively.

"Most of the time." Harry insisted. He looked away into the distant sky. "I sometimes think it could so easily have been me who ended up without a close friend in our dorm. If you had sat with him instead of me..."

"Weird, mate," Ron commented, "since I sometimes think it could have been me, you know, not having a friend, if you and Neville had grown up together like you were supposed to."

Harry nodded at him, sensing Ron was finally getting it. "Right, but we didn't grow up together and you sat with me so...it's Neville on his own and..." he sighed, "Neville doesn't deserve that when we can all be friends."

"I understand I guess," Ron sighed heavily, "it's...I hate the godbrother stuff you two go on about it? You're my best friend."

"I am," Harry agreed fervently, "but Neville's Mum and my Mum were best friends; his Dad and my Dad were like brothers. If Neville's parents hadn't been attacked I would have grown up with Neville as my brother so...I'm not going to ignore that we were supposed to be family." He stopped Ron with a look when he went to argue. "You have your family, Ron. You have your brothers and Ginny."

"I'm happy to share them with you." Ron said quickly.

"And I really appreciate the sentiment but you can't, not really. They're yours." Harry pointed out.
"And you don't get what it's like to not have them, Ron. Not to have them or your parents. You've never had to open presents at Christmas and know there isn't one from your parents – and seriously I hope you never do." He waited a beat. "But Neville knows what that feels like, so if he and I can be family for each other, well, I think that's what our parents wanted."

Ron nodded slowly and heaved another sigh. "I've been a bit of a prat, haven't I?"

"Yeah, but you're my prat." Harry said with a small smile. "Come on; it's lunch time. I'm voting we eat in the kitchen so I can avoid the masses and everyone thinking I'm crazy."

"On the plus side, I haven't seen any stalkers yet." Ron offered cheerfully as they started the climb back down the stands.

Harry brightened. That was true. Nobody had stalked him at all when he'd left the tower. Maybe his craziness would put off the horde of girls wondering if he was going to date them.

Huh.

Maybe every cloud did have a silver lining.

o-O-o

As they stepped into Albus's office at Hogwarts, Sirius considered again whether he should have had Albus stay back in Black Manor after the War Council for their discussion. It might have been better to have talked to him about the whole problematic issue of Albus keeping secrets on Sirius's home ground and with the officialdom of the War Council providing a back drop. But Sirius figured he could sneak a visit to Harry on his way out of the school and in truth he wasn't too intimidated by the Headmaster's office he found himself in.

Fawkes cried out a greeting and swooped over as Sirius took his seat. Sirius patted him and accepted Albus's offer of refreshments.

A house elf popped in immediately with a pot of tea and some English muffins.

Albus played Mum and poured the tea, handing over the delicate china cup with an openly curious expression. "I have to admit that I thought you might want to talk to me about the fallout from the discovery of Harry's mind healing. I was impressed that you managed to keep it out of the Prophet except for some minor hints in Miss Skeeter's article."

"I, or rather Brian, reminded the editor that Harry is a minor and any details about his medical treatment appearing in a newspaper would definitely result in legal action." Sirius said. "When Harry alerted me to the potential problem yesterday, he mentioned that everyone was staring at him?"

"Ah, well, it is not the first time he has been the centre of attention," Albus allowed, "although in this instance I believe our new bullying policy has made it difficult for anyone to be deliberately cruel to him." He smiled briefly, his eyes twinkling. "That, and the fact that Mister Malfoy, and possibly much of the student body, is attempting to remain within Harry's good graces thanks to the political power he now knows he wields."

Sirius hummed an agreement.

"On a positive note, Doctor Jordan reports that five other students have requested mind healing since the news leaked of Harry's treatment." Albus commented.

"How many of them require it?" asked Sirius dryly.
Albus beamed at him. "Three of the five."

Sirius nodded slowly. Well, at least some good had come of it.

"On a serious note, Harry has quietly let it be known that the mind healing is primarily to do with the death threats." Albus continued. "I believe that has been accepted as an understandable reason why a caring parent has insisted upon him seeing a mind healer."

Clever little raven, Sirius thought admiringly. Harry had indicated he had come up with a plan when they’d talked; blaming his getting treatment on Sirius was a good way to go.

"I have to admit I continue to have my doubts that his knowing about the ritual is a good thing." Albus said.

The comment arrested Sirius's attention, the implicit criticism tensing Sirius's gut. He picked up his tea and took a sip to calm himself. "According to Harry I should have told him much sooner." He began. "He pointed out he wasn't a child."

"Do you feel you should have told him sooner?" Albus asked.

Sirius's lips twitched because he had a feeling Albus thought he was comforting him or guiding him. He shook his head. "I'm comfortable that I told him soon enough." He gazed over the desk at Albus. "But this conversation does segue nicely into what I actually wanted to talk to you about in the first place."

"Oh?" It wasn't very often that Albus Dumbledore looked confused and the Marauder part of Sirius took pride in the achievement although the adult part of his brain (the part that sounded remarkably like Remus) remonstrated with him lightly that he needed to focus. He ran over the strategy he and Remus had discussed again in his head. It was a good strategy; it would work to get through to Albus. Sirius was sure of it.

Sirius sipped his tea and set it aside. "Why haven't you offered to tell me the details of the prophecy yet, Albus?"

Albus paused mid-chew of his English muffin and he finished rapidly, patting his mouth with a bright green napkin that matched his robes. "Do you really need to know the details of the prophecy?"

"I'm not sure," Sirius lied lightly, "do I?"

The older wizard picked up his tea and sipped it, evidently disconcerted by Sirius's request and playing for time.

"After all, Albus," Sirius pointed out dryly, "it's rather hard to make that determination when I don't know the details."

"Sirius…"

"Did you tell James?" asked Sirius sharply. "How about Lily?" His grey eyes darkened at Albus's chagrined face. "Did they know the details of why their son was targeted? Why they were in danger?"

Albus paled and his gaze jerked away from Sirius.

Fawkes gave a mournful trill.
"I did not tell them the specifics." Albus admitted when Sirius refused to fill the silence. "I told them that there was a prophecy that related to Harry or Neville; that either boy could be the one to vanquish Voldemort. That there was more but that what I had told them was as much as Voldemort himself knew." He raised his eyes. "It was a war and I could not risk even them knowing more than that."

Sirius sighed heavily and clasped his hands on his lap. "And now?"

"The risk of Voldemort finding out…" Albus began.

"Do you honestly believe that I would tell Voldemort anything if he captured me?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"He is a Master Leglimens." Albus countered.

"And my head is protected." Sirius shot back.

"It is not an acceptable risk…"

"That isn't your decision to make this time round, Albus." Sirius snorted. "It's arguable whether it was your decision alone to make back then."

They both looked at each other. The fire crackled breaking the tense silence.

Albus sat back, defeated. "I can show you the memory of the prophecy in a pensieve. Will that be acceptable?"

Sirius sighed. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies…"

Albus's eyes widened comically fast.

"…and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not … and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives." Sirius completed.

"How did…" Albus began before he stopped and closed his eyes. "There is only one way that you could have listened to the prophecy."

"Yes." Sirius said simply.

"Harry knows?" Albus's eyes reopened to look sorrowfully at Sirius.

"He knows." Sirius confirmed.

"Voldemort…"

"Harry is trained in Occlumency and has additional protection thanks to his family rings. Besides, if Voldemort is close enough to Harry to read the entire prophecy out of his head then it's likely to be the culmination of the prophecy one way or another." Sirius argued. "The only other people who know are Remus and Bertie, both of whom also have mental protection."

Albus drew in a sharp breath and exhaled loudly. "I still cannot agree with your decision to allow Harry to hear the prophecy, Sirius. He should not have to bear such a burden at his age."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "You don't have to agree since it was my decision to make," he said firmly,
"but let me ask you this; before my escape from Azkaban, when were you intending to tell him, Albus?" He shifted forward as Albus's gaze fell once again to his desk. "I know he asked you why Voldemort was after him at the end of his first year. I know you had a second opportunity to tell him at the end of his second year when he fought the basilisk. You could have even told him during his third year had you taken the time to explain to him why everyone thought Sirius Black wanted to kill him."

"He was too young…"

"At eleven I perhaps would have agreed with you. At twelve, having faced Voldemort twice in as many years, he deserved to know why in general terms at the very least. Certainly, at thirteen and with the knowledge that a mass murderer was supposedly wanting to kill him, he definitely deserved to know why even if you didn't tell him the exact words of the prophecy." Sirius argued.

Albus shook his head stubbornly.

"Harry's right, Albus," Sirius continued, "he's not a child and the events of his time in the wizarding world to date have eroded any sense of his having a normal childhood." He stared down Albus. "He saw a man burn and die under his hand. He killed a monster and almost died himself in the effort. He confronted the man who handed him and his parents to Voldemort. As much as I hate that these things happened to him, they did, and because of that, he is not a child."

"He is not an adult either." Albus countered, his hands holding tightly to the edge of his desk.

"No, he isn't," Sirius agreed, his own argument to Harry echoing in his head, "and, accepting that perhaps it was your decision to make prior to my being awarded guardianship officially, as I've already said; what Harry should and should not know is not your decision to make now – it's mine. I also recall a promise to help him that you made at the start of the Summer, Albus. Keeping him in the dark doesn't help him, you have to see that."

He could see that his words were impacting the older wizard to some degree – there was a flush of embarrassment perhaps even shame across Albus's cheeks along with a muscle twitching in his jaw, a strange tension in his body as he absorbed the point Sirius was making.

"Setting Harry aside," Sirius pressed on, "I am an adult. It is certainly not your place to decide what I should know or should not know when it pertains to my son, and given my current position, what I should or should not know when it pertains to the war effort."

Albus sat back, defeated. He nodded slowly. "I confess that I had not considered my silence about the prophecy in the light of our changed positions." He made a small tsking sound. "I forget that I am…"

"Part of a team?" suggested Sirius when Albus failed to complete his sentence.

Albus gave a huff of what might have been agreement.

Sirius took a deep breath. "Let's talk about the prophecy. You've had longer to think about the wording, to try and understand what it means. I'd like to know your view."

He was almost amused that Albus seemed surprised that Sirius wanted his input. Sirius reached for his tea and indicated the abandoned muffin in front of Albus. Albus took the hint and started to eat again, chewing slowly and evidently thinking about what he was going to say.

"Obviously, the first part indicates that a vanquisher approaches and provides the clue to their identity." Albus began. "I considered many different variations of what the words meant – the
seventh month, those who thrice defied, and so on – but at the end of July it was clear that Harry and Neville were the candidates, with Harry as the younger possibly being the one."

"Only Voldemort had to mark one as an equal." Sirius said.

"He did not know that part of the prophecy, of course, otherwise it may have deterred him from going after either of them. But he marked Harry as an equal the moment he chose to eliminate Harry as the potential threat, to make Harry the sacrifice for his next horcrux." Albus agreed, rubbing his fingers on the napkin and picking up his tea. "And he chose not the pureblood child but the one that shared a muggle heritage even if for Harry it was once removed."

"So he chose the one who most closely resembled him – a half-blood – because he believed they were the more likely threat." Sirius mused out loud.

"Exactly." Albus confirmed, wrapping his hands around the teacup. "I suppose others might point at the literal scar that Harry received but for me it was the moment the choice was made that marked Harry; his life would never be the same regardless of the outcome of that night."

"No."

"I also believe that night at Godric's Hollow was never meant to be the moment of prophecy – of vanquishing – but the moment of marking." Albus continued. "Tom stood in front of Harry that night believing he would eliminate his prophesised vanquisher and instead created him, literally making Harry his equal in the accidental transference of a shard of his soul."

"And you believe the vanquishing that day wasn't the prophesised vanquishing?"

"Oh no," Albus shook his head, "Tom wasn’t vanquished that night, merely reduced to a true equal state with his nemesis. And while no doubt Harry’s innate power helped to save him from the Killing curse levelled at him, I think you and I both know James and Lily played a part in his survival. However, from a mark as an equal perspective, Harry was still a baby and the events of that night resulted in Tom assuming a similar helpless condition; after that night, they were equal in all ways."

"And as Harry grows in strength and ability, so too does Voldemort." Sirius thought out loud. It wasn't something he and Remus had explicitly debated.

"Yes," Albus agreed, "so as Harry returns to the wizarding world, so too does Tom. And then this year; Harry gains allies and support, and so too does Tom. Destiny has kept a balance between them."

"But 'neither can live while the other survives,'" murmured Sirius, his hand clenching around the teacup with enough force that he thought it might crack the china.

"Indeed," Albus replied softly, "metaphorical more than literal as both are living as in alive, but to fully live their lives without the threat of the other? No. Until the prophecy is resolved, neither will have the life they want; they will merely survive, eke out an existence." He frowned. "Unfortunately, the prophecy is also open-ended as to who will be the victor between them. Harry has the power to defeat Tom but 'either may die at the hand of the other' and thus the outcome is uncertain."

It was the part of the prophecy that Sirius hated. He wanted it to say Harry would be the one to live; to defeat Voldemort.

Sirius sighed. It was time, he mused, for him to address the main reason for their discussion. "And 'the power he knows not'?"
"Ah, well, I rather thought it had something to do with the ancient magic Lily had invoked," Albus admitted ruefully, stroking his beard, "but I had forgotten the Potter family magic." He raised his eyes to meet Sirius's. "Harry seems to have an affinity for using it and the other family magics allied to him."

Sirius nodded, unable to deny it after the Wizengamot sessions.

"I recall a tale that suggests the most powerful wizard of a generation could call upon all of the family magic?" Albus asked tentatively.

"We've heard the same tale and Harry thinks it's a possibility that he could in dire circumstances call all the family magic to him." Sirius admitted bluntly. "But he believes that he would forfeit his own life in the calling of it."

"Oh." Albus's face fell. "Well, then…"

"As you can imagine, both Remus and I have discouraged Harry from thinking that the family magic is therefore the power Voldemort knows not." Sirius stated briskly.

Albus looked at him understandingly. "Do you think there is another option?"

It was the perfect opening.

"What about the Hallows?" prompted Sirius. "Harry is the last of the Peverells. The Hallows are also a power that Voldemort wouldn't know or have personal experience with."

"I thought we had agreed that the Resurrection Stone should be locked away?" There was a sharpness in Albus's tone that gave away his concern at the subject.

"Did you know my Grandfather spent his final days searching for how Harry could ultimately defeat Voldemort?" Sirius asked idly.

Albus's eyes widened. "Arcturus?"

"Yes," Sirius placed his teacup down, "Lily and he were friends. She confided in him before they went into hiding. The blood wards around Privet Drive came out of a book my Grandfather gave her. The spell for Harry's protection came out of another book he gave her that used to belong to my Grandmother."

"Oh my." Albus murmured.

"He came across a source about the Hallows – Remus is trying to track it down – anyway, it mentioned that the Hallows were created with the Peverell family magic to help defeat the Dark Lord Severn." Sirius continued. "All three items acting in concert."

Albus remained silent.

Sirius stared him down. "I'm certain your studies into the Hallows must have revealed something similar."

"Uniting the Hallows," began Albus, with an unhappy frown, "is meant to convey the wizard holding all three with the power of Death. It is why the child's tale says the wizard becomes Master of Death. But there is no evidence to substantiate that."

"Apart from the source my Grandfather found." Sirius decided that Albus didn't need to know that
his Grandfather had gotten the information from Ollivander. "It apparently made it very clear that all three enabled the defeat of this Dark Lord." His gaze settled on Albus. "We know where the cloak and the stone are…"

"And the wand's location is best kept secret to ensure Tom does not attempt to procure it." Albus interrupted. "You agreed with me that it was for the best when we found the stone."

"I didn't agree; I just didn't pursue the topic. And that was before I had information that the Hallows could be 'the power he knows not' that Harry needs in order to defeat Voldemort." Sirius countered calmly.

"Sirius…"

"Secrets, Albus." Sirius said pointedly. "Haven't we just had this conversation? If you know where the wand is then as the person leading the war effort where that wand could make the difference between winning and losing, and beyond that as the father of Harry, the last of the Peverells who arguably the wand truly belongs to, shouldn't I be told?"

Fawkes flew over to comfort Albus and the old wizard stroked the phoenix on his lap for a long moment.

Albus finally raised his eyes and met Sirius's relentless gaze again. "I assume this is where you inform me that you already know."

"My Grandfather had a theory." Sirius offered, trying to lighten the moment.

There was a soft snort from Albus. He slowly drew his wand out of a large sleeve as Fawkes abandoned him and flew back to his perch. The Elder wand was placed on the desk.

Sirius made no move toward it. "Harry is comfortable that you should have the wand for the time being."

Albus breathed in sharply. "He knows?"

"Yes." Sirius said bluntly.

"But then…"

"We understood why you were keeping it secret, Albus," Sirius said impatiently, "and frankly, Harry and I both agree that the wand is probably safest with you, but we also agree that you need to stop keeping secrets that relate to Harry; relate to how he could defeat Voldemort."

There was another long moment of silence.

"He must hate me." Albus murmured eventually.

"He's annoyed you're keeping secrets about him when you said you wouldn't." Sirius stated firmly. "As am I."

Albus sighed. "I have no defence, Sirius, beyond the truth that for many years I was the one to decide who knew what and when. I fear it has taken me some time to realise the truth that I no longer have that right nor occupy the same role in the war as last time."

Sirius nodded. "Is there anything else that you should have told me by now that springs to mind?"

"Nothing as you say springs to mind but I will review and let you know if there is something else."
Albus said dryly.

Sirius nodded.

"What about the Hallows?" asked Albus, motioning at his wand. "Or was that merely an example to prove your point?"

"I wish they were just an example but no," Sirius said, rubbing his hand over his chin. He sighed. "Remus and I are almost convinced that the Hallows are the power that the prophecy speaks about – mostly because when we did Harry's blessing to transfer the blood protection from the Evans' line to the Black, the spirit of Morgana Le Fay turned up and said something about Harry mastering Death."

Albus's eyebrows were so far up his forehead that Sirius wondered if they were going to crawl into his hairline. "The spirit of Morgana Le Fay appeared?"

"Bertie declared the whole thing a magical need-to-know event under the authority of the DOM. Everybody present took a vow not to speak of it." Sirius explained. "Obviously Bertie didn't make me take a vow and I think in the interests of knowledge sharing you should be aware."

"Astonishing." Albus said.

"It was. Anyway, Morgana's words didn't mean anything to us at the time but later when Harry, Remus and I talked about it, in retrospect her words seemed meaningful. To my mind, she pointed to the Hallows as the defining factor which would prevent Harry's death." Sirius gestured across the desk at the wand. "However, Remus and I believe we need to track the original source material that my Grandfather discovered down and see exactly how all three Hallows are meant to work in concert before Harry takes ownership of all three."

Albus nodded. "A sensible approach." His lips twisted. "I will review my own research. It has been some years but I may be able to find something."

Sirius smoothed down the front of his robes. "That would be helpful." He stood up. "I should get home."

"For what it is worth, Sirius, I am sorry." Albus said contritely.

"I think you owe that apology to Harry." Sirius replied.

Albus's blue eyes dimmed and he gave a brief nod. "The password to the Gryffindor Common Room is moonflower."

Sirius inclined his head in acknowledgement of Albus's guess at where Sirius was headed, and left the Headmaster's office. He immediately made for the tower.

He was almost there when he turned a corner and spotted Snape heading in his direction. He had to restrain his urge to dive into an alcove and pretend he wasn't there. Instead, he steeled himself and carried on walking.

Snape sneered as they drew level. "Black."

"Snape."

It was, Sirius considered amused, an almost civil exchange. He carried on walking.

"If you're looking for Potter, he's in the new middle years Common Room next to the library." Snape
called after him.

Sirius paused, shot a look over his shoulder to find Snape gazing back at him darkly. "Thank you."
He said mildly, and changed direction.

"Black." Snape halted Sirius again.

Snape closed the difference between them. He drew his wand and Sirius immediately released his own into the palm of his hand. Snape arched an eyebrow.

"I merely wish to erect a privacy bubble." Snape said formally.

Sirius gazed at him wondering why but acquiesced, replacing his wand in its holster. "Yes?" He asked as soon as the privacy bubble had formed.

"You are aware that Potter's medical treatment is now common knowledge?" Snape asked brusquely.

"I am." Sirius answered, trying not to feel defensive or that it was his fault for changing the time of Harry's appointment.

"Is he…?" Snape stopped and fidgeted with the buttons on his robes.

He seemed unaccountably nervous in Sirius's opinion.

"The rumour is that the sessions are dealing with the death threats?" Snape began again.

Sirius knew his surprise at the question was written all over his face. "I didn't know you cared, Snape." And he had no intention of talking about Harry's treatment with his former schoolyard nemesis.

Snape blocked his move to turn away. "I may not care for Potter but Lily was my best friend."

Anger erupted in Sirius, surging through him with the force of a tidal wave.

"A best friend whose death warrant you signed when you told Voldemort about the prophecy." Sirius looked at him with disgust as Snape's face drained of all colour. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"Does Potter…"

"No," Sirius said crisply, "he said he didn't want to know who told Voldemort if he still had to interact with the person in question. I wish I hadn't found out because frankly every time I see you, I want to hit you and keep hitting you until you're too bloody to move."

Snape's eyes remained affixed on the floor. "You couldn't possibly hate me more than I hate myself."

"Please save me the false regret. If you had any true remorse you wouldn't have spent the last three years making Harry's life miserable." Sirius shot back, taking a step toward Snape. "He is Lily's son. If you cared at all about her, you would have done everything you could have to make up for the fact that you are the reason why he doesn't know her; why the only memory of her he has is of her dying to save him."

Snape went red then white but he remained silent.

Sirius took a deep breath and reminded himself he couldn't kill Snape. "Now, since my son's medical
treatment is none of your business…”

"I think the death threats have something to do with Bellatrix and the LeStranges." Snape said as Sirius took a step away from him.

Sirius raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

"Your cousin taught me Occlumency and I stayed in the LeStrange mansion for a month." Snape explained. "She placed a notice-me-not on the memories and I discovered it when I felt there was something familiar about the first death threat note. So far my reconstruction has only shown Bartemius Crouch Junior in the mansion but is it possible she or Rodolphus had a lover?"

"Maybe." Sirius grimaced. "I'll look into it." He refused to thank Snape; he'd grovel before Voldemort first.

Snape bowed his head and stepped away, taking down the privacy bubble. He disappeared around a corner in a billow of black robes.

Sirius walked away with alacrity, wanting to get away from Snape and the words they'd exchanged as fast as possible. He paused at the entrance to the Common Room to catch his breath and calm down. He didn't want to alarm Harry.

He spotted him quickly; Harry sat at a large table, flanked by Hermione and Ron with Neville, Hannah and Susan on the other side. The table beside him was filled with Slytherins – Blaise was passing notes back and forth with Neville while Draco and Theo seemed involved in some discussion. A seating arrangement behind Neville was filled with girls of various Houses all trying to bat their eyelids at the boys rather do any work.

Sirius wandered in and pulled up a spare chair to budge in between Harry and Ron. "Well, this is very industrious."

"I know." Ron said sorrowfully, casting a look at Hermione who sniffed and carried on reading.

"Getting your homework out of the way is good practice, Ron, especially now you have Quidditch." Hermione lectured briskly.

"Transfiguration essay." Harry explained in reply to Sirius pulling the parchment closer towards him. "I'm just done. What are you doing here?"

"I was just talking with Professor Dumbledore. Want to walk me out?" asked Sirius brightly.

"Sure."

Ron grabbed hold of Harry's arm. "Hold up. How do we know it's Sirius?" He smiled apologetically at Sirius but didn't relent.

Harry rolled his eyes but explained. "Moody says we should check every time we're asked to go somewhere alone with someone else."

"Constant vigilance!" Sirius echoed cheerfully. "OK, so ask me something only I would know." He trusted that Harry wouldn't ask him to change into his animagus form in front of people who didn't know.

"Where did you say Remus was going next in our last communication?" Harry asked immediately.
"Germany." Sirius replied promptly. They'd had that conversation the night before through the mirrors.

Harry beamed at him and started to gather his stuff. They set off without further ado. Sirius put up a privacy bubble just in case anybody followed them before he started talking.

"So Albus and I talked." Sirius began.

"And?" Harry asked impatiently.

"He says he'll do better." Sirius shrugged and Harry nodded as though it was enough of an answer because maybe it was; Albus had promised to do better once before and he'd failed. He was on his last chance with them.

"He thought I wanted to talk to him about the fallout of your treatment going public." Sirius said, nudging Harry as they got outside and smacked straight into the brisk Scottish wind. "I understand you blamed it on me."

"Worked like a charm." Harry grinned before his face fell. "Apparently it hasn't put the stalkers off that much. Hermione says that my being crazy is attractive?"

Sirius chuckled at Harry's bemused expression. He poked his son. "Wounded birds are to be cooed over. I've had my fair share of that since we came back from the States." Nora Zabini was still intent on making him her next husband.

"Brilliant." Harry muttered despondently. "I guess I should rethink Theo's suggestion."

"What suggestion was that?" asked Sirius.

"He thinks I should pretend date a few of the girls I trust like Hermione and Susan? Maybe Luna and Daphne? If the girls agreed to it, I mean."

Sirius hummed as he considered the idea. "It's not a bad suggestion. I'm not sure it would put the more tenacious of your stalkers off though."

"It could be good practice though, right?" Harry replied. "If I'm pretending to date then I'd have to go on dates so…practice."

"You make it sound like Quidditch." Sirius teased.

Harry grimaced. "Quidditch is a lot easier than girls."

"That's true enough." Sirius slung an arm around him. "I think if the girls know up front and agree then I say go for it. Practice never hurt anyone. But I don't think it'll solve the stalker issue entirely. If they haven't been put off by your apparent craziness, I don't think competition is going to do it."

"I know," said Harry morosely. He gave a deep sigh and pushed his hands into his pockets. "You managed to stop the Prophet from printing anything."

"Well, Brian did." Sirius admitted. "Skeeter still managed to get a few comments into her latest article about the continuing lack of progress on the death threats about what a toll it must take on you so we'll keep an eye on her."

Harry nodded. "There's no news at all about the death threats?"

"No, although…” Sirius made a face. "I encountered Snape in the corridor on my way to find you
and he mentioned something he remembered which might give Amelia another avenue to explore."

"Wow," said Harry, "I'm impressed. You and Snape talked and nobody was hexed."

Sirius laughed. "It was a close-run thing. Your Potions lessons going OK?"

Harry shrugged. "He hasn't taken any points or put us in detention for breathing so…mostly? I preferred Madame Longley and thanks to her I understand why things need to be stirred or crushed or whatever so he hasn't marked me lower than an Acceptable this year." He bit his lip.

Sirius frowned. "But something is up with the lessons?"

"Not Potions so much as Transfiguration, Charms and DADA." Harry confessed with a sigh. "I'm just…the practical stuff is too easy. I mean, with all the practice I did for controlling my power during the Summer, I get whatever exercise is set first go and…" he coloured a little, "I usually help the others and the Professors have started to give me more advanced stuff but…it's awkward?"

And boring for Harry to feel unchallenged, Sirius concluded. "What about the theory side?"

"Some of it's difficult – stuff I haven't covered before but some of it is easier." Harry said. "I know it's early days but I've gotten outstanding on all my essays so far." He looked embarrassed.

"That's wonderful, Harry." Sirius stopped their progress towards the gates. "I'm very proud of you." He pulled Harry in for a quick hug, before he eased back, set his hands on Harry's shoulders and watched amused as Harry rolled his eyes. But he could see how Harry glowed with his praise and it warmed Sirius from the inside out. "Do you want me to speak to Minnie about your classes? Work something out to challenge you more?"

Harry stilled under Sirius's hands as he considered the idea before he shook his head. "Maybe it'll get better? The Professors are giving me other things to do so…not yet?"

"We'll give it a month." Sirius said firmly. "If you're still finding things too easy, we'll talk with Minnie then; agreed?"

The look of relief on Harry's face spoke volumes and Sirius gave him another quick hug.

"Right," Sirius cast his eyes up to the sky and the light drizzle that had started, "you run back to the school. I'll watch from here before I head home."

It was Harry's turn to hug him briefly; hard and tight. Sirius cast an umbrella charm to keep the rain off while he watched Harry run back up the path. It was getting easier to say goodbye to Harry, Sirius realised. There wasn't the gut-wrenching agony of remembered grief and pain anymore, just a quieter ache of missing and wistful longing that he wished he didn't have to say goodbye; a want to be with his son mitigated by the knowledge that Harry's education at Hogwarts was important both for his socialisation and his independence, and Sirius was doing the right thing as a parent letting him go.

It concerned him though that Harry wasn't being challenged educationally anymore. They should have expected it, Sirius considered wryly. After the lessons during the Summer, they should have realised Harry's power increase and his abilities would place him ahead of his peers and the usual fourth year classes.

Still...he'd promised Harry that they'd give it a month to see if it improved and he'd keep his word. Harry wouldn't want special treatment but if it was necessary, it was necessary. He couldn't see Albus having a problem with coming up with an individual learning plan for Harry; the old coot
would probably be delighted.

Sirius sighed as Harry disappeared into the school, safe and sound, and finally headed home.
"You know you don't have to come to the game if you don't want to, Ron and I won't mind, will we?"

Hermione's eyes snapped up from the book she had been reading, oblivious to her porridge which was half-forgotten and dripping from her drooping spoon back into the bowl. She stared at Harry across the table; he was avoiding her gaze by keeping his own fixed to the meagre breakfast he was eating. He never ate much the morning of a Quidditch match and that day saw the opening match of the season between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw despite the wet October weather.

Next to him Ron was staring at his own plate of food with unusual reluctance. He jerked suddenly as though Harry had kicked him under the table and nodded. "Yeah, it's fine." Ron agreed hastily.

"Of course I'm coming to the match." Hermione said briskly. "I wouldn't miss Ron's first game for anything."

Ron paled under his freckles. "Right. My first game." He placed a hand on his stomach. "You know I think there's something wrong with the sausage."

Harry raised his eyes and rolled them expressively as he pushed a glass of pumpkin juice towards Ron. "There's nothing wrong with the sausage."

"You haven't eaten any of it." Ron retorted.

"Neither have you." Harry pointed out.

The sausage sat on Ron's plate as untouched as the bacon, fried potatoes and beans next to it.

"Have some toast, Ron." Hermione said sympathetically. "You need to eat something."

Ron gingerly picked up a slice, slathered it with butter and started nibbling on it.

"I just meant," Harry said, returning to his original topic with Ron sorted, "that as much as we appreciate you watching us, if you'd rather do something else, something you enjoy, that's alright with us."

It was sweet of Harry to offer her the out but Quidditch had always been an important part of their friendship and regardless that she hated the game and watching it, and really she hated watching Harry play the game because it had never yet failed to almost kill him, Hermione wasn't going to stop watching.

"I want to watch you play Quidditch." Hermione said stubbornly. "Both of you." She hastily added on as she belated realised it sounded like she only watched for Harry.

Harry and Ron both smiled at her.

Ron swallowed the last of his toast. "You could read a book though if you wanted while you watched. Right, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "What are you reading anyway?"
"Farringtomen's Theory of Magical Meditation." Hermione said. "Professor McGonagall recommended it. She said it helped her so maybe it would help me." Her animagus training was all held up because Hermione couldn't switch her brain off. Ron was having more success achieving a meditative state than she was although he'd yet failed to find the lucid dreaming that would lead to the revelation of his available forms.

"I wouldn't mind reading it when you're done." Harry said.

Ron sighed. "I swear if you could read a book on a broomstick you would these days."

Harry shrugged although there was a faint hint of red in cheeks that signalled his embarrassment.

"I think it's a good thing." Hermione declared. And she did think it was a good thing despite the fact that Harry was ahead of her academically in some of their subjects and on a par with her in the others except for Potions (and there Hermione suspected it was because Snape just couldn't bring himself to award Harry anything higher than an Exceeds Expectation).

"You would." Ron shot back.

Hermione glared at him before she turned to Harry. "Is Sirius still planning to meet with Professor McGonagall?" She kept her voice low.

Harry nodded jerkily. "He wanted to do it this week but with the whole tournament thing, Professor McGonagall's too busy and she wanted to confer with the other Professors anyway. So, I think they're meeting a week Wednesday?"

"What do you think will happen?" asked Hermione.

"I'm not sure." Harry admitted unhappily pushing back his sleeves. "It's complicated because even though I'm ahead practically, most of the theory stuff is new to me although it kind of makes more sense now. So…” he lifted a shoulder and dropped it, "Sirius thinks they'll give me an independent lesson plan."

"That sucks, mate." Ron commiserated.

"No, that's brilliant." Hermione said, refusing to acknowledge the kernel of jealousy that had lodged in her gut at the idea of having an independent lesson plan. She knew she was smart and she was keeping pace with Harry on the theory side, but she couldn't match Harry's power or his practical prowess anymore.

"I just hope I get to stay in the fourth year classes." Harry said.

Hermione nodded. "I'm surprised Sirius hasn't suggested taking you out of Hogwarts and home-schooling you."

"We talked about it but I don't want to leave you guys so…” Harry admitted with a blush.

Ron slung an arm around his shoulders. "We don't want you to go either. You're our star Seeker."

Hermione and Harry simply looked at him.

Ron caved. "Well, not just because you're our star Seeker."

All three of them laughed.

"Speaking of…” Harry poked Ron. "We should head to the changing rooms and start getting ready
for the match."
"Right." Ron's face lost its colour again. "The match."

"I'll see you out there." Hermione said cheerfully.

"Bring a book!" Harry ordered as he dragged Ron away.

Hermione shook her head, her hair spilling over her shoulders. She pushed it away absently as she turned back to her book.

"Getheringmay's Theory of the Active Mind would be better." Luna slipped into the seat next to Hermione and started helping herself to the remaining platters of breakfast.

Hermione glanced up, shot a look at a third year boy who was looking at Luna with ill-disguised contempt, and turned to her friend. "Why do you say that?"

"Your mind is too busy for the exercises that Farringtomen recommends." Luna said serenely, tucking into an enormous stack of pancakes that she had liberally drizzled in syrup. "You'll go mad thinking of nothing."

"But isn't that the point of meditation?" questioned Hermione. "To get to that point where your mind is clear and still?"

"For normal people," Luna said, twirling her fork at Hermione, "but you're not normal. To make your mind happy it needs to be busy. It's not going to be happy if you make it shut up and that means it won't give you what you want."

Hermione sighed and closed her book. She had a feeling Luna was right. "Are you planning on going to the Quidditch match?"

Luna cocked her head as though listening to something. "No, but you are."

"I am," agreed Hermione morosely because she was a good friend who would go and support her friends even if they said she didn't have to be there.

"Where's Neville?" asked Luna brightly.

"He and Hannah are on a practice breakfast date." Hermione explained with a small grimace.

She had actually been in favour of the idea when Harry had raised it. Theo's original suggestion of fake dating was pragmatic and useful for giving Harry some needed cover especially when the revelation of his sessions with the mind healer increased his attractiveness rather than diminished it. The fact that it would also provide some practice at dating was also a practical advantage that Hermione appreciated. Maybe a part of her had been disappointed that Harry would only want to date her as practice and to avoid his stalkers but Hermione wasn't above taking what she could get; a date with Harry was still a date with Harry.

But unfortunately, Hannah and Susan had been overheard by Ernie and Justin who had talked with Terry and Michael who'd been overheard by Lisa and Padma, and within a day the whole of the fourth year knew about it. A day later the whole school knew about it. Practice dating was suddenly all the rage except with the person who it had originally been intended for: Harry.

And, well, Hermione.
Nobody had asked her to go on a practice date, especially not Harry. She tried hard not to feel discouraged by that. Other girls hadn't been asked out by anyone either; she reminded herself briskly. As far as she knew Morag and Lisa hadn't. And Harry wasn't the only boy who was shying away from the whole thing; Ron had so far ignored all the hints Lavender had dropped in his path (Hermione was waiting for her just to jump him), and Draco had avoided Pansy like she was the carrier of some fatal plague.

"Isn't this the third practice date Neville and Hannah have had?" hummed Luna with an innocent expression that was completely faked.

Hermione smiled. "Fourth, if you include the last Hogsmeade weekend."

Neville and Hannah had gone to browse the shops just the two of them while Susan had ended up tagging along with the original Gryffindor trio to see Sirius at the School House where Dobby had plied them all with cookies and hot chocolate.

"Do you think they'll still call it practicing when they get married?" joked Luna.

Hermione chuckled, her mood lightening. "It's a possibility." And it was a possibility; Neville and Hannah seemed really happy together and their families both approved of the fledgling relationship. She decided to change the subject. "So what are you up to today?"

"Charms essay." Luna said happily, finishing her pancakes. "I'm going to spend the day in the library."

Tactically it was a good move since most of the rest of the school would be at the Quidditch match.

Hermione checked her watch and sighed. "I'll walk with you and pick up that book you recommended. You really think it'll make a difference?"

"I think you'll see what you need to see when you need to see it." Luna said matter-of-factly. "But the book couldn't hurt?"

They chatted all the way to the library. The book turned out to be a hefty volume and Hermione tucked it in her satchel under the watchful eyes of Madame Pince. She said goodbye to Luna and raced to the tower to get her outdoor cloak.

She was surging down the steps of the Gryffindor girls' stairwell when she heard crying in the third year dormitory. She paused, torn between the urge to get to the match and the sense of obligation to check nobody was injured or truly upset. She hovered for a long moment on the landing before she sighed and tapped on the door.

There was no answer but Hermione pushed the door open and peered into the room. It was empty save for Ginny curled up on her bed, crying.

"Ginny!" Hermione hurried over to the younger girl. "Are you OK?"

Ginny hunched away from the touch of Hermione's hand on her shoulder. "I'm fine."

Hermione debated whether to leave the younger girl to it, but Ginny was clearly not fine and Hermione's compassion stirred. She sat down tentatively next to Ginny, ignoring the vibe of 'leave me alone' emanating from Ginny in waves.

"What's happened?" asked Hermione softly.
"You wouldn't understand!" Ginny sobbed, not looking at her.

Hermione resisted the urge to sigh. "I understand you were supposed to be pitch-side as a reserve for the team so I'm assuming something happened to stop that?"

Ginny swiped a hand at her face and nodded.

"What happened?" Hermione pressed with a sinking sensation that whatever it was she wasn't going to like it.

"You're going to yell at me like Angelina did." Ginny said simply, sniffing.

Hermione stayed silent and waited her out.

"It was stupid," Ginny admitted, "I mean, I know it was stupid but Lydia and Jessica wouldn't stop asking and…"

"And?" prompted Hermione impatiently, although truthfully she could see where Ginny's confession was heading.

"I let them into the changing rooms." Ginny blurted out, wiping her hand over her wet cheeks.

"There are separate areas, aren't there?" Hermione asked. "What did they think they were going to see?"

"It works like the stairs here." Ginny explained with a huff. "The boys can't get into the girls' changing rooms but…"

"But the girls can get into the boys." Hermione sighed heavily and pinched the brow of her nose. "You tried to sneak Lydia and Jessica into the boys' changing room."

"We didn't actually see anything." Ginny complained with a sniff. "Fred spotted us and George chased us out." She gave a hitching little sob. "Angelina went ballistic."

Completely understandable, Hermione thought dryly. She would have gone ballistic in Angelina's place.

"She told me that I was banned from playing as reserve today and…and…" Ginny started crying again, "she's going to talk to me later about my place on the team! She's going to drop me! I know she is!"

If Angelina did, Hermione wouldn't blame her; Ginny's lack of regard for Harry's – well, all the boys' privacy was appalling.

"She'll give you a second chance." Hermione said to Ginny confidently. "You made a mistake but as long as you sincerely apologise and don't even think of doing it again, it'll be fine."

At least Hermione thought Angelina would be OK with it although if she had any hint that Ginny's interest in Quidditch was primarily to get closer to Harry she'd probably not give Ginny a second chance. It could be worse, Hermione reminded herself; Ginny hadn't followed Romilda Vane's example and headed to a mind healer to have something in common with Harry (although after the events in the Chamber of Secrets with the basilisk Ginny really did need to see one in everyone's opinion except for Ginny's it seemed), and Ginny was genuinely interested in Quidditch beyond
Harry.

"Harry hates me!" Ginny sobbed.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry doesn't hate you."

"He barely talks to me!" Ginny argued angrily. "He avoids me!"

"You and your friends are basically stalking him everywhere!" Hermione retorted.

Ginny turned over and glared at her. "We do not stalk him!"

"Ginny, you've just tried to get you and your friends into the boys' changing rooms to spy on him!" Hermione pointed out. "You're hardly in a position to argue the matter." She held up a hand. "Do you remember our conversation at the end of the last school year? If you want to be Harry's friend, then you need to start acting like his friend and not some…some obsessed girl who doesn't know he wouldn't appreciate being gawked at in the changing rooms!"

"You don't understand!" Ginny snapped, her eyes flashing stormily at Hermione. "It's alright for you – you share classes with him and you're always with him!"

"That's an exaggeration and…"

"And you're the one he's most likely to ask on a practice date!" Ginny brushed away another set of angry tears. "Or a real date! Everyone says so!"

Hermione's heart started to race at that. What did Ginny mean? Did everyone know Hermione liked Harry? And why was everyone – the mythical everyone – so sure Harry would date her? Did they think he liked her? A flicker of hope sprung up before Hermione could stop it. She ruthlessly suppressed it again.

"Well, if everyone thinks that," Hermione began officiously, "it's only because Harry and I are friends."

Ginny turned away from her again, crossing her arms over her chest, her chin sticking up stubbornly in a manner that reminded Hermione of Ron.

"And I believe I told you that being Harry's friend was the most important thing." Hermione added. "I am his friend!"

"Do you really think that sneaking Lydia and Jessica into the changing rooms to spy on Harry is an act of a friend?" Hermione shot back.

"Lydia and Jessica asked me to help them! What was I supposed to say? They're my friends!"

And that was more evidence that the two girls who'd befriended Ginny hadn't really befriended her at all. Hermione felt for the younger girl.

"No would have been a start." Hermione said sternly. "If that's the kind of things they ask you to do maybe they aren't your friends." She glanced around the empty dorm. "Where are Lydia and Jessica anyway?"

"At the game." Ginny said.

Which just proved the point, Hermione thought.
"I'm going to head there now." Hermione stated firmly. "Would you like to come with me?"

Ginny threw her a disbelieving look before she shuffled off her bed hurriedly and stormed off to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

"I'll take that as a no then." Hermione said to the empty room. She threw on her cloak and made for the pitch.

The stands were already heaving with people, the game already begun when Hermione made her way towards a waving Neville. He made Parvati budge up so Hermione could sit next to him in the seat he had ostensibly saved for her. She waved to Sirius who was seated next to Professor McGonagall in the teacher's section and he waved back at her.

"Where've you been?" asked Neville, blowing on his hands to warm them.

"Ginny." Hermione shook her head. "I'll tell you later. What's the score?"

"Sixty-all." Neville grimaced unhappily waving at the hoops where Ron was placed as Keeper. "Ron's been unable to save any and it's sheer luck that our Chasers are good enough to keep up." He motioned to the other side of the pitch where Harry was helping to distract the Ravenclaw Chasers, dogged by the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang. "We're pretty much hoping Harry gets the Snitch at this point."

Hermione settled into watch as the game progressed. The Gryffindor Chasers were good and maintaining their possession of the Quaffle; Fred and George had fallen back to help guard the hoops; Harry was contributing more than simply searching for the Snitch. The team was working as a team to help Ron's failing nerves, Hermione realised.

"I think if he could save one then he'd have some confidence and be able to save others." Neville murmured.

"He'll save one," Lavender said brightly from beside Parvati, "he's just warming up!"

"I'm sure you're right, Lavender." Hermione agreed because even if Lavender was only saying it because she wanted to date Ron, Hermione was Ron's friend and she was going to join in any effort to show Ron support.

"Cho hasn't left Harry's side." Parvati complained.

"I think they're hoping she'll distract him." Lavender said authoritatively. "It's a tactic the Holyhead Harpies use against male players all the time."

"She is very pretty." Parvati allowed.

Hermione tried to ignore the flare of jealousy. Harry wasn't interested in Cho. He wasn't.

"Cho's going out on a practice date with Cedric Diggory." Neville said.

All three girls turned to stare at him.

"What?" Neville said, flushing bright red. "It's the talk of Hufflepuff!"

Lavender winked at him. "Well, you should know, Neville, the amount of time you spend practicing with the Hufflepuffs these days." Her smile was friendly and teasing rather than bitchy and Neville simply looked chuffed.
Harry flew across the pitch in a sudden move that distracted the Ravenclaws completely and allowed Katie Bell to score another goal. The Gryffindor stand erupted in cheers. Harry stopped just in front of Ron for a moment before he flew off again.

Suddenly, there was a shift as Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Captain, intercepted the Quaffle and flew with intent towards the hoops.

Hermione felt her heart pounding. "Come on, Ron!" She muttered. "Come on! You can do it!"

Roger was lining up, the Ravenclaw Beaters were sending the Bludgers towards the Gryffindor Chasers keeping them at bay and Cho was following Harry…

Roger threw the Quaffle…

Ron moved!

He swept across the hoop and threw out his long arms and…

He saved the Quaffle, punting it down where it was picked up by Angelina who yelled something at him that was lost in the noise as the Gryffindor stand whistled and cheered.

"Weasley is our King!" commented Lee Jordan delightedly.

The chant was taken up and Hermione joined in, so pleased for Ron that her face hurt from smiling.

The game progressed with alacrity after that; Ron saving more than he let through; the Gryffindor Chasers adding to the score bit by bit to keep the lead.

"Oh Merlin!" Neville clutched at Hermione suddenly and pointed.

Harry was diving, racing towards the ground at high speed…Cho on his heels and…

The Snitch was almost on the ground, darting around the blades of grass, before it took off sharply shifting upwards.

"Pull up, pull up, pull up!" Hermione muttered.

Harry changed direction as though he'd heard her but he levelled out and…reached…Cho just behind him…

The Snitch was his!

Harry raised his arm, the Snitch fluttering in his clenched fist, and he flew back to the hoop level where his team-mates flew over to congratulate him.

Hermione hugged Neville before she turned back to the pitch and clapped along with everyone else.

"Brilliant!" Neville said. "Just brilliant!"

The players started to descend and Hermione grabbed Neville as she started to push her way through the mass of the crowd to get out of the stands and to the ground as quickly as possible. By the time, she and Neville had reached the Gryffindor team, Harry was shaking hands with Cho and Ron had been hoisted onto his brothers' shoulders where he was laughing with glee as the rest of Gryffindor surrounded him.

Hermione was pleased when Harry immediately left Cho as soon as he spotted her. She closed the
distance between them and hugged him.

"That was fantastic!" Hermione said, vaguely aware that everyone else seemed to be leaving Harry to her and congratulating Ron instead.

Harry grinned. "You didn't read a book."

"You were watching me?" asked Hermione, loosening her hold on him to look at him properly.

Harry nodded, letting go of her with one hand to adjust his glasses. "Maybe a little."

She smiled at him happily. Maybe everyone was right, Hermione thought hopefully. Maybe Harry liked her; maybe he would ask her on a date. Eventually, if she knew Harry, which she did. But she could be patient.

"The game was too exciting to read a book." Hermione declared belated realising Harry was waiting for her answer.

He smiled again, a little shyly. "You read a book during the World Cup."

Hermione shrugged and slipped her hand into his relieved the crowd was still amazingly leaving them alone. "Well, you weren't playing in the World Cup." She said.

His answering smile was affectionate and bright with a hope that flared to life in Hermione too.

A cough behind them had them both turning.

"Hey! You have one of those hugs for me?" Sirius grinned at him and Harry shot her an apologetic look as he let go and enthusiastically moved into Sirius's waiting arms.

Hermione didn't mind because she still had that burning flame of hope alight in her and for once she didn't ruthlessly suppress it.

o-O-o

28th October 1994

The Parisian café was everything good that Remus remembered about Paris; an outdoor table in view of the Eiffel tower, strong black coffee and wonderfully sweet petit fours. Opposite him, Richard Bones scoffed down another of the miniature pastries and Augusta sighed with contentment as she scooped up another. Remus watched them with amusement before he lifted his face to the weak sunshine and gave thanks that the weather had turned out so nice. It was a warm day for the end of October but he was glad of the lycanthropy for once; his elevated body temperature kept off the worst of the chill whereas his companions were bundled up in muggle tweed coats, thick woolly scarves and leather gloves.

"Paris is more beautiful than I remember it." Augusta said quietly. "Gerald and I came here on our honeymoon, and we'd revisit every year on our anniversary. I haven't been back since he died." She shook her head. "I should bring Neville. Gerald would have loved to have shown him the sights."

"I lived here for a number of years." Remus murmured. He'd felt exiled; unable to find work in England and without anyone to care that he was absent from his homeland. It was nothing, Remus thought guiltily, compared to what Sirius and Harry had had to endure. "It's a beautiful city."

"Now I feel very boring." Richard commented wryly. "We usually holiday in our place in Spain so
we've rarely gone anywhere else."

"It was the fashion when I married to travel through Europe," Augusta commented, picking up her tea and wincing at the taste, "not the Grand Tours that used to be but the premise was similar."

"I rather had no choice in the matter." Remus pointed out gently. "It was travel for work or find a position in the muggle world."

"Well, now I feel less boring." Richard quipped. He grinned. "This is the most exciting thing I've done in years."

"Thank you for letting us come with you, Remus." Augusta added.

Remus didn't think he'd had much choice in the matter. He remembered all too well the Potter Alliance meeting with only the Ancient and Noble Houses where Sirius had spilled the beans on the issue of Harry's affinity with the family magic…

"…and so after discovering my Grandfather's research into it, we think that the origin story he found probably has the best explanation for why Harry can access your family magic; he's the most powerful wizard of his generation." Sirius sat back in his chair at the head of the Black Manor dining table.

The afternoon tea spread was half-diminished, most of the gathered allies tucking in before Sirius had begun to speak.

Remus observed who looked disturbed and who seemed more accepting around the table from his position at Sirius's left-hand side. They'd all had to take an Unbreakable Vow not to speak of anything revealed at the meeting with anyone outside of the meeting before Sirius would let them attend, despite their existing oaths to the House of Potter or not.

Augusta, on Sirius's right, nodded sharply. "Well, I think I can speak for most of us here when I say we can understand your reticence in sharing this before now."

Daniel Greengrass cleared his throat. There was a half-eaten and completely forgotten scone on the plate in front of him. "How powerful is Harry?"

"As powerful as Voldemort." Sirius stated simply.

Some of the allies flinched at the mention of the evil wizard.

"Or Albus, if you would prefer that comparison." Sirius added smoothly.

Daniel leaned forward. "Everybody here knows that Voldemort is around in some form thanks to you, Sirius, and the return of the Potter alliance." He nodded in Augusta's direction, acknowledging her part in constructing the alliance. "We all also know there is a plan that you and the Ministry, the DOM and the DMLE are pursuing to deal with him once and for all, although we don't know the detail of it. Helping you by creating a strong Wizengamot politically is one of the reasons I know I agreed to the alliance."

"Me too." Albert Goldstein added.

Everyone else around the table nodded.

"And," Daniel said, "I think there are many of us who regret that last time we allowed Voldemort to gain the power he did and to have become so complacent in the years since that we accepted his
former cohorts and supporters gaining as much political ground as they did."

"I think these things are partly why we all joined the alliance," Griselda Marchbanks muttered. "We feel we are at least doing something to defeat the bastard now!"

"Importantly," Daniel stressed, his brown eyes gleaming with a surprising amount of passion, "we all feel that this time, no matter that it is Harry's banner we are gathering around, that we are not leaving a child to deal with Voldemort this time."

"What I think Dan is trying to say," Albert interjected dryly, "is that we understand why you haven't said anything about Harry's power before now; why you're keeping it quiet as much as possible. If You-Know-Who's continued existence was publically known and Harry's power was also known, it would be far too easy for everyone to simply turn to your boy as the answer to You-Know-Who."

Sirius nodded gravely, and while Remus couldn't see relief anywhere on Sirius's face he knew his friend well enough to know Sirius felt relief at Albert's admission. "That has been a concern." He sighed. "Frankly, it is still a concern because evidently Harry's affinity with the family magic is gaining notice." He waved at Richard Bones. "Not just from you guys but Benjamin Nott was kind enough to point out why Selwyn and Wilkes had agreed to a détente with the House of Black."

"It's rather hard for it not to gain notice when the totems keep showing up for Wizengamot sessions." Richard said dryly.

"Hear, hear." Griselda said.

"So, Arcturus found this origin story." Tiberius Ogden looked over at Sirius curiously. "He knew about the lad's power?"

"There was an incident ruled by the DOM as need-to-know when Harry was...well, very young, shall we say?" Sirius gestured toward the older man. "Harry managed to call the Black family magic and the Potter family magic. Arcturus and Charlus both witnessed it."

"I forget Harry has Black blood." Daniel commented. "His Grandmother was a Black, wasn't she?"

Sirius nodded.

"One thing I don't understand," Carl Branstone cleared his throat, "why if he is so powerful has the scuttlebutt from Hogwarts been that he's, forgive me for stating it so bluntly, Sirius, but average?"

"Honestly, Carl has a point. We all expected Harry to be powerful," said Julian Sapworthy, "but after the general rumour mill said that he was average academically, I think most of us thought that the incident with Voldemort when he was a baby was some kind of accidental magic rather than real power."

Sirius frowned. "There are a number of reasons but the main one is that after Halloween in 'eighty-one, Albus placed a binding on Harry's power because he was concerned about the nature of Harry's scar, the one he received when Voldemort cast the Killing curse at him." He waved his hand at the collective gasp of horror; placing a binding in such a way was very frowned upon. "Albus had his reasons and he's apologised to Harry."

"You resolved the concern and had the binding removed?" Daniel inquired.

"Yes to both." Sirius agreed. "As most of you already know, Harry and I spent some time at the Valley clinic in the States at the beginning of the Summer..."
"And rather than that time being primarily dealing with your healing as we've assumed, Harry received healing alongside you." Griselda concluded briskly.

"The majority of the time we spent there involved retraining Harry's control of his magic." Sirius conceded.

"What was Albus thinking?" Elphias Doge commented banging his fist on the table. "To restrict the lad's power that way! It's unthinkable!"

"It didn't surprise me." Augusta said tartly. "Albus always thinks he knows best."

"It also explains why my daughter wrote to me that Harry's academic performance has changed." Daniel commented, reaching for his napkin. "His power increase would be part of that, I assume?"

"On the practical side." Sirius agreed.

"And gaining a guardian who cares for him has done the rest." Augusta patted Sirius's arm.

Sirius smiled at her. "He also understands more about his responsibilities and heritage now."

It was a deflection, Remus knew, from the implication that Harry's previous guardians hadn't cared for him. Some of the gathering didn't miss it though; Daniel's eyes sharpened perceptively.

"While I don't wish to come across as suggesting we do let Harry deal with You-Know-Who," Joseph Smith spoke up quietly, "my question is whether we actually believe the origin story that Arcturus uncovered and if so, does Harry have the ability to defeat You-Know-Who using the family magic?"

"Good questions." Albert stated, reaching for his tea.

Remus cleared his throat before Sirius could reply. "Let me take the first question as I've been involved with the research."

Everyone turned to look at him.

"When we realised that Harry had an unusual relationship with his House totems, Bertie, Minerva McGonagall and I all looked into this with Sirius's and Harry's permission." Remus explained. "There are a multitude of origin stories with only two things in common; firstly, that Merlin was involved in some way with the creation of family magic, and secondly, that it was created to defend our world."

"So Arcturus's origin story?" prompted Richard enthusiastically.

"Is one of many and what has become increasingly obvious to the three of us researching is that the truth has long been forgotten." Remus concluded. "However, Arcturus's origin story does explain in a way the others do not why your House totems might have responded to Harry following the oath of alliance that was made. But it's equally likely that the oath itself might have something to do with that."

"Ah." Richard frowned. "I hadn't considered that."

"It's a very good point," Daniel motioned with his teacup, "I felt something tug on my family magic during the first Potter alliance oath-taking but it wasn't until the September session when I took part in the oath that my family magic...shifted."
"Weasley is in an alliance with the House of Potter too, isn't he?" Albert questioned. "If it was just a question of oaths surely his totem should have responded?"

"But he's not in the formal Potter alliance." Joseph pointed out. "Not like us." His hand swept around the table, taking in the gathered representatives of the Ancient and Noble Houses within the alliance.

"You're suggesting that there needs to be an agreement between the original thirty families for the magic to be called by a powerful wizard within the collective?" Richard argued. "Because that's not going to happen."

"Not in any lifetime!" Carl agreed wholeheartedly. "Five of those families are lost now!"

"And the likes of Wenlock will never agree to anything!" pointed out Griselda.

Remus exchanged a bemused look with Sirius as the rest of the table started debating the matter heatedly. Bemusement shifted to amusement when Griselda made her point by whacking the back of Albert's hand with a spoon.

Sirius shifted in his seat and coughed. It was enough to silence everyone immediately.

"Well, I think the debate has probably provided evidence for Remus's initial answer to the first question of whether the origin story is true which to be succinct is 'we don't know.'" Sirius said dryly. There were a few chuckles as everyone conceded the point.

"Has Harry used any of our family magic outside of the Wizengamot sessions, Sirius?" asked Daniel.

"He used the Longbottom magic to save Neville from a curse at the World Cup." Sirius revealed. He held up his hand at the eager faces. "But again; Neville swore his magic was Harry's in his fealty oath. We don't know whether the fact that he called it is related to the origin story or not."

"What does the lad say?" asked Tiberius with characteristic bluntness.

Remus could see from the tension in Sirius's face that he was debating whether to answer honestly or not.

Sirius sighed heavily and reached for his abandoned coffee. "Harry said that when he went to protect Neville using our family magic, the Longbottom bear was just there waiting for him; that he just knew he could call it."

"And what does he say about calling the rest of the magic?" pressed Tiberius.

Sirius shifted in his seat. "He has the sense that he could call it all if the situation was bad enough but it would have to be very, very bad." His lips thinned. "He also thinks that in such a circumstance he would pay for calling it with his own life and magic. He wouldn't survive it."

The revelation sobered the group.

"And that answers the second question." Albert muttered quietly.

"But he could use it to defeat You-Know-Who…" Carl sighed at Sirius's hard look. "I'm sorry, Sirius, I'm not suggesting that we ask that of him."

"Good because that will only be happening over my dead body." Sirius snapped.
"I can’t blame you, Sirius, and well, after that ill-considered remark it’s even more understandable to me why you wanted to keep this quiet.” Griselda said, glaring at Carl herself.

Carl held up his hands. "For the record, I don't believe asking a fourteen year old boy to sacrifice himself is the answer to getting rid of Voldemort. I happen to very much agree with Daniel's comments earlier that our apathy last time was disgraceful and one of the reasons why I joined this alliance was to do my part this time in defeating You-Know-Who."

"For what it's worth, I don't think further research will help in this matter of the family magic.” Tiberius's fist banged sharply on the top of the table, punctuating his point. "I'm inclined to go with the lad's view of what he can and cannot call; the price he feels he would pay for using it.”

Sirius glanced at Remus.

Remus sighed. "Unfortunately we agree with you."

Daniel motioned across the table. "I think we all know there is a lot you can't share with us about the official plan beyond the political side, but I'm assuming other avenues of defeating Voldemort are being pursued?"

"Yes." Sirius confirmed briskly.

"So, we know what's going on with the family magic and know it's probably not the answer." Albert stated clearly. "We're also assured you are working on other measures. Is there anything you need from us beyond political support? Because you know suddenly I don't think I'm doing enough."

"I echo Albert here." Richard said. "Knowing that our families might have been chosen by Merlin to help defend the wizarding world…I'm not sure just sitting back and providing political support is enough anymore."

"Me either." Daniel said with a sigh.

"I'm old," Elphias said bluntly, "but I also feel the same."

A chorus of agreement rang out.

"You know I gave Jeremy hell over the fealty but perhaps we should take an oath ourselves." Carl said.

"I don’t think that's necessary." Sirius held up his hands. "Honestly, while we are honoured by the fealty of your Heirs, we would never have asked for it. So it's great that you feel that way but truly political support is what we most need from you."

"I'm afraid from an age perspective, it's probably all you'll get from me!" Griselda remarked. "I won't last long in a duel these days."

"There's also the question of too many people knowing too much." Sirius sighed. "As much as I hate keeping secrets from allies and friends…"

"There's a necessity or rather a balance to be kept between us knowing too much or too little especially when you have an evil wizard tormenting your son." Daniel finished with a sharp nod. "We understand."

Remus was reminded he’d been present for Travers not being Travers in the courtroom.
Daniel motioned around the table. "Perhaps there's a compromise? You delegate more of the political side to us? Wenlock is building his opposition; we can help there."

"Damn right, we can!" Griselda remarked, her eyes shining with glee.

"And we can help formulate and get the legislation organised." Leonard Abbot said loudly above the clamour of agreement. "You remain the leader and in charge but let the rest of us do the legwork."

"I agree," Augusta said turning to Sirius, "and you should let us help you with research. You don't necessarily need to disclose why you need something researched; we can simply research any given topic without you having to explain it."

"I would be up for that." Richard said.

"Any help you need to protect Harry..." Carl offered. "You only have to ask."

Everyone turned to look at the head of the table.

"What say you, Sirius?" Augusta asked with a smirk. "Will you accept our help?"

Sirius's expression melted into one of confidence complete with a Marauderish smirk (and Remus knew his friend was already plotting how to work all the Ancient and Noble Houses present offering additional and unconditional help to his advantage just as Arcturus had taught him). "How can I possibly say no?"

And so Sirius hadn't said no which was how Remus found himself a month later in Paris with Richard and Augusta tracking down the Lumiere source Ollivander had mentioned in Arcturus's memory. It had worked out though since the rare antiquities dealer Remus had found had insisted on dealing with the Head of a House not with a lowly steward. Unsurprisingly Sirius had no intentions of leaving England with the Tri-Wizard Tournament only a couple of days away. Richard and Augusta had both been told by Remus and Sirius that the Lumiere document they were after had mention of the Deathly Hallows which were being considered as one potential way of defeating Voldemort but nothing about the location of the Hallows.

Remus checked the time. "We should make our way to the Plaza Magique."

Richard sighed but obediently drank down his coffee. Augusta left the remainder of her tea – a sign that she hadn't enjoyed the taste at all.

The entrance to the Plaza wasn't far from the café. A small bar provided a cover in much the same way The Leaky Cauldron did for Diagon Alley. The dealer, Armaund Fevrier, was located just off the Plaza down a cobbled side-street they easily found. His undistinguished door had a simple plaque with his name on it and Remus rang the doorbell.

A busty rotund woman with red cheeks, flyaway blonde hair and a large white apron answered. "Yes?" She asked rudely in French.

"Good afternoon, Madame," Remus answered flawlessly in the same language, "Madame Longbottom and Lord Bones are here to see Monsieur Fevrier as scheduled." He handed her the parchment that Fevrier had sent confirming their appointment.

The housekeeper sniffed. "This way." She showed them to a front parlour but didn't offer them refreshments or to take their coats.

Augusta raised her eyebrows expressively at the lack of manners as she took off her gloves and
unwound her scarf.

"She reminds me of the nanny Amelia pushed into the pond when we were children." Richard confided with a wink.

Remus stifled a laugh.

"What's the betting Monsieur Fevrier will keep us waiting here a while?" asked Richard, shucking off his own coat and placing it on the arm of the chair he had chosen to sit on.

"My mother didn't raise a fool, Richard." Augusta parried, arranging her long skirt as she sat down.

"Mine didn't raise one either." Remus said dryly when Richard turned to him with a grin.

Richard pouted. "You're both no fun!" He motioned at Remus. "You were quite the prankster in your youth; you must have some stories."

Remus grinned back at him and began a tale of how the Marauders had turned the DADA classroom into a tropical jungle during their fourth year. He had segued into a slightly different story of pranking the Professors for the leaving feast in their fifth year by the time Fevrier showed up.

The tall thin man looked as though a stiff breeze would blow him over. His bald head was as chalk white as the rest of his complexion. His hooded black eyes gave little away.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting." Fevrier began as he took Augusta's hand and kissed her knuckles.

"I hope the wait was worth it," Augusta said in flawless French, "I am Madame Longbottom, Regent of the House of Longbottom. This is Lord Bones, Head of the House of Bones." Fevrier shook hands with him. "We are here in Lord Black's stead. You have already corresponded with Remus Lupin, his steward."

"The werewolf, yes," Fevrier dismissed Remus as unimportant without so much a look in his direction.

Augusta bristled and Remus shook his head minutely. There was no point getting upset about it. France might have had better working regulations for werewolves but discrimination was still rife.

"Perhaps we can speak English as Lord Bones does not speak a great deal of French." Augusta said as Fevrier sat in an uncomfortable chair opposite her.

Remus and Richard retook their seats.

"Of course," Fevrier said in heavily accented English, "my apologies, Lord Bones."

"Quite alright." Richard said politely. "Shall we get down to business?"

"You indicated that you had knowledge of the document Lord Black seeks to purchase." Augusta added.

Fevrier smiled superiorly at them, clasping his hands together lightly. "The Lumiere parchment is a rare document. It has been many years since it was last sought."

"Lord Black has an interest in rare things." Augusta said.

Fevrier tilted his head. "Do not think me an idiot, Madame, I am well aware of why Lord Black
would be interested in this parchment." He smiled again. "His ward is the last of the Peverells, non?"

Augusta smiled sharply in return. "Then you need no explanation as to why Lord Black is keen to secure this document for Lord Potter's family vault."

"And perhaps to learn of the secrets of the Hallows, n'est pas?" Fevrier rejoined, not losing his smile in the face of Augusta's lack of reaction.

It was Richard who chuckled wryly. "I'm fairly sure that Sirius knows that learning the secrets of the Hallows is pointless unless he finds out where they are." He grinned at Fevrier. "I don't suppose you have any leads on where the Hallows might be? They are rare antiquities after all."

Fevrier hung onto his smile but only just. "I suspect that Lord Black may know more than you think."

"I'm certain he does," Richard agreed happily, "but why he wants the document isn't pertinent to our discussion; you either have information for us or you don't. If you have it, we'll pay a fair price as already agreed; if you don't, then you have wasted our time and yours."

It was the first time Remus had heard an underlying hint of steel in Richard's voice. Augusta sent Richard a look of approval.

"Very well," Fevrier conceded, "there are three known copies of the Lumiere document. The original resides in the French Ministry of Magic within the archives as it was seized during the Revolution from the King." He gave a small shrug. "It will not be easy to locate given the state of the archives."

"The other copies?" prompted Augusta impatiently.

"The second copy – a duplicate of the first – is held by Lumiere's remaining descendant, Vivien Verte." Fevrier waved a hand in an expressive gesture. "Vivien is part Veela. She lives in a protected enclave in Alsace. She has allowed no-one to see the document in over fifty years."

Protected enclaves meant that a Veela would be required to make contact. Remus struggled to think of a Veela that they knew well enough to entrust with such a task and came up empty.

"The last copy is a translation from the original Latin into Italian and is owned by the Italian wand maker Cavietti. He once tried to sell it to me some years ago but we disagreed on the price." Fevrier's long fingers tapped the arm of his chair.

Richard and Remus exchanged a look.

"Can you provide proof of Cavietti's document?" Richard asked.

Fevrier huffed. "Do any of you speak Italian?"

Remus did but he wasn't about to tell Fevrier that. He shook his head along with Richard and Augusta.

"I have a memory of his showing me the document in Rome when we met last." Fevrier said. "I am uncertain whether it would be useful to show it to you as you do not speak the language."

"Is there a moment where the document is shown?" asked Remus. "Italian is close to Latin; we should be able to make out enough of the written version to make a determination."
For a long moment Fevrier looked as though he was going to ignore the question as Remus had asked it but when Richard stared at the dealer pointedly, Fevrier nodded.

Richard waved his hand. "Bring on the memory then."

"I agree." Augusta concurred.

The dealer regarded them thoughtfully and unfolded himself from the chair. A pensieve was produced in short order and they all entered along with the dealer.

The memory began with Fevrier at the door of Cavietti's shop being greeted by the wand maker himself. Cavietti was a short stout man with black greased back hair and a small handlebar moustache. He wore simple plain robes. As he led Fevrier through the shop, Remus noted it was surprisingly minimalistic with only a small counter, a waiting area and a room where matches between customers and wands were evidently made. The back room was equally tidy; a large workbench took up the centre with cabinets filled with materials covering all the walls. A door to the side led to a storage room which was where Remus assumed Cavietti kept his wands.

The memory showed a framed parchment covered in a cloth lying on the workbench. Cavietti stopped in front of it.

"Here it is." Cavietti said in Italian.

Memory Fevrier nodded. "Let me see it then."

The cloth was removed.

Remus stared at the parchment eagerly. The seal at the bottom looked authentic…

"This is very clever, no?" Fevrier said. "Just enough of the original translated to be believable but not enough to give away the secrets contained within that document. It is said that Albert Lumiere was wise to create this deception to divert attention from his Ancestor's original parchment."

"How much?" Cavietti said.

The memory ended and Remus came back to himself with a start. He kept his expression blank but caught Richard's eye and gave a minute shake of his head.

"I propose that you place me on retainer and allow me to make the initial approach to Cavietti." Fevrier announced. "I am certain I can negotiate a good deal for Lord Black."

Richard smiled. "I'm afraid any kind of retainer agreement will have to be discussed with Lord Black."

"Indeed," Augusta said.

"The fee as agreed." Remus withdrew the bank draft from his pocket.

"Very well." Fevrier said, plucking the envelope from his hands. "I would not wait too long before securing my services."

"We'll take that under advisement." Augusta said dryly.

They were ushered out quickly and spent a moment in front of the house slipping on coats, gloves and scarves.
Augusta sniffed heavily at the rudeness of not being allowed to dress properly for the outdoors before being shown the door. She lead them back to the bar, ordered them all Firewhiskeys and directed them to a booth at the back.

Remus cast the privacy charm before he raised his glass in a silent toast and knocked it back. "Well, that was almost a waste of time."

"Almost?" questioned Augusta, knocking back her own drink, "I would say it was a waste of time."

"No, some of it was useful. He did earn the fee for meeting us." Remus disagreed.

"I'm with Augusta." Richard said, nursing his Firewhiskey. "What was useful?"

"He corroborated the intelligence we had on the original," Remus said, "Bertie tracked the likely location of it down to the French Ministry and has already asked his counterpart if he could see it. He's waiting on the reply."

"Which could take forever." Augusta said.

"Exactly," Remus said, "but that Fevrier confirmed it was with the French Ministry…"

"Confirms that Bertie's tracking is probably on target." Richard said with a smile. "And I assume the other useful information is Vivien Verte?"

"Yes," Remus said, "Minerva suggested a while ago that we track down Lumiere's family; she managed to find a genealogy book that listed Madame Verte as the last living descendant." He sighed. "But we were unable to locate her…"

"Until now." Richard completed.

"I don't suppose either of you know a trustworthy Veela who we could ask to approach her?" Remus asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid I don't know any Veela." Augusta said. "I recall Dorea had a pen pal for a number of years – a Marguerite Limone. I think they were vaguely related through Dorea's mother; cousins several times removed. Minerva may know her better."

"I'll ask her." Remus said.

"What about that whole thing with Cavietti?" Richard asked, curiosity all over his face. "You were quick to say no."

"Fevrier confirmed in his discussion with Cavietti in the memory that the translation is incomplete." Remus said simply.

"You speak Italian." Richard stated with glee.

"Enough." Remus said. "Really once you've learned Latin, stumbling through any of the romantic languages is quite easy."

"For you maybe." Richard laughed.

"So Cavietti's parchment is of no use?" Augusta said with a sharp nod. "I thought so."

"I think it may have been the version that was told to Arcturus." Remus said. "I'll have to look at my memory of seeing the memory; I might be able to translate more of it. Certainly what I did translate in
"my brief glance indicates it could be Arcturus's original source."

"Well, not a waste of time then." Richard said, raising his glass. "What are you going to do with Fevrier?"

"He's a character, isn't he?" Remus murmured. 

"A rude and untrustworthy one." Augusta said sharply. "You're not seriously thinking of doing any further business with him?"

"Putting him on a retainer and letting him get the Cavietti version for us might ensure his continued silence to the likes of Voldemort's supporters over here." Remus said. "Moreover, Sirius will probably want the Cavietti version if only to take it off the market for anyone else."

"Good point." Richard drained his drink. "Shall we head back to the apartment?"

"Sounds like a plan." Remus said. The three of them were staying in the Black apartment near Notre Dame.

They gathered their things as Remus dispelled the privacy bubble.

They'd taken a step away from the booth when Remus caught a sniff of perfume and froze. He turned immediately in the direction of the scent.

Collette Panierre smiled back at him. Her strawberry blonde hair was tied back into a French plait. Her delicate features, liberally sprinkled with freckles bore the faint scars of her lycanthropy. Her blue-green eyes met his with amusement.

"Collette!"

"Bonjour Remus, my friend!" Collette sprang forward and embraced him, kissing both his cheeks with Gallic flair before moving back to regard him properly.

Collette had been the one bright spot in his spying days; if anyone had ever come close to convincing Remus that joining a formal pack had benefits, it was Collette.

Collette had been fifteen when she had been bitten by a werewolf after getting lost in the forest on her way home after dark on the night of a full moon. Her mother had home schooled her, determined that her daughter would have every advantage regardless of her lycanthropy, and the werewolf responsible for the bite had apologised fulsomely and taught Collette everything he knew about coping with the condition, including introducing her to his usual pack. She and Remus had been occasional lovers when they were younger but with the understanding that it was never leading anywhere.

Remus drank in the sight of her.

Augusta coughed delicately.

"Forgive me," Remus said, hastily turning to introduce Collette to Augusta and Richard.

Collette wrapped her arm around Remus's. "You will forgive me if I steal Remus from you for a few hours. We have so much to talk about! My brothers are keen to talk with you again."

And that was enough to start a flurry of nerves within Remus's gut because the only brothers Collette had were part of the pack she ran with.
Richard evidently guessed enough from Remus's sharp look to be concerned. "Remus?"

Remus took a breath. If the pack wanted to talk with him, he should probably at least listen to what they wanted to say. "I'll meet you back at the apartment for dinner."

"If you're sure." Augusta pressed.

Remus nodded.

Augusta shot Collette a hard look. "We will be waiting for him and I expect him to be returned in the same pristine condition as he is now or there will be trouble."

Collette inclined her head. Richard and Augusta said their goodbyes and departed.

Remus felt Collette squeeze his arm.

"You have good friends." Collette said with a sigh. "You always did."

"I hope I can still count you among them." Remus said bluntly.

She smiled and nodded. "You are safe, Remus; I promise."

It was as much reassurance as he was likely to get, he realised. He fell into step beside her as she headed back to the Plaza and an apparition point.

The side-along finished in front of a rustic looking bar on the other side of Paris.

The rundown outside screamed 'locals only' but Remus set aside his unease and followed Collette inside. The dark interior was cosy rather than threatening. One side of the room had a long scarred wooden bar in front of a veritable treasure trove of alcoholic beverages and an old-fashioned coffee machine. Two old wizards, their hands gnarled with age, sat playing dominos with glasses of Firewhiskey in front of them. The other side of the room was filled with small wooden tables whose surfaces looked sticky, old and non-matching chairs piled around them in odd numbers. They were all empty.

Collette grinned at him and pulled him through to the back room. The small space was filled with a card table and more mis-matched chairs. It was already filled with five men and another woman.

Remus identified one of the men immediately. "Tomas!?"

The Bulgarian Auror stood and shook his hand. "Let me introduce you; this is Gregor, my pack Alpha."

The pack Alpha of the Slavic werewolves, Remus determined, shaking hands and trying to appear unaffected as his heart raced.

Gregor took over the introductions as Tomas stepped back. "Giovanni Lippott." He waved at the brown haired man next to him.

Giovanni had been the pack leader of the Italian pack for more years than Remus had been born. Remus was very respectful as he shook hands with him.

"Otto Klein." Gregor continued around the table.

The German werewolf Alpha, Remus noted as the blond Aryan bowed his head in acknowledgement rather than offering his hand.
"And you already know Robert Martin," Gregor waved at the man who had pulled Collette into a hug, "and Sian Kelly."

Robert must have taken over as the leader of the pack in France, Remus mused, taking in the comfortable familiarity of affection between him and Collette. He and Robert hadn't interacted much during Remus's time with the pack but he had a vague recollection of a fair and intelligent wizard who had been a fisherman before he'd been turned.

Sian, all dark hair and flashing blue eyes, smiled at him sharply. She was part of Fenrir's pack – the pack that ostensibly was based in England – but she disliked Fenrir. They'd been friends of a sort when Remus had tentatively started his spying but they had clashed over Remus's refusal to depose Fenrir and take the pack for himself.

"Please take a seat." Gregor said.

Remus sat down and shucked off his coat. He was unnerved, he could admit that to himself. He had effectively been shanghaied into a meeting with the European werewolf leadership. It was the type of meeting that Albus had dreamed of him attending back in the first war and one that Remus had always taken pains to tell him would never happen – Remus just wasn't important enough to attract the attention of the werewolf leaders and, frankly, given his spying, he had thought at the time it was for the better that they disregarded him.

"You will forgive us for the impromptu nature of this meeting but when we received news that you would be in France this day we thought it prudent to act and request your forgiveness at the lack of notice." Gregor explained.

"I admit that I'm intrigued at the intrigue." Remus said politely.

Collette grinned at him and slipped out of Robert's hold. "Let me get you all a drink. Hot chocolate for you, Remus?"

"Thank you." Remus said.

They waited until she left before speaking again.

Gregor began. "There are two matters on which we should speak…"

"Three," corrected Sian interrupting.

Gregor bared his teeth at her. "Remember you are present at our indulgence, Sian."

Sian flushed.

"We hear the news that Britain has established a new Committee to look into the affairs of magical races and creatures; to review existing legislation with the intent to overhaul the entire system." Gregor motioned at Remus.

Remus nodded. "It was proposed at the October Wizengamot and passed with a majority."

"Ah, yes. The infamous Potter alliance." Gregor said with a smile.

"Harry's agenda has gained a great deal of support across the political spectrum." Remus defended briskly.

"An agenda wholly supported and promoted by his guardian Lord Black." Otto gestured at Remus.
"Sirius Black has something of a reputation."

Gregor grunted. "There are those of us who remember him from his time as a Hit Wizard. He was ruthless."

"We were at war." Remus said simply.

"The political landscape in Britain has changed with a speed that has surprised those of us on the Continent." Otto commented. "Possibly because your Mister Crouch has been distracted with other matters. Perhaps because we were not expecting…” he made a frantic gesture at Robert as he struggled for words.

Robert opened his mouth but someone else spoke first.

"Nobody was expecting Sirius to tear down the British wizarding world and remake it for the Boy Who Lived." Sian said brusquely.

Remus couldn't prevent the smirk that emerged at that. Sian and Sirius had met only once but the meeting had been fraught since Sirius had always been overprotective about Remus and Sian had been annoyed that Remus had good friends outside of the pack.

"You really should have done." Remus said to her. "Nothing is more important to Sirius than Harry."

"How far is he going to go?" asked Sian impatiently.

"In other words," Giovanni slipped in smoothly, "what is the agenda where werewolves are concerned?"

"Equality and help." Remus answered promptly. "Harry believes that werewolves are primarily wizards and witches who shouldn't lose their rights just because they've been infected with lycanthropy."

Sian growled. "So you have already set him against the packs?"

And this was always what Sian and he had disagreed on fundamentally.

"Sian, you believe we are werewolves first," Remus stated calmly, "that being bitten, whether out of choice as you were bitten, or by accident as Collette was, or in a purposeful act of violence as I was bitten, makes us something other than human, something supernatural and special. You believe that we should all embrace the wolf and the pack; that they provide us with a society and belonging that we won't find anywhere else." He paused. "I can appreciate why you and everyone within the packs feels that way, why the packs evolved in the first place. The prejudice against us is harsh even in countries like Bulgaria where the laws are certainly fairer on paper than many other countries."

"But?" prompted Giovanni with interest.

"But," Remus replied, "excepting the true shifter communities in Africa and the Americas, werewolves are made not born. We all start out as human. Some of us want to remain human; have the same opportunities as other wizards and witches; have the same lives as much as we can as those we had before we were bitten." He shrugged. "The only way for that to happen is if the prejudice within our society is tackled and one day eradicated. Harry wants that." He had to work to keep the tears out of his eyes and the emotion out of his voice. "Harry wants that for me."

"And what does he think of the packs?" Gregor asked, shooting Sian a look that told her to remain quiet.
"He knows they exist and we've talked how most of them provide werewolves with a community and support system." Remus explained. "We've also talked about why some of the packs sided with Voldemort in the last war and why most stayed neutral." He rubbed his chin. "If Harry has any view, it's that so long as nobody sides with Voldemort in the way Fenrir did in the past, he's fine with the packs."

"And your Lord Black?" Otto pressed. "Will he be fine with us on that basis also?"

"Yes." Remus said with conviction. "As long as you don't intend to hurt Harry in any way, Sirius is a live and let live kind of guy. If you intend to set yourself against Harry in any way," he shot Sian a look, "then Sirius will tear down the entire world to eliminate you and every single member of your pack." He paused for a beat. "And I would be right beside him."

Gregor laughed delighted apparently with the bluntness. "And this...this is why we wished to speak with you."

The moment was broken by Collette arriving back with the drinks. Espresso coffee for Otto, Giovanni and Robert, a bottled beer for Sian, a glass with clear liquid that Remus decided was probably vodka for Gregor and hot chocolate for himself.

Sian huffed out an exasperated breath as she gestured with her beer at him. "Sirius hated the packs."

"Sirius hated my spying on the packs and putting myself at risk." Remus corrected. "He also hated that some werewolves did side with Voldemort and went around terrorising people."

"You could have stopped that if you'd challenged Fenrir for the pack." Sian declared.

"We are not getting into that argument again." Remus said firmly. "I am not an Alpha."

The others around the table exchanged amused looks.

"My dear Remus," Gregor said with laughter colouring his words, "you would not be sat at this table if you were not an Alpha."

"Oh." Remus had no idea what to say to that.

"Tomas informed me that you do not think as a wolf," Gregor continued, "and thus you do not see that you are the most powerful wolf in your country. You occupy a place of authority within society; you can influence those who are reshaping the laws and public opinion. Within the pack you have created for yourself, you are the only true wolf and therefore the Alpha."

"If you declared your pack open to others, others would flock to join you." Otto picked up where Gregor stopped. "This actually is the second thing we wish to speak to you about."

Remus felt breathless and wondered if it was shock or panic. He took a long sip of comforting hot chocolate.

"And the third reason is the reason why Sian is here; because the majority of Fenrir's pack no longer wishes to follow him." Robert said.

Sian glared at him but nodded as she turned to Remus. "Fenrir has gone back to his Master like a dog with a wagging tail."

Remus stiffened. "He's rejoined Voldemort?"
"Over a month ago." Sian waved her bottle at him. "We didn't know at first; he just disappeared for days without word of where he had gone or what he was doing. Then he came back and broke the news last week at a pack meeting, before disappearing again."

"Damn it." Remus swore furiously. Voldemort was gathering quite the inner circle; the missing Travers, the unknown Polyjuice guy who everyone agreed must have had some connection to the LeStranges, Peter, and now Fenrir. And they all posed a threat to Harry. He was going to kill Fenrir himself, Remus decided; he wouldn't let a rabid animal like Fenrir harm Harry.

"You know, Remus, that the majority of us didn't take part last time." Sian said urgently. "Fenrir was our Alpha but only those who were stupid followed him into the raids. Most of them are dead now or have gained some maturity to realise that Fenrir's leadership made things worse for us not better." She sat back, an air of defeat on her face. "We all recognise that this time we won't survive it if he embroils us in a war, either because he himself will beat us into submission or because Sirius will come after us." She looked up at him, blue eyes hard with determination. "Which is why we need a new leader."

It was a variation of the same argument they'd had in the last war. But with the acknowledgement that apparently he held some kind of Alpha status, Remus felt his wolf’s sense of responsibility surge.

He took another sip of chocolate to steady himself. "Why don't we tackle this in order?" He waved around the table at Gregor and the other leaders. "I assume your packs wish to negotiate some kind of neutrality between them and Sirius?"

"We wish to negotiate some kind of neutrality between us and you as the Alpha of your pack." Gregor corrected gently.

Remus harrumphed. "Fine, then. You all stay away from Voldemort, keep your packs neutral and do not help him in any way. My pack won't come after you and yours."

"Excellent!" Giovanni declared as Otto and Robert beamed.

Gregor saluted Remus with his glass and knocked back the spirit.

"And what about us?" Sian snarled.

"I will…discuss with Sirius and Harry opening up our pack to give sanctuary to other werewolves." Remus said.

"You don't need to discuss it!" Sian argued. "You are the Alpha!"

"And I will do nothing to hurt my pack!" snapped Remus right back at her. "We need to consider the politics and how we can offer sanctuary without looking like we're creating a werewolf army to threaten those that oppose us into doing what we want! I won't have Sirius or Harry put in that position!"

"Sian, if you accept he is Alpha then you accept his position on this." Robert said calmly.

Sian grimaced but she subsided.

Robert gestured at Remus. "The Potters own a chateau in the South of France? Why not offer a werewolf sanctuary there for any in England who wish to seek your protection? I will agree to your pack occupying my territory on those terms under the neutrality."

"There are two farms in the Balkans I believe – one that Black owns and another Potter has?"
Gregor noted. "I will also concede to your pack occupying those places within my territory."

Otto and Giovanni added their agreement.

Remus sighed and massaged his temple. "Thank you. I will speak with Sirius and Harry to see which of the properties we will use and send you word."

"You do realise that if you should offer sanctuary to his pack, Fenrir will take it as a challenge regardless of whether you wish to challenge him for the leadership directly." Otto said.

"Since Fenrir has rejoined Voldemort, it's safe to say he'll be dead sooner or later." Remus responded without thinking, his mind too caught up in the list of political difficulties and complications of the sanctuaries to consider what he had just revealed.

Sian bristled again. "So you'll kill him for the boy but not for your pack!"

Remus's temper ignited. "The thing that you have never understood, Sian, is that Fenrir's pack, your pack, is not mine!" He held up his hand sharply when she would have argued back. "NO! Enough of you berating me! I was five years old when Fenrir bit me! Five! My pack was always my mother who comforted me; my father who stood by me; and my friends! My friends who did everything they could to help me every full moon and accepted me without question! It was Sirius who tended my wounds for years, Sian, not you! It was James who made me an honorary uncle to his son, and Lily who placed Harry into my arms without hesitation and called him my cub! They are pack!"

He snarled, anger coating every word.

"You are not pack! You, who were stupid enough to ask to be bitten at eighteen because you fell in love with the idea of being a werewolf as though we're cuddly pets and not dangerous creatures! You who realised your folly and expected me to fix it! If you dislike Fenrir as a leader, you could challenge him if you have the courage you seem to have always found lacking in me." He stabbed a finger in her direction. "Know this: I will kill for my pack and I will kill any who dares to harm my cub but you are not pack! You want sanctuary with me and mine; fine, but you'll keep your opinions about my actions and my pack to yourself. Understood?"

Sian bowed her head in submission and scurried from the room.

Collette sent Remus a chiding look and went after her.

There was a twinge of guilt curdling in Remus's belly but the wolf in his head was satisfied.

"Well," Gregor said dryly, "perhaps now you will believe you are Alpha."

Remus stared at him for a moment before he burst out laughing.

"A round of drinks! We should celebrate!" Gregor said with a grin.

It was another hour before Remus was able to extract himself from the gathering. A somewhat abashed Sian had turned up with Collette midway through. She had joined in the discussion on how they were going to get word into Fenrir's pack of the sanctuary sites (Robert agreed to pass word to Sian) but otherwise remained quiet.

Collette offered to escort him out and Sian followed them as Remus was ushered back through the bar which had filled somewhat in the hours he had been ensconced in the back room.

They hovered outside in the cold, Remus hurriedly pulling on his gloves as Sian and Collette
shivered beside him.

Sian hesitated but hugged him goodbye and he hugged her back, remembering the young girl she had been. "I'm sorry for pushing, Remus. We're just…we're just scared."

Remus tightened his hold for a moment. "I'll send word as soon as I can."

Sian nodded. She moved out of his arms and hurried back into the warmth of the bar.

Collette smiled softly at Remus and took Sian's place, wrapping her arms around him. "Next time you come to Paris, old friend, you will have dinner with Robert and I, and we will talk of nothing but our lives and loves since the last time we met."

"I'd like that." Remus said cautiously. He indicated the bar with a flick of his head in its direction. "You and Robert?"

"Married." Collette confirmed. "Three years. We are happy." She patted his chest as she stepped away. "You should try it, Remus." She tossed her own head back towards the building. "Sian would make a good mate."

"We'd kill each other," Remus joked, "and besides; I'm too busy right now for…"

"For love and romance?" Collette teased. "There is always time for love and romance, Remus."

"That's very French of you, Collette." He waved a hand at her as she laughed. "Maybe when I meet the right girl." He smiled wistfully. "Robert is a lucky man."

Collette's smile widened. "I make sure to remind him every day."

He laughed at that and pushed her gently toward the bar. She disappeared inside with a final wave.

Remus shook his head and apparated to the Plaza, hurrying toward his hotel as soon as he got his bearings. His mirror call with Sirius was going to take a while; they had a lot to discuss.
29th October 1994

It was freezing. But then the end of October in Scotland was typically cold, wet and dreary, and just because that Saturday heralded the arrival of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students for the imminent Tri-Wizard Tournament, it didn't mean the weather was going to accommodate them with a sunny warm day.

Harry pulled his outdoor cloak tighter around him. He noted he wasn't the only one huddling into his outerwear as he looked around the gathered Hogwarts students. The notice at dinner the night before that they had to welcome the visiting schools hadn't met with any kind of school spirit from anyone, even the Professors had looked less than chuffed at the thought of spending their Saturday afternoon on the lawn in front of the Black Lake. At least the schools were coming in daylight though, Harry mused, if it could be called daylight; he squinted up at the grey overcast sky.

"Do we really have to be out here?" moaned Ron beside him.

"Oh, for…" Hermione tapped them both with her wand as she muttered the spell and instantly Harry felt warmer.

She grinned at him. Her brown eyes sparkled and Harry found himself smiling back at her.

"Thanks." He said, nudging her.

Hermione nudged him back. "You're welcome."

Harry tore his eyes away from her with difficulty but determination. He was almost certain that Hermione liked him. There had been the hug after the Quidditch match; a lot more touching in the last week since the match. She smiled at him a lot. It all agreed with the signs of attraction that had been mentioned by his Dad in the memory of The Talk.

He had concluded somewhere around the time that practice dating suddenly became The Thing To Do for the rest of Hogwarts that he really liked Hermione. He liked her smile; her eyes. He liked holding hands with her. He liked being well read enough in their subjects so that he could debate with her and see her come alive with animation; hands flying in descriptive ways as she made her point. He wondered at odd times what it would be like to kiss her. He felt the blush rise on his cheeks as he thought about that again. He had also decided that he liked Hermione too much to ask her on a practice date; he wanted a real date.

There were only two things stopping him from asking her; the Tri-Wizard Tournament and Ron.

Harry glanced over at his redheaded friend. Ron's jealousy about Neville joining their group had abated since the start of school. Some of it was that Harry and Ron got to spend time together alone during Quidditch practice, and it was clearly 'best mate' alone time that Ron valued. Some of it was that Blaise and Neville had developed a friendship that meant Neville paired himself with the Slytherin more often than not in class. And finally, Neville had dived into practice dating with full enthusiasm, spending a lot of time with Hannah (and Harry cast a quick look toward where Neville stood chatting away to her). It all meant Ron couldn't exactly complain that Neville was bogarting Harry or trying to steal him away. Ron had also warmed up to the idea of being friendlier to Neville and had even attempted to inveigle Neville into chess matches, which were very amusing to watch because Neville turned out to be much better at chess than Harry.
What concerned Harry was whether Ron would be OK with Harry dating Hermione. He didn't think Ron liked Hermione that way or thought of her as a potential girlfriend, but he wanted to check his assumption with Ron personally, along with getting Ron's permission to change the dynamic of the friendship the trio shared, because if Harry and Hermione dated, it would change things, Harry wasn't naïve to that. Not that either Harry or Hermione would drop Ron but they would naturally spend more time together without Ron – or at least Harry thought they would when he let himself dream what it would be like. Really, Harry had been hoping that Ron would have asked Lavender on a date (because it was so obvious that she was interested that even Harry had figured it out) and provided Harry with room to date himself.

There was also the added issue that if things didn't work out…he didn't want to think that way but he knew it was something he and Hermione should talk about. Maybe, Harry mused, they could make some kind of promise that they would stay friends. He probably from a protocol perspective should talk to Sirius and confirm that the Head of the House of Black was alright with his Heir courting a daughter of the House – and that just made his head hurt. And made him a little nauseous. But Sirius would be fine, Harry thought candidly; in fact, he'd probably be delighted at Harry's choice.

He'd have all the planned discussions after the tournament opening and the selection of the Champions, Harry determined, his mind drifting to the uppermost reason why he hadn't asked Hermione on a date. If he was placed into the tournament somehow…he'd be in danger and he didn't want to put Hermione in the position of being with someone who was in danger any more than he already was.

He just hoped the security measures were going to be enough. He glanced over at the Professors where a disgruntled Moody was glaring at Bartemius Crouch Senior.

"What's up?" Ron asked, following his gaze.

"Just thinking about the security for the tournament." Harry murmured.

Ron's eyes widened briefly before he nodded in understanding. "Moody doesn't look happy."

"Sirius said Crouch insisted that he do the identity checks for the incoming students and Professors." Harry explained, rubbing his gloved hands together for extra warmth. "Because of diplomatic regulations, the checks are only to be performed once and after that can't be repeated."

"I can't see Professor Moody being happy with that." Hermione commented.

"According to Sirius he blew his top." Harry shook his head. "I don't trust Crouch. I wish he was still at home with the flu."

"Percy'll be pleased he's back." Ron snorted. "Pompous arse!"

"Ron!" remonstrated Hermione.

"What?" Ron argued. "You can't deny Percy is a pompous arse and he's only gotten worse since he became Chief Suck-up to Crouch. You read his last letter to me instructing me on proper etiquette because I was friends with a Lord! Like Harry's ever going to insist I bow to him every day."

"I don't know, Ron," teased Harry, "it is quite tempting."

"Oy!" Ron poked him.

Hermione chided them both for their antics, but sighed and nodded. "Honestly, I don't know how Penny puts up with him."
"Oh, look!"

The cry came from the press corp which was situated on the far side of the grass. Harry believed they were probably the second reason why Moody was unhappy. He strained to see what it was that had got them excited and saw something in the sky.

"It's a gigantic bird!" screamed one girl in the front.

"It's a dragon!" yelled another.

"No," Hermione whispered in Harry's ear, "it's Superman!"

Harry laughed and didn't protest as she tucked her arm around his. He smiled at her instead.

Eventually, the flying object got close enough that they could see it was an enormous blue and gold carriage being pulled by a dozen giant horses with wings.

"Oh aren't they beautiful!" simpered Lavender on the other side of Ron.

"Big." Ron declared.

"They look bigger than the elephants I've seen!" Hermione added.

Something that was verified a moment later as the horses and carriage landed with a thump. A boy jumped out of the carriage and arranged a set of gold steps. As soon as they were in place, a woman, almost as large as one of the horses emerged. She was large, olive in complexion, with dark hair tied back. She reminded Harry of the pictures of traditional Italian women he'd seen somewhere – only much, much, much bigger; almost Hagrid-sized, he realised.

Dumbledore immediately moved forward to greet her. "Madame Maxime!"

"Dumblydoor!" Madame Maxime extended her hand and Dumbledore kissed it.

Their conversational tone lowered and Harry struggled to make out the words through the noise of the wind and the distance. He thought they were talking about the horses but since he'd also thought he'd overheard the word whiskey maybe he was wrong. He focused instead on the gathering students pouring out of the carriage.

"Oh wow!"

A murmur went through the Hogwarts students as they assessed the new arrivals.

"What?" asked Harry irritated.

"Veela!" Ron elbowed him. "Veela, Harry!"

Harry sighed and pushed his glasses back on his nose. All he could make out was a mass of blonde hair.

"Great," Lavender said bitchily, "like we need their sort here."

"Why don't we wait till we get to know them before we pass judgement?" said Harry crossly.

"And it's only a couple by the looks of it." Hermione said.

Across the lawn, Madame Maxine had been introduced to Natalie Warren, the Head Girl, and she
was escorting them toward the castle with Crouch, who was presumably going to do the identity checks. Some of the boys' gazes remained fixed on the Beauxbatons group until it disappeared from view.

"Do you think Durmstrang are coming the same way?" asked Ron, stamping his feet and clapping his hands.

Hermione redid the warming charm. "I doubt it."

As though the universe had heard her, a cry went up from the press corp again and someone pointed at the lake.

A mast slowly rose from the silvery water and before long an old-fashioned wooden ship emerged that reminded Harry of the pictures he'd seen in pirate books he'd read in primary school. All it needed was the skull and crossbones, he mused.

The Durmstrang Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff, clattered down a plank that acted as a gangway. He was tall and thin like Dumbledore but with sleek silver hair and a matching goatee beard. He greeted Dumbledore with a jovial bonhomie that seemed entirely false to Harry.

In short order the Durmstrang students were handed off to Robert Ogden who led them back towards the castle.

Ron suddenly clutched at Harry's arm. "Look! It's Krum!"

Harry gently extracted his arm and mused there would be bruises. "I didn't realise he was still at school."

"Krum!" Ron said again.

"He's just a Quidditch player, Ron!" Hermione said exasperated.

"Just a…" Ron spluttered.

"Can we go inside?" begged Harry, already moving back towards the school. "It's freezing out here."

They fell into the flow of the other students. Harry tuned out of the argument between Ron and Hermione over the brilliance of Krum and whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that he was at Hogwarts. Harry's thoughts were more occupied with Karkaroff. Sirius had warned him that the man was an ex-Death Eater; one who had turned on his fellow Death Eaters in exchange for a minimal sentence.

After they'd stowed outerwear back in the tower, it was time for dinner. They made their way to the Great Hall bubbling over with curiosity about the likely decorations and the visitors.

Harry ignored the bright banners and shining Hall, leaving others to 'ooh' and 'aah' over them. He sat down and reached for the napkin in front of him. He gave Hermione a pleased smile when she slipped into the seat next to him. Ron sat on his other side; Neville took the seat across from him, flanked by Dean and Seamus.

"Nice of you to return to Gryffindor." Dean teased Neville lightly.

"Hufflepuff must be thinking about making you an honorary member." Seamus joked.
Neville simply smiled. "It's a shame we can't eat at any of the tables."

"You can except for feasts like this one." Hermione said.

Everyone looked at her.

"What?" She demanded, tossing her hair back. "It's in Hogwarts: A History!" She gestured at them. "Haven't you noticed Luna eats with us regularly now and she's a Ravenclaw?"

Harry had a suspicion it was probably Luna who had informed Hermione of the rule or lack thereof.

"Well, good to know." Neville said diplomatcially. "Maybe I'll join Hannah at breakfast tomorrow."

"Breakfast, huh?" Dean winked at him.

"Oh grow up!" Neville said laughing. "It's not like that."

"Yet!" declared Seamus.

"Ignore them, Neville," Hermione said firmly, "they're just jealous."

"Yeah, she's right, mate." Dean admitted. "I still can't get Hestia Wainwright to go out with me even on a practice date."

"She's in sixth year." Hermione said with a frown.

"And therein lies the problem." Seamus laughed.

Ron nudged Harry. "Heads up! Snakes are approaching."

Harry looked up and found Blaise, Theo and Draco who had just entered the Great Hall, all heading to the Gryffindor table, Crabbe and Goyle scurrying away to the Slytherin table without them.

"Wonderful." He muttered under his breath. "What now?" He shifted so his body was turned away from the table so he could face them.

Draco stopped just in front of him. "Cousin."

Harry's eyes narrowed at the familial term. "Cousin."

"May I, Nott and Zabini request an audience tonight after dinner?" Draco asked formally.

"About?" asked Harry bluntly, aware they were drawing attention.

Draco smiled sharply. "I don't think you want us to raise the matter in quite such a public forum."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione, Neville and Ron, you're all free tonight, right?"

"Yes!" They chorused.

"You don't need to bring them along!" Draco protested.

"Like we'd let him go alone!" retorted Ron, huffily.

"He's right," Neville said, gesturing with his napkin at Draco, "you know he's right, Harry knows it too which is why he asked."
"Fine, but not Granger!" Draco said.

"Why can't I come along?" Hermione asked tartly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Yes, why can't she come along?"

"It's…" Draco struggled to find an acceptable reason and darted a look for help at Theo.

"It's a sensitive subject for Draco." Theo inserted.

"It is not!" Draco protested, glaring at Theo.

Theo stared at him.

Draco grimaced and turned back to Harry. "Can we just go with I would prefer to discuss it without a female audience and leave it at that?"

Hermione crossed her arms. "You're banning me because I'm a girl?" There was a dangerous quality to her tone that Harry knew well.

Ron apparently heard it too because he jumped in. "We need someone sensible left behind anyway to raise the alarm if we don't return."

"And that can't be you because…" Hermione pressed with a stubborn tilt to her chin.

"I'm not sensible." Ron said.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue and closed it again. Her eyes skated to Neville.

"Don't look at me!" Neville said cheerfully. "I swore fealty to Harry."

Hermione huffed out an exasperated breath.

"We'll meet by the library after dinner then?" Theo said, sliding Hermione an apprehensive look.

Harry nodded. He was about to turn back to his original position when the Durmstrang students arrived, streaming through the door and heading for the Slytherin table. Viktor immediately changed direction as he caught sight of Harry, causing many of us fellow students to come to a sudden halt in confusion.

"Lord Potter!" Viktor smiled at him. "It is good to see you."

Harry stood up and shook the outstretched hand as the Gryffindors around him scrambled out of their seats too. "Mister Krum."

"Viktor, please." Viktor said.

"Call me Harry then." Harry gestured around him. "You remember my family and associates? Hermione…"

Viktor kissed the back of her hand and Hermione gave him a measured nod in response. Draco glared at Harry behind Viktor's back and Harry remembered with a wince that protocol wise Draco should have been first.

"Draco, my cousin." Harry said. "My godbrother Neville, best friend…"
"Ronald Weasley." Viktor smiled. "I remember. Have you joined Quidditch team now?"

Ron's grin was almost as wide as the Hall. "Yes, I play Keeper now."

"You remember Theo and Blaise from before," Harry continued a little desperately as he took in how much attention they were gaining, "and these are my other friends, Dean and Seamus."

Viktor gestured at the one student that had followed him over. "May I introduce my cousin, Erik Juggen."

There was another round of handshakes and Harry tried not to squirm as Erik stared at his forehead, trying to see the scar.

"I hope we can further our friendship while I am here at Hogwarts." Viktor said.

"I would like that." Harry replied. "We have a training session tomorrow at eleven if you'd liked to join us on the Quidditch pitch?"

"Excellent." Viktor said. "I look…"

"Viktor," Karkaroff appeared behind his celebrity pupil and shot Harry a coolly displeased look, "do you wish to sit here with…Lord Potter. I'm sure it could be…"

"I will be fine with the others at the Slytherin table as has already been arranged." Viktor said testily.

"Draco will be happy to host you there. He, Theo and Blaise are all in Slytherin." Harry offered.

Draco beamed at him happily as Ron's smiled dimmed. "I would be delighted."

Viktor nodded. "My thanks, Lord Potter. It is good to know that I can be with friends." He gave a short bow and allowed Draco to lead him and Eric away, Theo and Blaise going with him. Karkaroff sent Harry another cool glare and walked away.

Harry slid back into his seat and the rest of the Gryffindors retook theirs. Ron immediately began a spirited conversation with Seamus and Dean about meeting Viktor at the World Cup. Harry focused on his meal, trying to ignore the stares from the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students as they realised who he was. Hermione coaxed him into a discussion about runes eventually and with her distracting him he managed to eat something.

Dumbledore stood up at the end of the meal as the desserts disappeared from the tables. "Thank you all. Firstly, a warm welcome to our visitors! We hope you have a marvellous time here at Hogwarts. Please do take advantage of the Inter-School Common Room available near the library. Part of what we hope to accomplish is to build lasting ties and friendships among us all!" He smiled at them. "Now, onto the matter of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Tomorrow, after being displayed in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic, the artefact that will be used to select the Champions, the Goblet of Fire, will be brought to Hogwarts by Mister Crouch, the Head of the Department of International Cooperation."

There was a polite round of applause.

"We will formally open the tournament at that point and request eligible students of age enter their names if they wish to be considered for selection as a Champion. I will reiterate to you all that such an undertaking is a serious matter. The Goblet will enact a formal binding on each Champion which essentially creates a magical contract so please do not enter if you are not certain of your courage and ability to face the three tremendous tasks that will constitute the tournament itself." He smiled
benevolently around the Hall. "And now, I believe we should all enjoy the rest of the evening!"

Harry remained seated until the Beauxbatons and the Durmstrang students had gone. He didn't catch sight of Draco but figured he should show up for the meeting. Hermione walked with them, claiming she wanted to spend time in the Common Room.

She slowed as they neared it and saw the Slytherins already waiting for them. "I don't understand why I can't come along."

"Me either but look at this way," said Harry, "we're even numbered and have you as our secret back-up weapon if it turns out they've got something other than talking planned." He waved a hand. "Well, less with the secret, but you know."

"I know." She gave a long-suffering sigh. "If you're not back in an hour, I will come look for you."

Harry nodded and they took the last steps that drew them level with Draco. Hermione gave a wave and disappeared into the Common Room.

"Finally." Draco complained.

"Where are we doing this?" asked Neville.

"There's an empty classroom up by the DADA room." Blaise suggested.

Ron motioned for him to lead the way.

Five minutes later, Harry sat on the professor's desk at the front of the classroom with Ron and Neville flanking him, the Slytherins sat across from him, perched on the first row of student desks. At Draco's request, Harry erected a privacy bubble.

"So, what is this about?" asked Harry impatiently.

Draco cleared his throat. "Due to current gossip in the school, it's come to our attention that you might be thinking of making a move which will not enhance our political alliances in the House of Black but may instead hamper your ability to extend and grow the alliances which we already have, and possibly prevent us from cultivating new ones."

Harry blinked at his former rival and wondered if that had made sense to anybody. He turned to Neville.

"He thinks you're about to do something that will be politically stupid." Neville translated before he frowned. "I think."

"I told him to use small words since you're all Gryffindors but would he listen?" Blaise winked at them.

Draco pinched the brow of his nose. "Yes, you're about to do something politically stupid."

Harry folded his arms and regarded Draco crossly. "What am I about to do?" If Draco thought he was about to enter himself into the tournament, Harry was happy to set him right.

"You're focusing on an existing relationship which is already deeply loyal and deeply committed to the House of Black while ignoring other tentative and newer…"

"Oh for Merlin's sake!" Theo interrupted Draco sharply to gesture at Harry. "Everybody knows you're about to ask Granger out on a real date."
Ron burst into laughter. "Harry and Hermione? That's funny!"

Harry frowned and turned to glare at Ron, ignoring how Neville had placed his head in his hands and how the Slytherins were looking at Ron with ill-concealed astonishment that Ron had apparently not clued in.

"What?" Ron asked. "They've gone mental if they think you're seriously going to ask Hermione out on a real date. Maybe a practice one, yeah, but a real date?" His expression invited Harry to share the joke and laugh with him. "I mean, it's Hermione."

Harry sighed and fidgeted with the edge of his robe. "I was going to talk to you about it on Tuesday."

Ron's blue eyes went wide.

"It's just..." Harry said hurriedly, wishing that he and Ron were alone and not in front of an audience, "so...OK, I know this might change things between the three of us but...I like her and I think she likes me, genuinely likes me, and...and they're right; I want to ask her out on a date."

"Hermione?" Ron said. "Our Hermione?"

"Yeah, Ron," Harry said a little tersely, "our Hermione."

"But why?" asked Ron, plaintively. "I mean, there are literally thousands of girls out there! Why her?"

"I like Hermione!" Harry retorted. "She's smart and funny and pretty. Why wouldn't I want to go out with her?"

"But..." Ron made a flapping motion with both hands towards the outside of the room, "thousands of girls?!"

Harry felt his heart sink. "Do you...I thought...I didn't think you liked her that way but if..."

"I don't!" Ron immediately declared, shaking his head furiously.

"But then..." began Harry confused.

"This is excruciating!" Draco exclaimed.

"Oy!" Ron said, scowling at the Slytherin.

Theo shook his head. "No, Malfoy's right; excruciating!" He pointed at Harry. "Look, Potter – Harry, Weasley doesn't like Granger that way because he hasn't yet noticed she's a girl."

"Oy!" said Ron again before he froze and turned to Harry with a sheepish expression. "Well, actually that's kind of true which is why I don't get why you do, I guess. I mean, she's Hermione!"

He poked Harry's arm. "She nags us about homework and complains when we don't study enough and makes sure we eat right and complains about slavery and...and...Hermione things!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's also brilliant, Ron!"

"Yes, as a friend." Ron stated firmly.

"As, you know, a girl!" Harry argued, forgetting momentarily that there were others present. "I don't know why you don't see it! She gives really great hugs and her eyes are really pretty...and she does
this thing when she's debating with wrinkling her nose that's so cute and…”

"Merlin!" Ron interrupted. "You like Hermione!"

"Now he gets it!" Draco threw up his hands.

Ron glowered at him. "Shut it, Malfoy!"

"So, are you OK with me asking her out?" Harry asked nervously. "I mean, you and I would still spend time together and we'd still spend time all of us as friends, it's just…”

"You'd be dating Hermione and she would be dating you." Ron completed, a small frown on his face that Harry knew meant he was unhappy.

"Well, she still has to say yes when I ask her." Harry said, trying not to show how uncertain he was that she was going to say yes.

"Like she's going to say no!" scoffed Draco.

They all looked at him.

"What?" Draco said, flinging his hands out. "It's perfectly obvious to anyone with eyes and a modicum of sense," he threw Ron a sneering look, "that Granger is going to say yes." He made another flappy hand gesture. "Which is why, getting back to the point of this meeting, you shouldn't ask her."

"Huh?" asked Ron, patently as bewildered as Harry felt.

"This isn't going to go well." Neville predicted with a sigh.

"Why shouldn't Harry ask Hermione out if he wants to?" Ron snapped at the blond Slytherin. He turned back to Harry. "You go for it, mate."

"No!" Draco said, standing up. "He can't go for it!" He waved a hand at the door. "Not with Granger anyway."

Harry felt his anger start to stir.

"Just where do you get off telling Harry who he can go for it with?!" Ron retorted furiously, always quicker to anger than Harry.

"I'm a member of the House of Black." Draco said just as snootily as he'd always proclaimed to be a Malfoy."I'm perfectly entitled to raise my concerns with the Heir!"

"But he's the Heir!" declared Ron. "He outranks you!"

Harry glanced at Neville who sent him 'I knew this was going to disintegrate into a Ron and Draco shouting match' look of sympathy. Harry sighed and stood up which immediately brought a halt to the shouting match.

"Right," Harry said irritated, "someone – not you, Malfoy," he stopped Draco with a look, "is going to explain why I shouldn't ask Hermione out."

"Politics." Blaise said succinctly in an altogether too cheerful voice.

"Look," Theo held his hands up in a placating gesture, "you're the Head of your House, the Heir of
another. Hermione is a member of the House of Black. She's completely loyal to you already and is never going to be anything other than an ally for you."

"And this is bad for Harry how?" demanded Ron crossly.

"It takes him off the market." Blaise said bluntly.

"In trying to finesse a closer relationship with some of the other important families, it would be good if Harry was available." Theo expanded. He met Harry's furious gaze. "If you dated a few eligible girls, it would do wonders to help foster goodwill and bring people into your corner. Keeping people thinking you're available is a good way to draw them in."

"Girls want to go out with you, Potter." Draco drawled. "Why is a mystery but it presents an opportunity."

"Which is lost if you take up with Granger." Blaise added. "Everyone will consider you naïve because you've focused on your inner circle and there'll be resentment and hurt feelings among the other girls." He caught Neville's disapproving glare and sighed. "Don't look at me like that. You know I'm right."

Harry cast a questioning glance in Neville's direction.

Neville grimaced and nodded. "They have a point." He shot the Slytherins another disapproving look. "Although how they've made it is not exactly brilliant and hasn't considered everything."

Harry pressed his lips together. "Well?" He asked impatiently, because he knew Neville would be honest with him.

"If you date Hermione, it takes you off the market," Neville explained, "they're right about that."

"Even I get that." Harry muttered. He wasn't quite that dense.

"Right," Neville said hurriedly, "what you're missing is that currently within the many, many admirers you have there are a number of girls who would like to date you because it would benefit them politically; all from prestigious families; all who are in families where an alliance would be useful and advantageous to your Houses, either Black or Potter." His expression turned considering. "I'm guessing that as it's this lot who've raised the issue, probably more advantageous to Black? Probably pureblood and traditional families?"

Theo nodded while Draco made a huffing sound and crossed his arms. Blaise grinned at him.

"A date with you," Neville raised his hand preventing Harry from protesting, "just one date with any of these girls or boys even will make them feel special and their families will rethink their position on you. It'll make you and your agenda more accessible. It gives them hope that if they agree a political alliance that with continued exposure, they'll have the opportunity to influence you. It also does give you and Sirius an angle to get closer to them and influence them; bring others over to us."

Harry's jaw tightened with anger with every word Neville said especially as he could see Theo nodding along in the background. Maybe, in hindsight, Theo had had another motive in suggesting the practice dating thing, he mused.

"If you do go out with Hermione, then some of those families will probably think that you've decided against them already especially as Hermione is a muggleborn. They'll resent you for not providing them with the opportunity to court you and believe you entrenched in your position and therefore determine that you're not worthy of spending the time trying to get you into any kind of alliance with
them.” Neville continued.

Harry slumped back against the desk, took off his glasses and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

"We're not saying you should never date Granger…” Theo offered apologetically.

"Just give us the opportunity to take advantage of your bachelor status first." Draco said almost soothingly.

Harry looked up at that with a frown.

"Bollocks!” Ron declared. "You date who you want, mate."

"Like you're really all that happy if he dates Granger!” Draco returned, annoyance colouring his tone again.

"I am!” Ron protested.

And, OK, Harry knew Ron was lying with that one.

"You so are not!” Draco pointed at him victoriously. "You're going to hate them being lovey-dovey around you! Snogging all the time and making kissy faces!"

Ron flushed and his eyes darted to Harry with a faint air of regret. "It's just…"

"I know, Ron, it would probably be uncomfortable at first," Harry admitted, "but can you honestly see Hermione and me snogging in front of you all the time? We wouldn't; you know that.” He nudged Ron's shoulder. "Besides, who's to say you don't go out with someone yourself?” Like Lavender.

"Well, I guess.” Ron conceded, glared again at Draco.

"So I'm going to go with the notion that you still want to date Granger, Potter.” Blaise commented, idly picking off lint from his robes.

"Yes, I still want to date Gran…Hermione.” Harry retorted. He folded his arms and tried hard to see past the knee-jerk reaction of them simply doing this to annoy him. He could believe that of Draco, maybe of Blaise, but not really of Theo. And Neville had pretty much confirmed that there was a real issue under the posturing.

"OK, so thank you for bringing this to my attention,” Harry said formally and his words caused everyone to shift position, realising that the discussion part of the meeting was definitely over, "and I appreciate your concern. However, I think the Head of the House of Black has already made his position on this quite clear when he declared that we can find our own life partners.” He looked at Draco. "If he wanted us to broker alliance deals in that way, you'd still be arranged with Pansy Parkinson instead of being free to choose who you wish.”

Draco winced.

"Good point.” Blaise declared with a grin, ignoring the sneer Draco cast in his direction.

"An interesting point.” Theo said suddenly, standing and staring at Draco with a renewed spark in his eye.

"Why are you looking at me like that?” Draco demanded.
Neville's face brightened with realisation. "Of course!"

Draco's head snapped to him. "What?"

"We need a single unattached male associated with the House of Black to offer up for potential future alliances," Theo pointed at him, "we have you."

"Me?!" Draco whirled around to glower at Theo.

"You." Theo confirmed.

"I am not being pimped out like some cheap floozy!" Draco snarled.

Harry raised an eyebrow and folded his arms over his chest. "So, it's alright if I'm pimped out but not you?"

"He has a point." Ron said cheerfully.

Draco sent him a disgruntled look.

"Actually, it's a much more believable move to offer up Malfoy." Neville said calmly. "You're a pureblood, traditional, and much closer to their politics. You have the whole 'I know your way is best but I'm subject to primacy' thing to placate them with and yet you can still get them close to Harry and Sirius for potential influencing purposes." He made a circular gesture.

"Nobody is going to believe I'm close enough with Potter with our history for it to be believable." Draco pointed out derisively.

"So, spend an hour every Sunday together discussing House business or debating politics or something that you can both say you were ordered to do to build a closer relationship." Blaise suggested. "Somewhere public but private like the new Common Room."

"You can also always say that a date comes with at least an introduction to Harry." Neville added.

"Your idea may have some merit." Draco allowed and sneaked a look towards Harry.

"If it gets me out of dating a whole bunch of girls who just see me as a meal ticket, I'm all for it." Harry said. Not that he looked forward to the whole spending an hour thing but maybe it would be useful if for no other reason to quiz Draco on how the things Sirius was putting in place were going down with the pureblood families in Slytherin.

"On the plus side," Theo said to Draco, "if you're dating a whole bunch of other girls, Pansy may actually get the message that you're not with her anymore."

"I was never with her to start with." Draco said tersely. He took a moment to think it over, his jaw working as he reviewed the idea. "You'll owe me, Potter."

"I don't owe you anything," Harry rejoined briskly, "you're supposed to be a loyal and contributing member of the House of Black; we'll consider this your contribution."

Draco's eyes blazed. "Fine but we do the first Sunday meet tomorrow."

"Well, it is Sunday." Harry sighed. He figured Draco had agreed because it benefited Draco to agree rather than any because it benefited the House of Black or Harry really but that was fine. At least he knew where he stood with Draco.
"Speaking of which," Ron said suddenly, "why Tuesday?"

"What?" asked Draco bewildered, turning to stare at Ron like he thought the Gryffindor was crazy.

"Not you," Ron dismissed him with a flappy hand gesture, "Harry. Why were you going to talk to me about Hermione on Tuesday?"

Harry sighed heavily and shot Ron a 'you couldn't wait until we were alone' look. "Because of the tournament." He sent Ron a 'please remember what I told you about someone trying to get me into the tournament' look and was pleased when Ron got it and went red and white in order under his freckles.

"You do know we're Slytherins and caught that really not very subtle 'get a clue' look, right?" Blaise pointed out dryly.

Harry blushed and rubbed the back of his neck, aware that he and Ron were now looking completely guilty. "It's nothing…it's just…." he sighed again and caved when Neville stared at him in confusion, "Sirius has reason to believe that Voldemort is trying to get me into the tournament."

Everyone fell silent for a long moment as they absorbed that.

"Well, it will be an easy way to kill you without him lifting a finger or whatever he has as a finger these days." Draco said bluntly.

"Thank you, Draco, for summarising the situation so well." Harry said sarcastically.

Neville nodded slowly. "It makes sense." He sighed. "The tasks are constructed for students of seventeen. He has to think you're going to struggle with them at fourteen no matter how powerful you are."

"So, you were going to wait until Tuesday before having the conversation with Ron because you're waiting until after Monday night to see if you're being entered into the competition." Theo stated with far too much understanding for Harry's liking.

"What does that mean?" asked Ron tersely.

Theo looked at Harry.

"Well, if I'm in the tournament, I can hardly ask Hermione to go out with me." Harry pointed out with enough briskness that he hoped they'd drop the subject.

"Why not?" Neville questioned with genuine bemusement written across his sturdy features. "It's not like you're not already in danger."

"Mate," Ron slapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, "if you like her, you should ask her and let her decide. She'll kill you if you don't give her the option and you know what she's like; she's scary when she's angry." "And violent." Draco said, a hint of amusement creeping back into his voice.

"Yes, he has the handprint on his face to prove it." Blaise drawled, jumping off the desk. "My vote goes with them by the way; I think you should ask her whether you're in the tournament or not."

"Knowing Granger she'll stick by you," Theo chimed in, "which I'm sure is one of the reasons why
you like her enough to ask her on a date in the first place. You should ask her."

Everyone but Harry turned to look at Draco.

"What?" Draco said. "Do I need to point out the irony that we brought Potter here to talk him out of asking Granger out? I'm not entirely certain how we've come round to encouraging him instead!"

"I could draw you a diagram." Blaise offered cheekily.

Ron snorted with laughter. His hand tightened on Harry's shoulder. "Ask her, mate. And you know," he shrugged a little self-consciously, "maybe it'll be weird at first but I'll get used to it."

Harry scanned Ron's determined expression and nodded slowly, a pleased rush of warmth filling him up as he took in Ron's sincere blessing. "Thanks."

"So, when are you going to ask her?" Blaise asked pointedly. "Some of us may have money riding on the outcome."

"Tuesday." Harry said.

"I thought we just agreed…" Ron began.

"Tuesday being also the day after the anniversary of my parents' death, Ron." Harry interrupted him sharply.

"Right." Ron winced. "Sorry."

"I take it Sirius is working on the security with the Goblet and making sure you're not entered?" Neville asked.

Harry sent him a grateful look. "Director Bones has the Aurors on guard while it's on display at the Ministry and they're sealing it behind some protective glass when it's in public. Dumbledore says there'll be a professor on watch around the clock for the twenty-four hours that it's at Hogwarts and open to people putting their names in."

"Maybe we can set-up our own watch." Ron mused out loud.

"He has a point." Neville said, worried. "It's not like you haven't been targeted by professors before."

"Sirius said Moody was in charge at Hogwarts so…he's comfortable that it'll be OK." Harry said firmly. He suspected though that Sirius had other plans than just leaving it to Amelia or Moody.

Which was OK with Harry.

The look Neville gave him made Harry think that Neville also suspected Sirius would be sneaky.

"Right," Harry declared, "I think we're finished?"

There was a chorus of agreement and the Gryffindors and Slytherins dispersed in different directions once they got out of the room.

Harry led Neville and Ron back to the Inter-House Common Room and they all piled into the chairs in the seating area where Hermione was curled up reading a book on a sofa. She didn't even look up as Harry fell into the seat next to her, Ron and Neville taking the chairs.

"Did your boys only meeting go OK then?" Hermione asked, turning a page.
"It ended up being House of Black business." Harry said. "Draco and I are going to meet up every Sunday for an hour to show solidarity."

Hermione's eyes flicked up from the page to meet his. "Seriously?"

Harry shrugged and checked around the room to see who was listening; surprisingly they were almost the only ones in the Common Room. "Pretty much."

"What are you going to talk to him about?" asked Ron, raising his head from the back cushion of the chair he was sacked out in.

"Politics and House stuff mostly, I guess." Harry propped his head up with his hand.

"In some ways it's a good thing." Neville commented.

Hermione nodded. "Maybe Neville, Blaise and I can come along occasionally." She suggested. "Under the guise of that we're all allied or associated with the House of Black."

"Good idea." Harry agreed because he wasn't really looking forward to spending time alone with Draco. He debated for a moment whether to tell her about the tournament; it didn't sit right with him that Draco knew he might be entered and Hermione didn't. He sighed. "We also discussed the possibility of someone entering me into the tournament."

Her brown eyes widened momentarily before she nodded briskly. "Well, with the death threats I guess it isn't a surprise that someone would attempt it." She flipped her book shut. "I assume Sirius is trying to make sure it doesn't happen?"

Harry nodded.

"But you're still worried?" guessed Hermione, scanning his face carefully.

"The guy who attacked us at the World Cup is..." Harry searched for the right words.

"Scarily nuts?" offered Ron bluntly.

"Powerful," Neville suggested with a grimace.

"And smart." Hermione mused, her nose scrunching up as she came to the same conclusion as Harry. "That's quite a dangerous combination."

"Have they made any progress in finding out who he is?" asked Neville. "The last time we talked about it you said Sirius had a new lead."

"Everyone thinks it's someone connected to the LeStranges and Barty Crouch Junior." Harry said. "But as they're all dead..."

Hermione bit her lip. "We could look through the old school-year books in the library. Maybe we can come up with a list of suspects based on his education and abilities."

"It's a plan."

"I'm thinking we put our own watch on the Goblet." Ron said grumpily.

"We'll be in class most of the day." Harry pointed out.

"So, we'll get the alliance together and draw up a plan," Neville said, "those with free periods can
help."

Harry opened his mouth to protest.

"Leave it with Neville and me." Ron said brightly. "We'll sort it."

Harry subsided. He didn't think it was going to make a difference (or would work as Moody was bound to spot the watch and send them packing) but he appreciated the gesture. "Thanks, guys."

"Maybe you and Hermione can do the thing with the year-books together." Ron waggled his eyebrows – and OK, Ron was just not subtle.

Harry blushed as Hermione turned toward him with a hopeful smile. "Yeah," he said, "if that's OK with you, Hermione?"

"Sure. Tomorrow?" Hermione suggested, opening her book and raising it a little. "I'd like to get to the end of this chapter before curfew?"

Tomorrow sounded good. Harry nodded happily. It was going to be a good day, he mused. He had Quidditch practice with Viktor Krum, research with Hermione and…and an hour of having to talk to Draco.

It could be worse, Harry thought philosophically. He could be forced into spending time with pureblood girls on dates that he didn't want to go to instead of planning how he was going to ask Hermione out on Tuesday.

He was going to ask Hermione out on Tuesday!

Don't panic, Harry told himself sternly. He thought back to the advice he'd been given; a token, somewhere private and how he would ask her. He had plenty of time to plan; he could do it.

Harry closed his eyes as Neville and Ron started to discuss how they'd put together a watch on the Goblet. He could hear the faint rustle as Hermione turned the pages of her book. He snuggled closer into the cushions, faintly aware the move took him closer to Hermione. Contentment stole over him like a blanket, and between one breath and another, he fell asleep.
Pronglet Returns to Hogwarts:8

30th October 1994

Bill wasn't particularly fanciful – curse-breaking tended to lend itself to a hardy cynicism about tales of vengeful ghosts occupying dark and dank tombs – but he believed the Potter cottage at Godric's Hollow was haunted. Only it wasn't haunted by angry spirits but by the fog of lingering emotion.

There was the desperation and terror of parents whose love for their child knew no bounds written stark into the scars of the crumbling walls hit by destructive spells as James Potter had fought for his family, as Lily Potter had begged for her son's life. There was the horror of a child who had seen his mother killed protecting him scrawled in the chaos that was left of the nursery. And more, there was the devastating loss of the young family evident in the preserved remnants of the Potters' last day as a family – the dinner plates stacked in the drainer, the day's newspaper folded casually on the arm of the sofa, the baby toys that cluttered the floor in front of the hearth.

It was heart-breaking.

Like many of the wizarding world, Bill remembered the celebrations that had followed the night Voldemort had been defeated by Harry with a hazy fondness blunted by distance and childhood. He remembered snatches of the party that had been held at The Burrow with their neighbours eating and drinking and making merry – the childish certainty that something fundamental about the world had changed and the adults were happy. He remembered not giving a thought to the Potters, not even in passing, that day.

He had thought about them later in his life in an abstract kind of way when he'd gotten old enough to understand how the change he'd observed had come about; when he had heard his mother lull Ginny to sleep with tales of the Boy Who Lived; when the first Halloween he had spent outside of Hogwarts had his Dad pulling out the Firewhiskey after dinner and making a toast to those who had lost their lives in the war. Bill also knew the next year he hadn't repeated that toast and not just because he'd been in Egypt but because he hadn't thought to do it.

He hadn't thought.

In retrospect, one miserly toast – a toast that hadn't even recognised the Potters' sacrifice alone – was so bloody inadequate that Bill was hard pressed to find the words that expressed just how bloody inadequate.

If Harry's plea in the article in the Prophet that he wished the wizarding world would honour his parents had felt like an uncomfortable kick in the arse, the cottage was a punch in the gut. Bill was so ashamed he couldn't stand it.

They had been at the cottage for two weeks systematically packing up each room after careful checks of every item to make sure nothing was a horcrux. They'd started from the kitchen door and moved their way through the house. The dinner plates emblazoned with the crest of the House of Potter had been taken out of the drainer and stacked into a trunk with other crockery. The newspaper in the living room had gone into another trunk full of odds and ends for Harry to sort through when he was ready. The baby toys had gone into another trunk although Bill had kept the soft stuffed black dog with its half-chewed off ear and given it to Sirius personally.

They'd left the nursery for last because of the structural damage; the outer wall blown into smithereens; the roof in danger of collapsing in on the room. They'd found the dagger near what
remained of the cot; a Goblin made steel blade with a ruby encrusted hilt that hadn't rusted despite the conditions. The dagger wasn't a horcrux but Bill knew with cold certainty that it had been intended to be used as one. They'd set it aside that morning in a dark black box. It would be examined by Bertie before they discussed what to do with it.

After that, it was mostly a salvaging exercise although to be certain they'd still examined every other item just in case.

Caro paused as the last book flew into the open trunk. "That's the last object here."

Bill nodded; they'd already been over the furniture. He waved his wand and the items he'd marked as sturdy packed themselves neatly into the trunk marked 'furniture.'

"Do we know what Sirius and Harry are going to do with this place?" asked Caro as she got to her feet and dusted down her jeans.

"I don't know." Bill shook his head. "I don't…I don't think they should keep it as a memorial."

"Yeah," Caro sighed and brushed her fringe back, "I'd be tempted to pull it all down; start fresh." She cast a sad look around the small room. The faint outline of mural of a forest on the far side of the nursery could just be seen under the dirt and spell damage.

"I know Harry wants to come here but…I think this place is going to seriously upset him." Bill commented tiredly. "It's…"

"It's a terrifying reality of what that night actually meant." Caro nodded in understanding. She met his questioning gaze with a rueful one of her own. "You think you're the only one feeling guilty?"

Bill grimaced.

"I was happy when we got into school the next day and heard the news that Voldemort had gone after the Potters and the baby had destroyed him. Happy! I knew I didn't have to worry about dying in some muggleborn baiting or thinking my parents might die." Caro said plaintively. "I don't think I've ever really considered until this year and meeting Harry that he lost his parents and any semblance of the childhood he would have had with them that night."

"You know how I was pleased that Brian hunted down the company that did the tours and got them to stop?" Bill waved a hand at her. "Now I want a list of everyone who ever took one of those tours so I can march them through this cottage and hammer the truth of what a tragedy it was into their heads."

"They wouldn't care." Caro sighed. "I mean how ghoulisht do you have to be to do the tour in the first place?"

"Point." Bill muttered. "Merlin, this place is creepy." His side ached where he'd been hit by the curse at the World Cup. He was so tired.

"Hey, you alright? You've gone all pale again." Caro said solicitously, reaching out and putting a hand on his arm.

Bill motioned at his side.

"You do know that's not where your liver is?" Caro asked dryly.

"Alicia would hug me." Bill complained teasingly, folding his arms and pouting.
"Alicia is your girlfriend." Caro pointed out and raised an eyebrow when Bill winced at the term. "She has to hug you." She tilted her head and looked very much like her animagus version for a moment as she regarded him with interest. "So what was with the face?"

"What face?" Bill said, tapping the trunks so they were easy to carry; a featherlight charm took care of the weight. He scanned the nursery for anything they might have left.

"Oh you do not get to do that!" Caro declared, wagging her finger at him. "What was with the face?"

Bill regarded her thoughtfully. Caro's expression was light-hearted but her eyes were serious and there was real concern in them. They'd gotten closer since Lawrence had been declared sick; true work partners. He liked her but more importantly he respected her opinion.

"You know my mother…" Bill began.

Caro smiled. "You mean the force of nature that would only ever allow me five minute visits with you when you were recovering? That mother?"

Bill's lips twitched. "That's the one. She's kind of…" he made a whirly gesture that tried to encapsulate 'she's gone nuts about my relationship with Alicia and is already planning a wedding and I'm nowhere near ready for marriage, and I like Alicia but I don't know if I like her that much, or really if she likes me that much although she did save my life.'

"Ah." Caro said, translating the vagueness with superhuman speed. "So your mother's taking it all too seriously and you're confused. What does Alicia say?"

"I don't know." Bill admitted sheepishly. "I haven't actually talked about it with Alicia."

Caro stared at him with the same pitying look that Bill believed girls gave guys the world over; the one that said 'you're a man, I suppose you can't help being this stupid.'

"I should talk with Alicia." Bill said.

She patted his arm. "Good call. Come on." She started towards the door. "We should pack it up and head home."

Bill nodded. "I'll take the trunks to Sirius." He waved his wand and the trunks obediently floated behind him in an orderly fashion.

"I'll take the dagger to Bertie." Caro said. "Say hi to Sirius for me."

"I thought you liked Remus." Bill said confused.

"I'm waiting for Harry to grow up." Caro joked.

They exited the cottage and said goodbye at the door. Bill tapped the ward stone to set the new wards he'd constructed active and the faint shimmer of them moving over the cottage somehow made Bill feel better. He apparated home to London Street and took the floo to Black Manor, carefully ensuring the trunks went ahead of him.

Penny was on her way out as Bill flooed in. He smiled at her warmly. He liked Penny. She was a good match for Percy – and Merlin, he was turning into his mother.

"What are you doing here on a Sunday?" Bill grinned at her.

"I had a report to finish on Lord Wenlock's voting patterns." Penny said. "Sirius wanted it done..."
before the November Wizengamot session. But I'm on my way home now."

"No hot date?" He teased as she adjusted her outer cloak.

Penny laughed. "I wish there was a hot date but no. You do know your brother has lived at the office since Mister Crouch came back off sick leave again and now there's the tournament." She shook his head. "I'll be lucky to see him before June next year at this rate."

Bill grimaced. He wondered if anyone thought the resurrection of the Tri-Wizard Tournament was a good idea anymore.

"But I do have a date with a glass of wine, some Chinese take-out and an episode of The X-Files."

"That's a television thing right?" Bill questioned. He'd watched some TV when he'd worked abroad in the States one Summer. Muggle TV had been integrated into the wizarding world there.

"Right." Penny smiled. "Your Dad keeps threatening to come over and watch."

"I think he saw it once in the Seventies but he knows it's improved. Mum says the day he gets a TV is the day she moves out. He keeps arguing he needs it for his new job." Bill said with a laugh. He was so proud of his Dad's new status despite the dangers. "I'd better let you go. I have these to drop off." He motioned at the trunks on the floor.

Penny frowned. "More stuff from the cottage?"

Bill nodded. He glanced over her face. "That bad, huh?"

"Sirius's face every time he takes ownership of these trunks…" Penny shook her head. "It's bringing it all back for him and I hate, hate what it's likely going to do to Harry when he sees...everything." She sighed heavily and shook her head. "You should leave them in the library with the others."

"Sirius and Remus are not here?" Bill asked.

"Remus is still in France although Madame Longbottom and Lord Bones came back," Penny explained, "Sirius said Remus had to check something out at the chateau in the South. He'll be back tomorrow morning."

"And Sirius?"

"At the Ministry all day." Penny said. "He arranged with Director Bones to be part of the security detail on the Goblet while it's being displayed in the atrium."

Bill understood. Sirius didn't trust anyone else to guard the Goblet to ensure it couldn't be tampered with in some way so Harry would be entered. After what had happened at the World Cup, Bill didn't blame him. He felt a twinge of guilt over how he'd failed to protect Harry. Sirius had told him it wasn't his fault but it was; he'd lost the duel.

Penny's hand on his shoulder yanked him out of his thoughts.

"Sorry." Bill muttered.

"You want to talk about it?" offered Penny.

Bill wondered if he was transmitting some kind of wounded bird signal to all the women in his life that made them want to comfort him. He shook his head. "I have to work it out for myself."
"Hmmm." If Penny had been Caro she wouldn't have backed off, and if Bill had been Percy he suspected Penny would have pressed the issue but she wasn't and he wasn't so Penny nodded and shared a small smile instead. "Once you've dropped the trunks, go home and get some rest, Bill, or I'll tell your Mum you're looking peaky."

"Merlin!" Bill stared at her horrified. "You're evil!"

"That's me!" Penny said cheerfully. She gave him a wave, shouted her destination, and disappeared into the floo.

Bill wandered down to the library. He could see the stack of trunks piled up by Remus's desk and placed those he held on the pile gently. He could see some of the older trunks had been opened and reclosed. He didn't want to think about how Sirius must have felt going through them.

He rubbed a hand over his face. Weirdly, he had an urge to go and see his Mum, see his Dad; wrap them both up in his arms and tell them that he loved them. Maybe that wasn't a bad idea for all he'd joked with Penny about his Mum.

He headed for the floo and shouted for The Burrow before he could change his mind. His Mum hurried into the living room as he stepped out, alerted by the chimes.

Her face brightened as soon as she saw him. "Bill! I thought you were working today!"

"I was." Bill said, accepting her hug and holding onto her when she would have pulled away.

She angled her head to look at him properly and frowned. "What's wrong?"

He avoided her eyes. "Just…it's been a hard day. Difficult."

His Mum held more tightly for a long moment before she rubbed his back and moved away. "A good cup of tea and a chat will help," her look stopped his protest before it was made, "you can tell me as much as you can."

It wasn't long before Bill sat at the dining table, a strong cup of tea in his hand and a plate of homemade biscuits on the table in front of him. His Mum sat beside him at the head of the table, waiting patiently.

"Where's Dad?" Bill asked procrastinating.

"He went to meet up with Leonard Abbot for a drink." His Mum said.

He tapped the side of the heavy ceramic mug. "Did…do you ever think about the Potters?"

His Mum frowned. "How do you mean?"

"It's…I vaguely remember the party the night after Halloween in 'eighty-one and I don't remember any mention of the Potters. And I know Dad made that toast that year I was here for Halloween but he didn't mention the Potters by name and…"

"I understand what you're asking," his Mum interrupted and sighed heavily, "and the answer is no, not really. Back then, I think part of it was because it felt right, you see, that they died protecting their child." Her eyes met his sadly. "Any parent worth their salt would do the same."

She would do the same, Bill knew. If his mother had been in the Potter alliance tent with him on the night of the World Cup, she would have stepped in front of him and taken every curse the attacker
threw at him without hesitation.

She wrapped her hands around her mug. "So when the news came it wasn't a surprise or a shock to me that they were dead. It was...what was expected. Frankly, the fact that You-Know-Who was gone and baby Harry had survived swamped everything else. I think everybody reacted the same."

"And since?" prompted Bill.

His Mum took a sip of tea. "Your Dad does the toast every year to remember the fallen but...it's your Uncles that I think about. I think that's human nature; we remember the people we've lost who were close to us the most. I didn't really know the Potters. I'd met Lily a couple of times through various mother and baby groups, and James through Fabian and Gideon but the Potters were very young and had their own friends." She grimaced. "I thought about them a little when I met Harry, of course, mostly that it was such a shame they hadn't lived to see what a wonderful boy he'd become but...not in the way you mean. When I read Harry's words in the Prophet...I have to admit that I was stunned to realise that I hadn't ever acknowledged their part in what happened that night, their sacrifice." She raised her eyes and looked at Bill. "What's this about, Bill?"

"We've spent the last couple of weeks at Godric's Hollow." Bill admitted. "I can't say anything about why but...it got me thinking about them."

"I can understand that if you've been there." His Mum said.

There was something in her tone and Bill's eyes sharpened on her guilty expression. "You went on one of those awful tours didn't you?"

His Mum bristled but subsided with an unhappy nod. "Years ago as a present for Ginny. She wanted to see where the Boy Who Lived...where it had happened. I told myself I was doing it as a way of paying tribute to him, but as soon as I saw the place I...I knew it was wrong."

Bill knew it was pointless to berate her since she'd already come to the right conclusion. "I don't think Harry should see it. Ever. I feel like razing the place to the ground and sowing the earth with salt."

His Mum reached out and laid a comforting hand on his. "It really got to you."

"Yeah." Bill said.

"How about tomorrow you come over for dinner and we do something special to honour the Potters?" His Mum suggested.

Bill considered it and nodded slowly. "I'd like that."

"Good." His Mum patted his hand. "Now, onto happier news; I got a letter from Charlie today. He's coming back to England next month!"

"That's great." Bill said, pleased, even as he mentally tried to shift with the change of subject. "It'll be good to see him again. Why's he back?"

"Something work related." His Mum waved a hand dismissively. "He said it was all very hush-hush."

The clock chimed; his Dad was on his way home. His Mum got up. "I should start dinner." She frowned heavily. "I doubt Percy will make it back before nine."
"What's going on with Percy?" Bill asked curiously. "Penny said she's hardly seen him."

"Percy is working too hard. He's been out of the door first thing in the morning and back last thing at night for weeks including weekends." His Mum said briskly. "If you ask me, Barty Crouch is taking advantage but Percy won't listen to any of us."

"Not even Dad?" Bill asked half-teasingly.

"He told your father that it wasn't any of his business."

Bill stared at her as she turned away in mortification of having blurted out something he realised his parents had clearly meant to keep from the rest of the family. "He did what?"

His Mum stopped bustling around the kitchen and looked at him, shame-faced. "Your Dad didn't want the rest of you knowing he and Percy are…not getting along." She must have spotted his intent to head straight over to the Ministry and yell at his brother because her face changed to her 'I am your mother and this is serious' look. "Your Dad's decision, Bill, and you will abide by it."

Bill squirmed in his chair but she was right. He needed to respect his Dad's decision.

"Percy's…Percy's just going through a phase right now, Bill." His Mum nodded as though she was willing herself to believe it through force of will alone. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Sure." Bill said, because he might not be able to talk to Percy but he could hang around and see if his Dad wanted a friendly ear.

His Mum beamed at him. She paused beside him and dropped a kiss the top of his head. "You're a good boy, Bill."

Bill felt his cheeks heat and he hid his face in his mug. But he was glad he'd made the decision to visit. And maybe in honouring the Potters, maybe he should honour his own parents and the sacrifices that they had made too.

o-O-o

"Is that who I think it is?" Bertie asked in a low voice as he moved to stand beside Amelia in her hiding spot by the large fern by the elevators in the atrium.

Amelia's lips twitched. "I have no idea to whom you are referring, Bertie." She kept her eyes on the entrance way where the Goblet was being displayed, encased in a glass box on a tall golden stand just in front of the Fountain of Magical Brethren. An Auror guard stood either side of the Goblet. There was a team of five switching in and out on an irregular basis. But in front of the Goblet, lying on the ground with his head resting on his front paws, was Amelia's lynch-pin; a large black Grim.

Bertie huffed out a breath of laughter and shook his head. "It's rather an ingenious way to guard the Goblet."

"I thought so." Amelia said with satisfaction.

The sight of the Grim had been enough to deter most of the spectators from lingering for too long the entire day. There had been three fainting fits, two women and one man, but it was worth it.

It was rather a shame that the Tri-Wizard Tournament Committee had rejected Moody's proposition that they repeat the security measure at Hogwarts. She guessed Bagman had a point when he'd suggested that it might deter some entrants from putting their name forth if they saw a Grim by the
Goblet. Amelia though agreed with Moody's rejoinder that if entrants had issues getting past a Grim to put their name in the Goblet they were hardly likely to be Champion material anyway.

She also knew that Albus had warned Sirius off sneaking into Hogwarts to guard the Goblet anyway in human form. Unfortunately, his point that if Harry was entered some might claim Sirius himself had entered Harry for the glory was well made. She knew Moody had taken Sirius through the planned security measures and Sirius was comfortable with them; he just had a hard time letting go and allowing someone else to have the responsibility of protecting Harry. Amelia understood and she knew Moody did too.

"Has he been there all day?" Bertie asked.

"Since we placed it in the glass box." Amelia said dryly. "You should have seen people fleeing in terror."

"You sound far too amused about people fleeing in terror to be the Director of the DMLE." Bertie said, his own voice filled with laughter.

Amelia snorted. She glanced at him curiously. "What are you doing here on a Sunday?"

Bertie grimaced and waved a wand to form a privacy bubble. "Caro and Bill have finished their examination. Caro dropped off the item we think was the one that was meant to be used. They found it near what remained of the cot. I have it locked up downstairs now."

"Is it…?" Amelia asked hesitantly.

"No," Bertie shook his head, "the tests show it's clean." He sighed. "It's a priceless heirloom and historical artefact and I want to throw it into a furnace anyway."

Amelia nodded. "It was by the cot?" The thought of it made her shudder. How close had Riddle come that night to true immortality? If it hadn't been for Harry…

"The cot." Bertie shook his head. "It's been hard on them going through that house."

"Will they be ready to start at Hogwarts tomorrow or do they need a break?" Amelia asked bluntly.

"They'll be ready." Bertie sighed. "Caro said that Harry was right; that the wizarding world should have honoured his parents and it is a crime we ignored their part in all this; their sacrifice."

"They're not the only ones whose sacrifices have been ignored." Amelia's eyes strayed to the Grim. "Indeed not."

Merlin but Crouch was being more of a bastard than ever since his second return to work after the flu, she mused. He'd always been a stuffed shirt with a fierce ambition and a rather narrow view of things, but he'd been forgiven that because as the Director of the DMLE during the war he'd been ferocious in going after Death Eaters. His reputation had suffered when it had been discovered his son was a Death Eater, it had certainly lost him his coveted ambition of Minister, and while Barty had rebuilt his reputation somewhat in the years since, the admission that he had helped imprison an innocent man had tarnished him again. Perhaps that was at the heart of his antipathy toward Sirius, Amelia thought.
Her eyes slid to Percy. Why he had decided to attach himself to Crouch was a mystery to her. She had the sense that he and Arthur had fallen out; neither had been seen in the other’s company for days. Personally, Amelia thought it showed common sense on Arthur’s part to distance himself but she feared that the distance was more one created by an ungrateful son eschewing his father’s advice rather than a father sensing the need to let his son make his own mistakes.

"Barty." Amelia caught him as he got to the Goblet.

"It's time for it to be transported to Hogwarts." Barty said impatiently, straightening his already pristine straight robes.

Amelia nodded at Auror Pollock. "Fetch the box."

The Grim got to its feet and stretched. On the far side of the atrium someone shrieked.

Barty stared at it with distaste. "Should that beast be loose?"

Amelia placed a hand on the Grim's head. "Snuffles is fine."

"Snuffles?!" Auror Tonks chuckled and Amelia shot her a look. She sobered quickly. "Sorry, ma'am."

"As you were, Tonks." Amelia wondered for a moment if Tonks actually knew it was Sirius. She was under the impression that not many actually knew Sirius was an animagus. It had certainly been a surprise to her when Sirius had come to her with the idea and a belated request to have his animagus registration done and sealed as confidential under the DMLE authority.

Pollock arrived back with the box and Amelia tapped the glass in specific places to get it to release without setting off the wards she had cast earlier. She carefully picked up the Goblet with its everlasting blue flames and placed it gently into the box Pollock held open. She closed the box.

Crouch nodded crisply. "Excellent. I'll take this to my office."

"You're not going to floo from here to Hogwarts immediately?" Amelia pointed at the waiting fireplaces. "I thought they were waiting for you to begin the Initiation Ceremony?"

The Ceremony was the official beginning of the tournament. A piece of paper detailing the latest tournament, its dates and the tasks involved, would be fed to the flames. It primed the Goblet to accept the names that would be entered thereafter as candidates and to choose the Champions.

"I have a few things to finish up in my office and I prefer to floo from there." Crouch stated authoritatively.

"Why didn't you finish before you came for the Goblet?" asked Amelia irritated.

Crouch raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't aware that I had to clear my work schedule with you, Amelia. The Goblet was due to be transferred to my custody at five o'clock. It is now five o'clock. The Goblet has been transferred to my custody. It will sit on my desk while I finish my work and I will floo to Hogwarts shortly thereafter."

"If you need any help, Mister Crouch, I would be honoured to assist." Percy said obsequiously.

Amelia refrained from rolling her eyes at him. "Barty, Hogwarts is expecting the Goblet as soon as it is placed in your custody…"
"Percy, floo to Hogwarts and inform Dumbledore of the delay. You may remain there until I arrive when you will floo back to inform Director Bones of my safe arrival." Crouch ordered.

"Yes, sir." Percy headed off to Hogwarts without any other discussion.

"Is that acceptable, Director?" Crouch sneered.

"You'll have an escort to your office and at the door." Amelia snapped.

"Very well." Crouch huffed. He pointed at Pollock. "As you're coming along, you can carry the damn thing."

"I shall leave you here." Bertie said apologetically and made for the exit.

"Coward," muttered Amelia, disgruntled at his abandonment.

The rest of them all trooped to the elevators and down through the Ministry to Crouch's office. Pollock set the Goblet on a side table that Crouch picked out as he made himself comfortable behind his large desk.

"Thank you." Crouch muttered grudgingly.

"I'll leave Tonks and Pollock outside your door." Amelia instructed brusquely. "Get Percy to floo straight back to your office here when you get to Hogwarts so they can finish for the day."

Crouch nodded stiffly.

Amelia grimaced. She pushed the Grim towards the door. It went with an unhappy bark. As soon as they were out of the office the Aurors took up a position either side of the door. The Grim sat down and looked at Amelia stubbornly.

"Fine," Amelia allowed, "you can stay here until Percy gets back. I'll be in my office."

The Grim barked his agreement.

Amelia ignored the look Pollock was giving her and left them to it.

She had continued to work the odd Sunday as a Director, partially to show solidarity with the Aurors and Hit Wizards who had to work weekend shifts, and partially because the mostly empty Ministry was a boon to her work rate. She dived into the open reports on her desk, the cases that she was prosecuting, and the correspondence that included a note from her brother along with a small statue of the Eiffel tower which she placed on her desk.

She was in the middle of a report on the search for the pregnant women who had gone missing when there was a knock on her door.

"Enter." Amelia called, pulling her monocle from her eye and letting it dangle on the silver chain around her neck.

Sirius entered. He looked tired and worn. Concern shot through her. He hadn't moved all day. She'd ensured he'd received bowls of water and some food at lunchtime but he had to be hungry and thirsty.

"Sit." She ordered as she conjured up some tea and toast.

Sirius glanced at her as he collapsed into a chair. "You do know that just because my animagus form
is a dog, it doesn't mean that I'll follow that order all the time?"

"Your animagus form is a Grim, Sirius." Amelia pointed out as she poured the tea. "It has as much in common with a dog as an unicorn has with a donkey." She passed him a mug and he took it with a murmured word of thanks. She turned her attention to fixing him a plate of jam and toast. She waited until he was eating before performing a tempus charm. "It's been an hour?"

"Crouch took more than half an hour to finish whatever it was that he was doing." Sirius said with disgust. He swallowed down some more toast with a mouthful of tea. "If I didn't know he was so completely against Death Eaters that he sent his own son to Azkaban, I'd be deeply tempted to suspect him of…of something. Unfortunately I think he just did it to screw with me."

"I think part of his anger towards you, Sirius, is probably wondering that if he made such a mistake about you whether he made the same mistake about his son." Amelia sat back and folded her hands over her belly. "Junior got a trial but…in truth, the fact that his wand was clean was all but ignored by the tribunal, despite his claim that he only led the LeStranges there and helped them gain entry. The sentence was harsh."

"I heard him yelling for days in Azkaban." Sirius commented almost absently as he slumped wearily in the chair. "Begging." He shook himself out of the memory. "I think I vaguely remember his parents visiting? Maybe I dreamed that."

"No," Amelia shook her head, "Barty got special dispensation to take his wife to visit because she was dying and wanted to say goodbye to her son."

"Junior didn't last long himself after the visit. Maybe he lost the will to live with the news his mother was sick." Sirius murmured. "It's a shame he's not alive. He could have answered some questions."

"You've had no luck trying to track down the LeStranges' paramours I take it?" Amelia asked dryly. Sirius shook his head. "Everyone agrees that Crouch Junior and Rabastan were lovers, apparently devoted so no side dishes for either of them. Narcissa managed to recall Bella had a torrid affair with Oliver Mulciber but that apparently ended when Voldemort took an interest in her, and it can't be Mulciber who's the Polyjuice man because he's in Azkaban and we've checked it is him. Rodolphus preferred one night stands with women he'd picked up in bars; muggles, witches, whatever, so that's pretty much a non-starter."

"Has Snape had any further luck sorting through his memories?" Amelia asked.

"No, and the last time I asked he took great delight in telling me I only had myself to blame for the lack of information available to us because I was the one who'd killed the LeStranges." Sirius gestured at Amelia's look of disgust. "He was right in one way."

"And totally wrong in a much more important way." Amelia retorted. "I hope you see that."

"It's Snape." Sirius said simply with a ghost of his usual smirk. "Of course I know he's wrong."

Amelia smiled.

"Bertie was here?"

"Caro and Bill found the item they were looking for but it wasn't one of the objects? It's locked away in the DOM." Amelia explained.

Sirius nodded slowly and drank some more of his tea. "It's been hard for them going through the
cottage."

And harder on Sirius, Amelia would wager.

"Bertie wants to throw the item in the furnace regardless that it's not actually…whatever it is that would bring Voldemort back to life." Amelia said. "Even if it is a priceless heirloom."

"Well, we've already destroyed Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket." Sirius said dryly. "If we find Ravenclaw's diadem that will be melted down too so…what's one more?"

"Riddle must have counted on sentimentality about the Founders of Hogwarts stilling the hand of anyone who would seek to destroy them." Amelia mused.

"He forgot the truth that the living are more important than the dead despite his obsession with immortality." Sirius agreed.

Amelia decided a change of subject was required. "Speaking of antiquities, my brother tells me he's off to Paris next week once more?"

"I'm putting Fevrier on retainer to get the Cavetti version of the Lumiere document." Sirius explained. "Even if it's not the exact thing, I don't want it available to anyone else."

"Wise." Amelia said. "Have you heard anything else from Remus?"

"Nothing more about Greyback, no." Sirius guessed where her main concern was and Amelia blushed.

"I'm also concerned for Remus." Amelia said defensively. "We know so little about the packs."

"I hate Remus getting involved with them again." Sirius sighed. "And then there's the whole problem that apparently the packs see Remus's family with myself and Harry as a new pack." He waved a hand at her. "We'll discuss it at the Council tomorrow."

Amelia nodded. It was late. She regarded Sirius critically. His colour had improved but there were shadows in his eyes and if Remus was away, all he had at home was a slightly crazy house elf.

"Why don't you come back to Brian's with me for supper?" She said impulsively. "I'm sure Brian won't mind."

"I'm sure Brian will mind." Sirius countered with a faint grin. "I'll be fine."

She saw the thought flitter through his brain. "Do not go to Hogwarts." Amelia instructed briskly. "Go home, take a bath and go to bed."

Sirius glared at her without any heat. "I wasn't thinking…"

"Please." Amelia peered at him evenly. "I'm not stupid."

Sirius sighed heavily. "OK, so maybe I was contemplating that I'd sleep a whole lot easier if I just sneaked into Hogwarts and stole the damn Goblet."

"I'm not sure that's something you should admit to the Director of the DMLE, Sirius."

"It's not possible either," Sirius laughed weakly, "I helped Moody close the gaps that I used in the security last year."

"See: Alastor has it covered." Amelia said gently. "You have to trust that it's going to be OK."
"I thought that at the World Cup and look what happened: Minnie was injured, Bill was almost killed and Harry…I almost lost Harry." Sirius pointed out.

"You have to stop beating yourself up about it, Sirius." Amelia waved at him. "The majority of the decisions made by adults that day were well-intentioned and reasonable at the time they were made. I'm also fairly certain that Harry has learned his own lesson about running off alone after formidable opponents. In the two duels I've had with him in his lessons since, he's never once let himself underestimate me." Although she was pleased that she had managed a victory in the second; it had been close but she had managed to get him off-balance and take his wand.

"I should have sent Harry home after the Quidditch match."

"You're trying to do your best to give him a balanced life and you thought any threat or danger would happen much later based on our intel." Amelia said softly. "I'm not certain that I wouldn't have made the same decision if it had been Susan."

Sirius nodded slowly and got to his feet. "Home, bath and bed. I think I'll follow your instructions, Amelia. And thanks." He gestured at her. "For letting me guard the Goblet today."

Amelia watched him leave, worried.

Sirius was under so much pressure, had so many responsibilities, and had so much to worry about given the very real threat to Harry's life…her lips firmed. Well, she would do her bit to make his life easier. She'd talk with the Rat Squad the next day; there had to be some way of finding Voldemort and his cronies, some way of tracking down the missing pregnant women, and she would find it.

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31st October 1994

"I can't believe Moody treated it as an exercise for his guards and a lesson for us!" Ron complained.

"I think it was ingenious," Hermione said. "He knew you'd try to help Harry and instead of stopping it cold, he turned it into something useful."

Beside her, Harry scooped up some of the mashed potatoes and ate them desultorily as Ron groaned over how quickly Connor Sapworthy had been found lurking near to the Goblet. Harry agreed with Hermione; Moody was ingenious. He'd effectively made spotting the Potter alliance kids a game for the professors who were watching the Goblet in the entrance hall. According to a rumour that Robert Ogden had heard (he had actually lasted the longest with a superb disillusionment spell), Moody had offered a prize for the professor who found lurkers the fastest. All the caught alliance members were told to write an essay on why they had been discovered and how they could improve if they were to attempt it again; it was to be handed to Moody at their next DADA lesson.

Harry had offered to help with the essays as a combined 'thanks for trying' and 'sorry you got into trouble.' Since his own prowess in DADA was well known, the alliance members had jumped at the offer. He'd spent the hour before the feast going over several essays and drafts. It had been great. In fact, he would have preferred to have continued his unexpected tutoring session instead of being dragged to the feast.

He wasn't in the mood for the usual Halloween festive feast since he was acknowledging the day was the anniversary of his parents' deaths. He definitely wasn't in the mood for the new and improved tournament Halloween feast which saw a small cadre of press at a table off to the side of the Great Hall, the students from Beauxbatons happily sat at the end of the Ravenclaw table, those
from Durmstrang at the end of the Slytherin, and their Headmaster and Headmistress sat at the high table either side of Dumbledore, along with Crouch and Bagman.

Bloody Tri-Wizard Tournament, Harry thought morosely. He couldn't wait for the naming of the Champions to be over so he would just know, so that Sirius would know. His call on the communication mirror the night before had worried Harry. Sirius had looked too pale and tired. He had just spent the day doing guard duty on the Goblet but Harry was concerned the worry of Harry being entered into the tournament was consuming his father.

According to Robert, there had been no successful attempt by anyone who wasn't going to enter themselves to get to the Goblet. Moody had even had the professors checking each note before a student submitted it to ensure it was their own actual name that they were entering and not a friend or a rival. The twins' attempt to enter by asking Angelina to submit their names had been foiled that way.

On the face of it, between Sirius personally attesting to the fact that nobody had tampered with the Goblet before it had been handed to Crouch and Moody's insane security controls, Harry should be safe.

Except that Harry didn't think he was.

He shot a jaundiced look at the Goblet sitting on a tall pedestal just in front of the high table.

Think about something else, Harry instructed himself firmly, and tuned back into the conversation around him which was disappointingly still on the tournament.

"I can't believe…" began George.

"…they checked the notes!" finished Fred.

Angelina pointed her knife at them. "It's just as well. Only one of you could have been chosen and if you had been chosen, I'd have been down a Beater!"

"Have you not entered, Angelina?" Hermione asked.

"Not with the Quidditch ban I'd get if I was chosen. It's better for my future career to keep playing this year." Angelina said with a grin and a wink in Harry's direction. "Especially when Harry invites Viktor Krum to come to our practices."

Harry smiled back at her.

"He's entered though, hasn't he?" checked Ron. "I'd heard that all of the Durmstrang lot had put their names in."

"The students from Beauxbatons all entered too." Neville said quietly.

"Which makes sense," Hermione said authoritatively, "they all did come here for the tournament."

"Who has entered from Hogwarts? Do we know?" Ron questioned Neville eagerly.

Neville shrugged. "All of the Gryffindor seventh year apart from Angelina but none of the sixth year…"

"We tried!" wailed Fred and George dramatically.

"Five seventh year Ravenclaws and three of their sixth years, all of the eligible Slytherins, and only a
few Hufflepuffs but they do include Cedric Diggory and Robert Ogden.” Neville said. "Blaise has a list."

"He's running another book, isn't he?" Hermione sniffed with disapproval. "What's the bet? Who'll be the Hogwarts Champion?"

Neville shrugged and smiled. "I have a galleon on it being Diggory."

"What about the other schools?" Ron waved his fork, a piece of chicken flying over the table and luckily not landing on anyone else's plate. "I bet Krum gets chosen for Durmstrang."

"Just because he's a good Quidditch player doesn't mean that he's Champion material." Hermione informed him briskly.

"Aha!" Ron cried out. "So you admit that Krum's a good player!"

"I never said he wasn't." Hermione proclaimed, raising her eyebrow as though to suggest Ron was wrong to even suggest that she had.

Harry pushed his dinner away as they fell into a familiar argument. He wasn't hungry. He cast a look around and caught Ginny looking at him. She immediately went bright red and stared down at her half-finished meal. Harry averted his eyes, staring at his own plate. Ginny was on probation with the Quidditch team after trying to sneak Lydia and Jessica into the boys' changing rooms; Angelina had given all three girls a dressing down and threatened to report them to Professor McGonagall if they did anything similar again. Harry was glad because it meant that the stalking had finally stopped even if heartfelt looks cast in his direction at meals were still on.

On the positive side, his plan to ask Hermione out was finished and ready to be executed the next day. They had Runes just before lunch and thanks to the kitchen house elves who were very, very helpful, Harry had sorted out a private table in the kitchen where he could take Hermione and ask her if she would do him the honour of accompanying him to the November Hogsmeade weekend. For his token, Neville was supplying Harry with a flower from the greenhouses that Harry would charm with an Everfresh spell so it was as lovely as the moment it was picked. Ron and Neville would guard the kitchen and make sure nobody interrupted Harry. It was a good plan.

"Treacle tart?" Hermione nudged his elbow with hers.

Harry glanced at the table and saw that it had switched to desserts. He shook his head. "It's kind of like the morning of a Quidditch match." He whispered noticing her concern at his refusal.

Hermione nodded understandingly. "It'll be over soon." She cut a small slice of lemon cheesecake for herself and spooned some vanilla ice-cream on her plate to go with it.

Harry smiled inwardly at that. He knew Hermione secretly loved desserts because they were the only sweet treat that her parents had occasionally allowed. She still didn't like chocolate all that much finding most of the candy oversweet for her tastes. It was the reason why he had decided against chocolate as his token.

"Shall we finish going through the year books tonight?" Hermione asked softly, once she'd almost finished eating. "Or would you prefer to call it a night?"

"Tomorrow?" suggested Harry. "Sirius wants me to call him right after the feast is over and…” he grimaced, "truthfully I think I just want to go to bed after.” Maybe look at his photo album; think about his parents.
"It's OK with me." Hermione assured him. "I have the Transfiguration essay to start."

"You're not starting that already are you?" Ron said, overhearing Hermione.

"If you do it as soon as you get it, it's done." Hermione said firmly.

There was a sudden clinking sound that interrupted the babble of conversation and the noise in the Great Hall fell away gradually until silence descended.

Dumbledore smiled at them all happily. "It is almost time for the Goblet to select our Champions." He waved a hand at a doorway off to the left. "If the members of the press could make their way to the antechamber, please."

Harry watched as Snape, his face contorted in a sour expression, escorted the press to the room. He saw Luna wave to her father. Bagman looked jovial and smiley as he greeted them; Crouch looked bored as he watched on.

"As our Champions are chosen, they will make their way to the antechamber to receive instructions and a copy of the rules from one of the judges from the Ministry, Mister Bagman." Dumbledore smiled. "If my fellow Headmaster and Headmistress will follow me to the Goblet..." he invited them to move with a sweep of his arm, sending the bats on his pumpkin orange sleeve into flight across the fabric.

They walked around the table to the Goblet.

Dumbledore waved his wand and the candles around the Hall were extinguished except for those within the carved pumpkins that adorned every table. The semi-dark was dramatic and there was a collective intake of breath; a hush that fell over everyone as their eyes were drawn to the glow of the blue-white flames of the Goblet.

Harry heard his heart pounding and felt Hermione creep closer to him. He reached for her hand blindly and she quickly intertwined their fingers.

Suddenly, the Goblet's flames flared upwards, turning red and orange and sending a piece of parchment upwards.

Dumbledore plucked it out of the air and read it quickly. His face broke into a broad grin. "The Champion for Durmstrang is Viktor Krum!"

There was a cacophony of applause as Viktor rose from the Slytherin table, bowed slightly to acknowledge the students' show of support and walked quickly away to the antechamber.

Karkaroff gave a short nod to Dumbledore and walked off after his charge.

Everything settled again.

Harry held his breath as the Goblet flared a second time; another parchment spun in the air. "The Champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour!"

There was a cacophony of applause as Viktor rose from the Slytherin table, bowed slightly to acknowledge the students' show of support and walked quickly away to the antechamber.

Karkaroff gave a short nod to Dumbledore and walked off after his charge.

Silence descended rapidly.
Harry bit his lip. Please, please, please, he begged the universe, let it be someone else.

The flame shot up…

The parchment went airborne…

Dumbledore snagged it…

Harry closed his eyes. Please, please, please…

"The Champion for Hogwarts is…" Dumbledore paused, "Cedric Diggory!"

Harry's eyes shot open, relief flooding him.

The Hall erupted. Harry squeezed Hermione's hand gently and let go so they could join in the clapping, shouting and whistling that saw a blushing Cedric bow to the school and make his way to the Chamber with an incredibly happy Professor Sprout.

It took an age for the Hall to quiet down again.

"We now have our Champions!" Dumbledore smiled happily and clapped his hands together in glee. "I know you will continue to give them every support in the coming tasks. But for now please make your way out of the Hall in an orderly…"

The Goblet's flames turned red.

Dumbledore stared at the artefact, his smile falling away.

Harry felt his heart stutter in his chest as another piece of parchment was sent flying into the air.

Dumbledore caught it in a trembling hand. He read it and his face filled with sorrow. Harry shook his head.

"The Champion for the Light is Harry Potter."

Harry closed his eyes again tightly.

No.

It was a nightmare.

It wasn't happening.

Anger and fear bubbled up inside of him and his magic surged.

"Harry, my boy," Dumbledore said softly, "please make your way to the antechamber. We will try to determine how your name was put into the Goblet and…"

Harry kept his eyes closed. He took a breath, trying to keep a hold of his magic. If he lost control…

"Harry." Hermione whispered.

He took another breath and tried to keep his chaotic emotions in check. "Get Sirius." He whispered back. "Please! Use the mirror!"

He felt when Hermione moved, sliding away from the bench and running out of the Great Hall, her steps echoing.
A murmur broke out in the Hall.

Harry took another breath. His fingers curled around the edge of the table. All the candles in the Hall blazed with light as his magic flared.

A few of the first years shrieked.

There was a rapid clicking of heels in his direction and he suddenly felt Minerva's hand on his shoulder, comforting and solid, a flimsy anchor against the magic wanting to break free in him but enough…

"I stand in the stead of Lily of the House of Potter…"

"Take another breath, Mister Potter." She ordered briskly, her Scottish brogue colouring her words roughly, giving away her concern.

"And another one, Harry." Doctor Jordan's crisp instruction from somewhere behind him filled him with more reassurance. Doctor Jordan knew his control issues.

"Good." Minerva's hand squeezed his shoulder.

Harry warily opened his eyes and wished he hadn't as he realised he was the focus of every eye in the room. He felt his face go hot with shame as he glanced around and saw the astonished faces on the press and the other Champions who had wandered back into the Hall, no doubt to see what was happening…

"Come with me, Mister Potter." Minerva said gently.

He got up.

Neville immediately stood up with him and Ron followed; a mere second later the sons and daughters of the entire Potter alliance present in the Hall stood up. Harry noted with bemusement that Draco and Theo were also on their feet.

"Mister Longbottom, Mister Weasley…"

"Professor McGonagall." Neville replied forcefully. "The Potter alliance was well aware of the plot by Harry's enemies to enter him into the tournament. Clearly they've succeeded and that means the House of Potter is now at war." His gaze met Harry's stunned eyes. "Lord Potter has our fealty and our trust; we stand with him."

"We're here for you, mate." Ron's hand landed on his other shoulder.

Angelina suddenly stood. "I'm with you too, Harry."

"And us!" chorused Fred and George, standing.

The entirety of Gryffindor scrambled to its feet.

Cedric walked until he was just behind the high table. He looked at Hufflepuff and turned back to Harry. "The Hogwarts Champion stands with you."

Hufflepuff got to its feet.

Luna sprang to hers at the same time as Natalie Warren, the Head Girl, and the rest of Ravenclaw followed.
There was only the Slytherins left but one by one, they got to their feet. Some appeared unwilling and miserable about it but since it was clearly in their interests not to be singled out as the only person not to stand up, they got up.

Dumbledore sniffed audibly at the sight of Hogwarts united in appearance if not wholly in spirit. The visiting schools regarded them with shock and curiosity.

Harry's emotions surged again but this time with so much pride in the alliance, and gratitude and relief that the rest of the school accepted he was in the tournament against his will that he almost blacked out. He wrestled his magic back under control and took one shaky breath after another. He took courage from Ron's determined expression; from Neville's steadfastness; from the sight of Draco nodding at him from the Slytherin table, and twelve year old Connor Sapworthy smiling brightly at him.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Everyone, I appreciate there are political alliances in play here, but this matter needs to be resolved in a less public forum." He raised a hand and looked over at Harry. "I assume Miss Granger has gone to request Lord Black's presence as your guardian?"

Harry nodded jerkily.

"Well, then, if everyone else could retake their seats," Dumbledore motioned for everyone to sit down, "Harry will go to the antechamber with Professor McGonagall and we will await Lord Black's arrival."

Nobody moved except one lone Slytherin first year who almost sank into his seat, realised nobody else had, and froze half-way in what looked like an uncomfortable position.

"As the Regent Apparent of the House of Potter," Minerva said crisply, "I assure you all that I will stay with Lord Potter until Lord Black arrives. You may be seated."

Neville simply glanced at Harry for confirmation.

Harry nodded. "Thank you."

Neville reluctantly sat down and the rest of the school followed him. Ron waited until everyone else sat down before he sent his own look of 'are you sure' to Harry. Harry nodded imperceptibly back at him and Ron retook his seat with a heavy sigh.

Harry stumbled a little climbing out from the bench but Minerva steadied him. He saw Bagman ushering the gawping press – including an almost vibrating-with-glee Rita Skeeter – back into the antechamber.

"Professor Moody," Dumbledore said, "if you could bring the Goblet for examination?"

Moody limped over. He and Harry reached the Goblet at the same time.

"I'm sorry, lad." Moody said in a low voice.

Harry tried to smile but he couldn't quite make his face work. "It's not your fault." He was aware all eyes were still on them as he walked behind the high table and entered the antechamber; he dimly heard Dumbledore order everyone back to the Common Rooms.

"Harry!" Rita immediately moved to question him and Minerva blocked her.

"Mister Bagman," Minerva said briskly, "perhaps you can show the illustrious members of the press
to another room while we await Lord Black?” Her icy stare seemed to slide right off Rita.

"We have a right to ask questions!” Rita argued.

"But not of a minor." Snape spoke up, sneeringly. Harry had barely noticed the Slytherin Head leaning against the far wall.

"Professor Snape is quite correct, Ms Skeeter," Dumbledore said as he entered, "and I am certain Lord Black will not be pleased should Harry be interrogated by the press in his absence." He waved at Bagman. "Please escort them to the Charms classroom, Ludo. We will issue a statement after speaking with Lord Black."

"That’s…” Rita began to protest.

"Good enough for me!” proclaimed a stout woman with black hair and a calculating gleam in her green eyes. "The International Wizarding Herald is happy to wait for a statement and perhaps an opportunity to ask you questions, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Very well, Ms Goose."

"Esmeralda, please." She turned to Bagman. "Well, lead the way, Ludo. I went to Salem; I don't have a Scooby how to get to this Charms place."

"I know the way!" Xeno Lovegood offered his arm to his fellow reporter and the two of them made their way out.

Bagman smiled charmingly at Rita, offering his arm. She gave a sickly smile and they left.

Moody placed the Goblet on a side table and Minerva ushered Harry further into the room. Professor Sprout and Cedric both gave him supportive smiles. Snape glowered at him as usual. Everyone else looked confused and bewildered.

Harry rubbed his forehead at a stab of pain.

"Dumblydoor," Madame Maxime cleared her throat, "what is going on?"

"I would like to know that too." Karkaroff stated with a vaguely threatening air. "You have two Champions. Is this some kind of prank?"

"Hogwarts has but one Champion." Dumbledore replied. "Harry was entered not of his own free will but by those meaning to do him harm."

Fleur regarded Harry as though he was a particularly interesting bug. "But he is a child!"

Karkaroff snorted. "Are you so certain the boy didn't enter himself?"

"I didn't enter!" Harry said hotly. And there was another jab of hot pain inside his head. He shook it trying to dislodge the ache.

Viktor shifted, catching the attention of his Headmaster. "If Lord Potter says he did not enter, he did not enter, Headmaster."

Karkaroff looked as though he wanted to argue with his star pupil but he conceded with a small nod. "What happens now with the competition?"

Dumbledore frowned as he glanced around the room. "Where is Bartemius?"
"He muttered something about alerting the DMLE." Snape said, straightening to reply to Dumbledore.

"I've already sent a patronus to Bones and Croaker." Moody said as his wand began to wave over the Goblet.

Harry mused that he must have missed seeing it with his eyes closed.

There was a noise and Sirius entered the room at a run, Remus at his heels. Harry wasn't really aware of how it happened; one moment he was standing with Minerva beside him and the next he was wrapped up tightly in Sirius's arms.

"I didn't enter, I promise." Harry's words were muffled into Sirius's shoulder.

"I know, Harry." Sirius sounded choked. "I never thought you would."

Harry felt relief course through him. He'd known intellectually that Sirius would never believe he'd entered himself especially given the known threat of Voldemort entering him, but it was good to hear it out loud.

His head ached again.

Harry didn't want to move but he was too self-conscious about the others in the room to continue being hugged as though he were a small child. He moved tentatively out of Sirius's hold to stand beside him. Remus's hand fell onto his shoulder.

Sirius kept one arm around Harry's back and took a deep breath as he glared at Dumbledore. "How the hell did this happen?"

"A good question." Madame Maxime said.

"There're no obvious signs of tampering and nobody here at Hogwarts got near the Goblet who wasn't supposed to be near the Goblet, Black," Moody reported, frustration eking into his voice, "I'd swear to it."

"Well, nobody got near it at the Ministry who wasn't supposed to be near it either." Sirius retorted. His eyes widened. "The only time it was out of my sight was after Crouch took custody." He pointed at Moody. "He had it for half an hour before he turned up here."

"Was it actually Crouch?" Remus asked bluntly.

"It was at the Ministry." Sirius stated firmly. "Amelia did the identity checks herself before we picked up the Goblet from the DOM."

"And it was here too!" Moody glowered at Remus. "I can perform an identity check!"

"But Bartemius would never side with You-Know-Who!" Minerva said, shocked at the direction of the conversation.

"Imperius?" offered Remus as an explanation.

"I can spot someone under the Imperius!" Moody said indignantly.

"The same name." Harry blurted out, dragging the information from his lesson with Moody. "If someone is polyjuiced and they have the same name..."
"Crouch's son had the same name!" Remus said, breathlessly.

Snape scowled. "My memories…"

"There is no other secret LeStrange paramour!" Sirius said. "It's the one they kept hidden back then that we knew about now; Crouch Junior!"

"But he's dead!" Professor Sprout spoke up.

Everyone looked at her.

"I mean," Sprout said wringing her hands, "isn't he?"

"Maybe not as dead as we thought." Sirius snapped. "Where is he, Albus?"

"I will check the wards." Dumbledore closed his eyes briefly before they flew open again and he started for the door. "He is almost at the Forbidden Forest."

The door slammed shut of its own accord halting Dumbledore's progress. A shimmer of red rolled over the room.

"What's going on, Dumblydoor?" asked Madame Maxime worriedly.

"I do not know," Dumbledore said, his wand moving gracefully as he attempted to find out what was going on, "a ward has been raised preventing our exit and Fawkes's entry, but it is not of Hogwarts." His eyes widened. "It is the Goblet!"

There was another blinding stab of pain and Harry clutched at his head as it wrenched him from Sirius's grasp and sent Harry to his knees.

"Harry!"

Sirius made to take hold of him but Harry pushed him away weakly, driven by some instinct that told him it was a bad idea.

"No, stay back!" Harry felt his magic rising to meet the threat of whatever was causing him pain. He held his hand up in front of him shakily. His skin glowed gold; silver rippled over the surface.

"Oh Merlin!" Remus said. "Lily's protection has activated!"

"What does that mean?" Madame Maxime asked plaintively.

"The one who tried to kill him cannot touch him!" Remus kneeled beside Harry. "The Goblet binds the Champions. Since Barty Crouch Junior acted in Voldemort's name in entering Harry's name into the Goblet…"

"Dear Merlin!" Minerva said horrified.

"The Goblet can't bind with him because of the protection." Dumbledore determined. "That is why it has locked us in here; to prevent Harry from escaping. It doesn't truly understand why it cannot bind."

"Isn't this a good thing?" Cedric asked tentatively. "If the Goblet can't bind with him, he can't be in the tournament."

"Unfortunately, it is not that simple, Mister Diggory." Dumbledore said urgently. "The last time
Harry's protection was activated to defeat Voldemort. Voldemort was ripped from his body and the cottage around Harry almost destroyed. If it attempts to destroy the Goblet to defeat the threat to Harry…"

"You need to get us out of here, Dumbledore!" Karkaroff snapped angrily.

There was another stab of searing pain; gold flickered all around Harry as he fought for breath as the shield around him flared.

Sirius kneeled beside Harry; he raised a hand to place on his back and lowered it again without touching him. "Harry, you need to control the protection."

"How?" asked Harry, struggling to focus.

Remus snapped his fingers. "The spell is powered by your family magic, Harry. Call it up and talk with the snake!"

Harry raised his trembling hand as pain lanced through his head. "Familius magicus!"

Gold and silver rushed out of his hand, pooling on the floor beside him into the totems' distinct forms. Immediately the griffin moved to surround him again, wrapping its wings tightly around Harry. He slumped into its embrace and closed his eyes, shivering with reaction.

The feel of the griffin changed a touch and Harry whimpered.

"Lily!" breathed Snape.

Harry's eyes snapped back open. It was his mother holding him, Harry realised; her golden spirit form and where the griffin's wings had encased him, her arms now held him. He swallowed on a lump of emotion.

"Mum?" Harry struggled to shift position so he could drink in her features, look into her eyes.

"Rest, my Harry." Lily's spirit whispered. "You are safe."

"Who dares threaten he who is shielded with my blessing!" A voice thundered.

Harry tore his gaze away from his mother. Merlin! He'd called Morgana again, he thought slightly hysterical.

She stood as a silvery shield in front of him, her long old-fashioned robe swirling about her, her hair streaming.

"My Lady, the Goblet is attempting a binding on my son after his enemy placed his name within it." Sirius explained hurriedly as everyone else gaped on.

Morgana's hand snapped out. "Spiritus manifestus!"

Instantly, Harry felt the pain go away and he took a deep breath, soaking up the feeling of his mother's love surrounding him.

The Goblet glowed. The blue and white flames flared and suddenly streamed out of the Goblet to land on the floor in front of it. They rose and shifted until the body of an old woman took shape.

Moody stumbled back from her. Madame Maxime pushed Fleur behind her and Karkaroff moved to do the same with Viktor. Professor Sprout tugged Cedric back. Minerva, Remus and Sirius
surrounded Harry in a loose circle. Harry tried to ignore how Snape's focus was affixed to the spirit of his mother.

"You will explain yourself!" Morgana directed imperiously to the old woman.

"I owe you no explanation." The Spirit of the Goblet proclaimed.

Morgana bristled, the silver rippling furiously. "I am Morgana of the line of Le Fey! You are attempting to bind a child shielded by me!"

The Spirit of the Goblet frowned. "He has been chosen."

"My Lady Morgana, if I may?" Dumbledore said diplomatically.

Morgana stared at him for a long moment. "You may speak, Albus of the line of Dumbledore."

Dumbledore bowed his head to her before turning to the Spirit of the Goblet. "Spirit," he said, "you have chosen four Champions for a Tri-Wizard Tournament. Someone has magically confused you into doing so. There should only be three Champions."

"I am not confused. The initiation parameters for this tournament were clear; four Champions were to be chosen." The Spirit replied.

Remus cleared his throat. "Is it possible to see the parameters of this tournament?"

"Excellent question, Remus!" Dumbledore said.

The Spirit of the Goblet held out her hand and a parchment formed within it.

Dumbledore removed it from her hand, frowning at the charred edges as he read the contents. "It is as I feared; these are not the parameters we agreed for the tournament."

"Shouldn't the tournament be voided then?" Professor Sprout asked bravely. "If the parameters for the tournament have been altered from what was agreed previously?"

"Is there a way to void the tournament?" asked Dumbledore of the Spirit.

"No." The Spirit of the Goblet said. "Once the tournament has been initiated, the tournament must proceed to its end."

"Bloody Crouch must have initiated the tournament when he had the Goblet to himself!" Moody snarled.

"Then what was the piece of paper he submitted during our Initiation Ceremony?" Madame Maxime demanded.

"Potter's name presumably." Snape said. "It would satisfy his sense of arrogance to do such a thing right under our very noses."

Madame Maxime cleared her throat. "What are the new parameters?"

"The tournament schedule remains the same." Dumbledore said. "But there is a fourth Champion to be chosen for 'The Light.' One assumes that Harry was the only entrant. The number of judges has been reduced to four but it is no longer specified whether they are to be from the schools, the Ministry or elsewhere. Some part of the tasks we agreed remains but they have been altered."
"Dear Merlin!" Professor Sprout muttered.

"What about the age rule?" asked Sirius gruffly.

"The age rule was not part of the parameters but a conceit of our ability to prevent anyone under-aged from entering." Dumbledore admitted with chagrin.

"It's likely if it had been, it would have been changed anyway." Remus glanced at the Spirit. "What about the rule that they must enter their own name?"

Dumbledore perked up. "Traditionally, candidates submit their own names as, I believe, like in a normal magical contract, it provides the permission for the binding to form. Spirit, Harry did not enter himself and therefore should not be bound as he didn't give his permission."

"The original spells which created me did not restrict others from entering the names of the candidates. The rule of which you speak is usually spelled out in the initiation parameters." The Spirit replied. "It matters not who entered him to me, only that he was entered."

"Bloody idiocy! Anyone could enter anyone else!" Moody snarled.

"Probably the rule was added to the initiation after someone entered someone else maliciously!" Remus guessed.

"Alas it has been removed from the original wording of initiation in this document allowing Harry to be chosen." Dumbledore waved the parchment he held.

"Enough!" Morgana snapped angrily, silver swirls of magic surrounding her. "You will not bind the one I protect!"

"It is the bargain." The Spirit of the Goblet replied evenly. "Each Champion is bound to me to renew my flames with their magic. If they do not perform a task, their magic becomes mine. If they die, their magic becomes mine."

"And if they refuse to be bound?" Sirius asked harshly.

"They will be bound." She answered implacably.

"Then you will be destroyed." Morgana said and raised her hand.

"No!" Harry said, some instinct nagging at him.

Morgana paused.

"What happens when the, if the Goblet is destroyed, Spirit?" Harry asked.

"Good question." Sirius said quietly and Harry flushed with praise.

"At the moment of my destruction my magic would call to those who are promised or bound to me."

It was the price of being a Champion, Harry surmised. To have the glory and the respect given to a Champion, the individual risked their life and their magic. There was always a price to pay. And there were now four Champions, one promised but three already bound…

"All those bound?" checked Harry, with a sinking heart. "You would take those already bound with you at the last?"
"Mon Dieu!" Fleur muttered.

Sprout had her hand over her mouth, Cedric pale and unmoving beside her.

Viktor looked grim; his dark eyes gleaming.

Harry closed his eyes briefly before he reopened them and slowly got to his feet, his mother's spirit supporting him as he got upright. "I'll accept the binding."

"My son." His mother stroked his hair, gold drifting over him. "The binding is tainted with the touch of the one who tried to kill you."

"We will never allow it to touch thee." Morgana turned to him.

"But the binding isn't him, it's not really Voldemort." Harry argued. "Just the instrument of his evil. And…and you protect me but if we destroy the Goblet to prevent the binding, I may be hurt worse than accepting the binding." He looked into his mother's eyes deeply. "And even if you do somehow prevent the Goblet from taking my magic and life when it's destroyed, it's not just me. I can't…the other Champions shouldn't die or lose their magic. That's not fair or right. I won't let them be sacrificed for me."

He glanced at Sirius who looked at him with wet grey eyes but who nodded slowly, understanding his decision.

"I'm very proud of you, Harry." Sirius said softly.

"And this, thy great heart and shining spirit, this is why thou carry my blessing." Morgana leaned forward and kissed his forehead, disappearing in a shimmer of silver.

Harry wanted to hold onto his mother's spirit, to beg her never to leave him. His throat closed up and her golden hands tightened on his. "Your father and I have never left you, Harry, and we never will." She kissed his forehead and was gone in a fall of golden dust.

Harry felt drained of all energy; bone tired and weary.

"You, Harry James Potter, of all who entered, deserve your place as Champion." The Spirit of the Goblet moved forward and held out her hands. "You have resisted me so I warn you, this may hurt."

He remembered the stabbing pains and grimaced. Still, Harry nodded and slid his hands into hers…

Heat suffused him…

Flames surrounded him…

Pain everywhere…

And Harry slipped into unconsciousness with a grateful moan.
Ensuring Pronglet Survives:1

Part 8: Ensuring Pronglet Survives (The Dating is More Dangerous than Dragons Prank)

The Spirit of the Goblet transformed in front of their eyes, her essence changing from an old woman to a young girl such was the renewal prompted by her binding with Harry. She let go of him and shifted into flames, pouring back into the Goblet.

Sirius didn't watch; he was too busy, jumping forward just in time to catch Harry before he hit the floor. It was becoming too much of a regular occurrence, Sirius thought wildly as he cradled Harry against him and felt for a pulse.

It beat out a pattern under his fingers. He breathed out in relief, ignoring the rest of the room and the pounding on the door of the antechamber.

Remus crouched down beside him, waving his wand to assess the damage. "His hands are burned."

Sirius's eyes were drawn to them. He swallowed hard at the sight of Harry's beautiful hands, curled in on themselves, red raw.

Snape was suddenly on the other side of Harry. "I can perform a mild healing spell for the burns with your permission?"

"I will perform any healing, Professor Snape." Doctor Jordan suddenly appeared, and Sirius belated realised the door must have opened allowing others entry. She pushed Remus aside as Poppy did the same to Snape. Jordan's wand weaved authoritatively over Harry filling Sirius was confidence.

"We need to get him to the infirmary." Jordan stated briskly, conjuring a stretcher.

"I'll carry him." Sirius adjusted his hold very carefully in anticipation of picking Harry up.

Jordan slapped Remus's wand away as he made to do a featherlight charm. "No magic. This is why I conjured the stretcher. Sirius, be sensible and for Harry's sake use it. It'll be quicker so we can start treatment sooner."

Sirius hefted Harry into his arms but resisted his desire not to let go of his son and transferred him as Jordan had instructed to the stretcher. He had to do what was best for Harry.

"Thank you." Jordan took control of the stretcher with her wand.

It floated out of the door and beyond where Dumbledore was discussing the unmasking of Crouch Junior as their mystery rogue with Moody and Amelia. Sirius ignored them and kept pace with the healers. Minerva fell into step behind him as did Remus.

The corridors were thankfully empty. The students nowhere in sight which was something Sirius knew Harry would be thankful for when he woke up.

Jordan hurried down another flight of stairs, Poppy bustling along beside her. Another corridor and another and they were suddenly there…the doors of the infirmary in front of them.

They headed straight through the main ward to a private room, and Harry was transferred manually from the stretcher to a bed. Poppy and Jordan began stripping Harry of his clothes without using magic and Sirius's concern rose even as he moved to help them, quickly getting him down to his
Jordan motioned for them to stand back; green healing energy poured from her wand over Harry's body. "His core is unstable thanks to the binding. It...Sirius, do you remember that Harry's core healed of its childhood binding but there was some scarring that Noshi wasn't able to prevent or mitigate?"

"Yes," Sirius nodded, "I remember."

"The new binding is irritating the scars along his core and his core is unhappy for the want of a better word. I'm wrapping it in healing energy like Noshi did in the Summer." Jordan explained as she continued to work. "I may need to consult with Noshi to understand what this binding is going to do to his power and his control of it."

"Anything you need to do just do it." Sirius managed to croak out.

"OK," Jordan said, "on the minor side; Harry's hands are burned but easily fixed once I've got his core wrapped up like a Mummy. He's also suffering from severe magical exhaustion. I don't expect him to wake up until tomorrow night at the earliest."

Sirius breathed a little easier. He was going to be fine. "When can I take him home?" Because he wanted Harry home where Sirius could hide him away from the rest of the world and keep him safe.

"Sirius..." Minerva murmured warily, presumably anticipating his decision.

Jordan didn't look at him. "I want to keep him overnight; assess his core tomorrow. If his core is...not unhappy then I'll allow him to recuperate at home with the understanding that Poppy and I will pay regular visits."

"I can live with that." Sirius said.

"Wouldn't it be better for him to remain here?" asked Minerva pointedly.

Jordan shook her head. "It would be better for Harry to be at home in a familiar bed with people who love him taking care of him. It's medically proven to have a beneficial effect. However, he won't be moved until I'm certain his core won't object to magical transportation." She stepped back. "Poppy, if you can take over, do his hands and get him settled?"

"Of course, Doctor Jordan." Poppy said briskly, moving into position, a jar of ointment flying towards her from the potion stores.

Jordan rolled her neck tiredly. "He's all bandaged up now." She reached out to Sirius. "You can stay here. I'll get another bed put in the room for you."

Sirius nodded, more thankful than ever that he and Harry had gone to the Valley Clinic, that Helen had taken up the opportunity at Hogwarts and understood his need to be with Harry.

She glanced at Remus and Minerva. "You can both stay or visit if you wish. But I don't want students in here; any immature magic could destabilise the healing energy which would be very bad for his core right now."

Minerva nodded. "Thank you. All students were ordered to the Common Rooms after the Goblet selected the Champions. Once Poppy is done I'll update his friends."

"I'm going to go talk to Noshi." Jordan left swiftly.
Sirius walked over to the free side of the bed and conjured a chair to sit down. He watched as Poppy competently smothered Harry's hands in ointment and wrapped them in bandages, as she set the monitoring and body maintenance spells that would ensure Harry's bodily functions would be immediately taken care of without any intrusive interaction for as long as he slept. She covered him in a blanket and got him comfortable. She gave Sirius an encouraging nod when she was done.

"He's a strong boy, Sirius." Poppy said. "He'll come through this."

"Thank you, Poppy." Sirius said, reaching out to hold Harry's arm. He waited until she was out of the room. "Dobby!"

The house elf popped in, saw Harry and his overlarge eyes filled with tears and distress immediately. "Harry Potter is injured!"

"Healing." Sirius said succinctly. "Get Harry's things from Gryffindor tower and take them to Griffin House. We'll be coming home tomorrow; get everything ready."

"Yes, Harry Potter's Paddy, sir." Dobby popped away again.

Minerva gave a sigh. "I should get to Gryffindor tower before Dobby creates panic." She regarded him compassionately. "You're not intending for Harry to return, are you?"

"Would you?" Sirius asked brusquely.

"I'll leave Remus to argue about it with you." She sniffed and marched out.

Sirius cocked his head in Remus's direction. "Are you planning to argue me out of going ahead with plan A again?"

Remus conjured a second chair and sank into it. He rubbed his forehead. "No," he admitted, "wrapping Harry in cotton wool and hiding him away from the rest of the world seems imminently preferable to me right at this moment."

"Oh bugger! We need to contain what was seen." Sirius said, his mind starting to process and assimilate everything that had happened now it wasn't preoccupied with Harry's survival. "Remus…"

"I'll see to it." Remus left without another word, the conjured chair disintegrating in his wake.

Sirius kept his hand around Harry's arm and scanned the pale face. "I am so very proud of you, Harry, and what you did today. You have no idea. And I know this, being in the tournament, isn't ideal and pretty much what we were trying to avoid, but you're not alone and we will beat the son of a bitch. He may put you through nine months of trials but he still has to get you for the ritual and that part…that part I fully intend to screw with."

A gentle cough at the doorway had Sirius immediately turning to assess the threat.

Albus's eyes fell on Harry. "How is he?"

"He's magically exhausted, his hands are burned but they're healing now, and the Goblet binding is chafing against the scar tissue your binding left behind on his core." Sirius said harshly before taking a calming breath and reminding himself it wasn't Albus's fault that Harry had been entered into the tournament. "He'll recover."

Albus moved into the room and shut the door behind him. He glided up to the other side of the bed.
"There are many things I would change, Sirius, if I had the chance to do it over." Albus said softly. "When I…at the end of Harry's first year, when I realised Voldemort's ruse and returned, when I found Harry unconscious and exhausted and dying in front of the shattered Mirror of Erised…I hated myself in that moment in a manner that I have only once felt before when my sister died." He said. "I watched over him in the infirmary and…I swore I would protect him from Voldemort as much as I could for as long as I could. You brought home my failures in that regard this Summer. I pledged to do better, and yet here we are once more."

"What happened at the end of Harry's first year…that was your fault. This…" Sirius sighed heavily. "This isn't your fault as much as I…as much as I want someone to blame." He shook his head. "In many ways I have a greater understanding of the difficulties of the decisions you faced before I assumed Harry's guardianship than I did when I confronted you at the beginning of the Summer. It's…it's not easy to make the right decision; to get the balance right between protecting him and letting him live his life." His lips twisted. "I still think the decisions you made were wrong but…” But he understood that they hadn't been made easily. It soothed something of the hurt that learning Albus wasn't infallible, that Albus's decisions had hurt Harry, had inflicted. He motioned vaguely in Albus's direction. "This isn't something either of us could have anticipated."

"If that is your view then I admit I am confused." Albus said hesitantly. "On my way here, my path crossed with Minerva's and…"

"And Minnie hinted that I'm taking Harry home and probably not coming back." Sirius concluded with a sigh. He glanced over at the old wizard. "Honestly, Albus, I don't know what I'm going to do." He felt a bubble of hysteria rising and pushed it down ruthlessly. He took a calming breath. "All I know right now is that I want Harry home where I can protect him best."

"I can certainly understand that sentiment." Albus said, not without kindness. "But I would caution you not to make the same mistakes I made. For all his time here at Hogwarts has been and is filled with challenge, it does provide him with much happiness."

"I'm sure Harry will argue the same when he wakes up." Sirius admitted. He sighed and rubbed his forehead tiredly. "I'll not do a formal withdrawal until I've spoken with him, Albus, but apart from my…," wanting to lock Harry up for the rest of his natural life, his mind supplied, "my concern, I'm not sure how this will work now he's bound to participate in the tournament against the Hogwarts' Champion? And we still have to discuss his schooling in general. He's way ahead on a practical level," he gave a short laugh, "which considering what he's about to face is just as well but…"

"But he will need an independent lesson structure either way." Albus agreed sagely. "You are also correct that we will need to review how the Goblet is likely to interpret Harry's position, although I will say that if Harry becomes home-schooled, if the Goblet believes that constitutes 'The Light' within the initiation parchment, you will be subject to quite limiting rules on how you may help him with the tournament as a Professor."

Sirius nodded. "I'd like a copy of the original spell rules."

"I will arrange it, Sirius." Albus slid his hands into the sleeves of his orange robe as there was a soft knock and Amelia entered without waiting for an answer.

"Sorry, but I'd thought you'd want to know immediately." Amelia said briskly, brushing back a stray hair that had escaped her efficient bun. "It looks like Crouch Junior apparated but the magic in the Forest corrupted the trail. The Auror team can't get a lock to trace and follow." She nodded at the bed. "How is Harry?"

"He'll be alright." Sirius said succinctly.
"The Rat Squad and about half of the Auror force should be raiding Crouch's house shortly." Amelia continued. "It's more than probable if that's where they were that they've moved on but we have to try." She grimaced. "Rufus and I are agreed that the likely switch-over must have happened during the week Crouch sent word he had wizard flu."

"He never had it." Sirius corrected brusquely. "Crouch Junior must have taken his father hostage."

"Yes." Amelia nodded. "And no doubt he's been impersonating his father ever since. I feel so stupid. I should have realised something was amiss in Crouch's behaviour but frankly, I put his oddities since his return from the flu down to having to live with your presence and the very visible reminder of his making a mistake."

Sirius understood. He hadn't thought anything of Crouch's behaviour too caught up in his own anger about the role his former boss had played in sending him to Azkaban without a trial. "Why would we suspect Crouch? He was fanatical in pursuing Death Eaters and fighting against Voldemort, and his son was dead."

"Yet in hindsight I see every clue that is now apparent that he wasn't Crouch Senior." Amelia sighed. "He forgot names, he dodged meetings and responsibilities, he took additional time off sick...he left the World Cup early...obviously to change into the appearance of Auror Hollins."

"You're not the only one who missed clues." Sirius pointed out. "We've known it was someone connected to the LeStranges; we just didn't think it was him since he was, you know, dead."

"I want to know how he escaped Azkaban and survived." Amelia admitted sharply. "Crouch claimed the ashes and had them interred with his wife..." her eyes widened as she made the connection.

"His wife who died a mere day after visiting her son?" Albus sighed. "I fear we have found out the means by which young Bartemius survived. She was devoted to her son. Knowing she was dying, I am certain she would have taken his place eagerly in Azkaban."

"How he survived doesn't really matter," Sirius pointed out, "finding him now does." He paused, a germ of an idea forming in his head. "Kreacher!"

Kreacher popped into the room and his eyes immediately went to Harry. "Dobby informs Kreacher Master Harry is to come home?"

Sirius nodded. "Tomorrow, when the healer releases him. Kreacher, the Crouch family is part of the House of Black." There was no primacy though since the Ancient and Noble House of Crouch had equal standing – or it had had equal standing at the time the two Houses had been joined by matrimony. "Can you find Bartemius Crouch Junior?"

"He has no Black blood and his elf bond prevents it." Kreacher replied.

"Could you find his elf then?" Sirius asked.

Kreacher frowned. "Kreacher is uncertain but Kreacher can try to find Winky."

"Lock down Black Manor first," Sirius ordered, "send word to the other house elves to do the same on all Black properties; entry only for you, me, my Heir, the steward, Penny and Dobby. I won't be displeased if you can't find Winky but try and bring her to me if you manage to secure her."

"Do you wish her dead or alive?" Kreacher asked.
Sirius blinked at Kreacher's enthusiastic tone and knew if he ordered the house elf to bring Winky back dead he'd do it with no hesitation. "Alive."

Kreacher popped away.

"Ingenious." Albus praised him warmly.

"Maybe." Sirius muttered. "Let's see if it works."

Amelia scratched her forehead. "I'd forgotten about the elf." She sighed heavily. "Dear Merlin, Junior's had foreknowledge of every security measure we've taken even if we hadn't confided all the reasons why we were taking them."

"And poor Percy Weasley has been keeping him informed of all Ministry business." Albus sighed heavily. "He will be most devastated to know he helped to assist the man who attacked his family."

"We're going to have to do a full audit of the last four months in that department." Amelia grimaced again. "I suppose I'll be the one to break the news to Cornelius."

"I'm sure you'll do a fine job." Albus grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Ah, I had forgotten. We have members of the press sequestered into the Charms classroom. I shall have to speak with them."

"Speak to Cornelius first and get his view about what should be released to the media." Sirius advised. "He's much better at spinning a news item than we are."

"What do you want to say about Harry?" Amelia said gently.

"That the person who issued the death threats has succeeded in entering him into the tournament." Sirius had to fight against the lump in his throat to continue. "That because he initially resisted being bound, he was injured when he finally acquiesced and is undergoing healing. That I am taking him home and will be debating the repercussions with Albus and other advisors in the near future."

Amelia nodded. "The vultures should be satisfied with that." She made a face. "Can you imagine if they'd been present when the various spirits showed up?"

"Remus went off to make sure nobody talked." Sirius stated tiredly.

"Bertie was already on it although I'm certain he'd be grateful for Remus's help." Amelia smiled at Sirius's surprise. "You were rather preoccupied with getting Harry to the infirmary, Sirius. Karkaroff is going to be obliviated; Bertie didn't want to risk his keeping any memory of the event since he's a former Death Eater; the others including the Champions have agreed to take vows to keep the existence of Harry's protectors secret and to only share that Harry was forced into the tournament."

"We should go and call Cornelius now, Amelia." Albus said. "The sooner we speak with him, the sooner we can talk with the press."

"Will you be alright here alone, Sirius?" Amelia asked.

Sirius wondered what he must look like to have prompted the question but he nodded. "I'm not alone, Amelia. I have Harry."

"Yes, you do," she said pointedly and patted his shoulder, "keep that in mind, Sirius."

Sirius's hand tightened on Harry's arm as Albus and Amelia hurried out. He welcomed the silence;
his mind churning.

Bartemius Crouch Junior.

There was no doubt at all in his mind that the Rat Squad would find the Crouch residence abandoned. He believed that they’d find Crouch Senior dead. With the ruse discovered there was no way that Voldemort would let him live; no way that Junior would let him live either.

He remembered Barty; handsome, charismatic, and popular. He'd played Quidditch; gained a position as a prefect if not as a Head Boy. He'd joined the Auror Academy right out of school with a set of Outstandings on his NEWTs, and yet his performance there hadn't indicated any particular prowess. But then, Sirius considered gravely, it was all too possible that Barty hadn't wanted to draw attention. Better to make people think that he'd been academically perfect but struggled in real life than for people to pick up on how powerful he was.

Cunning.

The death threats had been Barty, Sirius deduced. Barty had the house elf; she would have followed orders and sent the letter, written the words during the Longbottom party. Sirius was suddenly very angry and regretting his decision to have Kreacher bring her back alive if he caught her. The elf was bound to follow Barty's orders, he knew that, but…she had been a major part of events that had terrorised his son.

Still, he'd made the right decision. They needed intel. Whatever the elf revealed would be useful. Not that an elf would reveal much without coercion because of their bonds, but his grandfather had taught him a Dark spell that somehow usurped the elf's ownership for a brief time. Maybe it wasn't ethical to use it but Harry's safety was more important.

Which reminded him…

"Cally!"

A female house elf popped in wearing a fastidiously clean tea-towel embroidered with the crest of the House of Black.

"Master." She bowed to him.

For once, Sirius didn't correct her and urge her into less subservient behaviour. "Bring me the files on the LeStranges, and Bartemius Crouch and his son from the cabinet in my…my study."

She nodded and popped away again.

He'd rarely used the information locked away in his grandfather's cabinet. He'd hated how he'd boxed the Malfoys in using the primacy threat to force them into compliance, although it had been necessary, and he had hoped that he wouldn't have to resort to blackmailing or bribing or engaging in dubiously ethical behaviour ever again. But knowing his enemy was necessary, Sirius thought determinedly, and Barty Crouch Junior had been his enemy from the moment he had been Marked by Voldemort.

He was almost startled when the elf returned with the requested files. "Thank you, Cally."

Cally's eyes opened in her usual astonishment at being appreciated. She popped away.

Sirius looked at the weighty stack of files with foreboding but he reached for the top one with his free hand. He flipped it open and started reading.
Hermione felt a shiver of alarm go through her as she pushed her way through the crowd of students returning to Gryffindor tower and tried to find Ron or Neville or, even better; Harry. But she wasn't really expecting Harry.

Sirius had told her to stay in the tower; that he and Remus were en route to the school. She had gotten up from her place in the Common Room to go back to the Great Hall anyway a dozen times, and a dozen times talked herself out of disobeying the Head of the House of the Black who was effectively her wizarding guardian regardless that Andy was the one who sponsored her formally. Her lower lip throbbed with pain and Hermione was aware that she had bitten it to pieces during the excruciating wait. Finally, she spotted a head of familiar red hair.

"Ron!"

Ron's face wasn't encouraging, neither was Neville's as he followed Ron towards her.

"Where's Harry?" demanded Hermione.

"They kept him back with the other Champions." Ron said disgusted. "Did you get hold of Sirius?"

"He's on his way, Professor Lupin too." Hermione bit her lip again, unaware of the slip in how she referred to Remus.

"Good," Ron rubbed his nose, "bloody incompetents! How could they let someone enter Harry?!"

"That's what I'd like to know." Neville said, folding his arms and his chin jutting out defensively. "They should have let us guard the Goblet!"

Hermione pushed her hand through her hair. "I think I should go and wait with Harry until Sirius gets here."

"McGonagall's with him. She gave her word she wouldn't leave him." Ron sounded as unhappy as Hermione felt.

"We tried to stay with him," Neville said, "but they weren't having it." He tapped his feet impatiently. "I think I'm going to go write to my Gran. As soon as Harry gets back I can sneak out and send it with Hedwig."

"Beats hanging around here." Ron confirmed, waving a hand in irritation at the gossiping crowd around him.

Lavender materialised in front of Ron as if by magic as they moved to the boys' staircase. "You're not leaving are you, Ron?" She smiled at him. "I thought you were brilliant back there."

"You and Neville." Parvati said, smiling at Neville.

"Thanks but we still had to leave him." Ron muttered, sidestepping them.

Hermione was too distracted by her worry for Harry to think about offering Lavender another 'I'm sorry he's so dense but he will get that you like him eventually' look. She followed the boys up to their dorm room. It seemed natural for her to sit cross-legged on Harry's bed while Ron threw himself on his own, and Neville dragged out his parchment and quill.

"I don't know what to tell her," Neville admitted, "I mean, I assume Sirius will send all the alliance a
message tomorrow anyway."

"Just tell her that Harry's in the tournament and we're all standing beside him." Ron suggested without raising his head, his gaze fixed on the top canopy of his bed.

Hermione nodded briskly. "Ron's right. Just keep it simple and...and I'm sure your Gran will like that you've taken the time to write to her whether Sirius contacts her before you or not."

Neville sent a grateful look. "Thanks."

For a while, they sat in silence together, the only sound the scratch of Neville's quill against the parchment.

"I just don't see how it happened!" Hermione burst out, unable to keep the thought that had been whizzing through her head silent any longer. "Sirius would never have allowed anyone who shouldn't have been near to the Goblet to get near to it and we know that Moody did the same here so where does that leave us?"

Ron sat up to stare at her. "So you're saying if everyone who touched the Goblet was meant to touch the Goblet..."

"Then whoever entered Harry was meant to touch the Goblet." Neville concluded.

"Who was meant to touch the Goblet then?" Ron questioned, excitedly.

Hermione shifted position, thinking over what Harry had told her about the Goblet's security procedures. "The Goblet is kept locked up in the DOM. Director Croaker was scheduled to handle the retrieval overseen by Director Bones and Sirius though so I don't think there was an opportunity to tamper with the Goblet then."

"So not Croaker or Bones." Ron said, stabbing a finger through the air.

"There was a small ceremony where the Ministry representatives, Mister Crouch and Mister Bagman, entered their names as the officials so the Goblet would recognise their authority during the Initiation Ceremony when the tournament details are entered." Hermione recalled.

"But they had the chance to enter Harry's name instead of their own." Ron said.

"No," Hermione shook her head, "only after the Initiation Ceremony are candidates for Champions entered."

"So it was probably someone at Hogwarts then," Neville pointed out, "because the Initiation Ceremony only happened once the Goblet got here."

"Unless..." Hermione grabbed her hair. "Crouch! Crouch was the one to bring the Goblet to Hogwarts! What if he...what if he performed the Initiation Ceremony when he was alone with it?! He would have plenty of opportunity to enter Harry's name then!"

"But wouldn't the Goblet get confused having two Initiation Ceremonies?" asked Ron, bewildered.

"Well, we don't actually know what the Initiation Ceremony is." Hermione said.

Neville raised his quill. "Gran said it was a fancy name for putting a piece of paper with the agreed dates and tasks in the Goblet."

"So it would be possible," Hermione said, "Crouch just had to do the latter, bring the Goblet here
and then…enter Harry's name under the ruse of entering the details of the tournament!" She bit her lip. "Presumably nobody checked the parchments he was entering because they all trusted him!"

"Doesn't it have to be Harry's name in Harry's handwriting though?" Ron asked. "How would he have that?"

"I don't know." Hermione said. "But it makes sense."

"We should tell someone!" Neville scrambled off his bed, almost upending the bottle of ink. "Crouch could get away otherwise!"

"Right!" Ron made for the door and stopped, whirling around. "Who do we tell?"

Hermione frowned. "We should find a professor. Maybe Professor Flitwick?"

They'd just turned for the door again when there was a popping sound behind them.

Hermione's head whipped around at the familiarity of it. "Dobby!" Her eyes widened hugely as she took in the house elf's frantic packing. "What are you doing?"

"Nasty Goblet binding hurts Harry Potter!" Dobby said, not pausing in his task. "Harry Potter is injured! Harry Potter will be going home tomorrow!"

"Harry's injured!" cried Hermione in alarm. How had that happened? God, she knew it had been a mistake to leave him alone.

"But why are you packing all his things?" Ron questioned the elf brusquely. "He'll be coming back here when he's healed, right?"

Dobby pulled on his ears. "Harry Potter's Paddy ordered Dobby to pack all of Harry Potter's things."

It wasn't quite an admission of Sirius's intent but Hermione was smart enough to understand the implication; Sirius intended to keep Harry home after he had healed. And who could blame him? She sat down abruptly on the nearest bed.

Neville placed a hand on her shoulder and patted her awkwardly. "Hermione, we still have to tell someone about Crouch…"

"And Sirius is bound to be in the infirmary with Harry," Ron chimed in quickly, "we can talk him out of taking Harry home!"

Suddenly, Dean entered the dorm at a run. "Guys! McGonagall's downstairs!"

They all quickly made their way out, running down the staircase, and pushing past people standing in the doorway and in the Common Room until they were in front of their stern looking Head of House.

Professor McGonagall stood in front the portrait and nodded sharply at the sight of Ron, Hermione and Neville as they stopped, breathless in front of her. "I assume that's everybody?"

There was a murmur of agreement.

"We have identified who entered Mister Potter into the tournament and Aurors are presently trying to apprehend the perpetrator." Professor McGonagall informed them briskly. "Some of you may be aware that the Goblet binds the Champions who participate in the tournament into a form of magical contract, and unfortunately when it did this with Mister Potter, because of the circumstances and
Mister Potter's resistance, it has led to Mister Potter being injured. He is currently magically exhausted and will shortly leave to recuperate at his home. Do not attempt to sneak in tonight to see him. Students are currently banned from visiting Mister Potter in the infirmary as any immature magic may negatively disturb his healing. Am I understood?"

Hermione's heart sank but she nodded. She wouldn't do anything to harm Harry or put his healing at risk no matter how much she wanted to see Harry and convince Sirius to let Harry stay at Hogwarts.

Professor McGonagall's gaze swept across the room and settled on Ginny, Lydia and Jessica for a long moment, making Hermione wonder if she knew about the locker room incident. McGonagall drew in a long breath and her eyes moved on, softening as she took in the faces in front of her.

"In all my days in this school, I have never been so proud to be the Head of Gryffindor as I was tonight. Your unequivocal support for Mister Potter, a fellow Gryffindor was…" she paused, seemingly overcome, "inspiring." She concluded. "One hundred points to Gryffindor." She smiled at the cheers and held up her hand. "Curfew begins now for all students for your protection while Aurors are on Hogwarts' grounds." She gave a sharp nod and turned to leave.

"Professor, may we speak with you quickly?" Neville said immediately. "It's about who put Harry into the tournament."

"Let's go to your dorm, Mister Longbottom." Professor McGonagall ushered them through the crowd and up the stairs. She shut the door and erected a privacy bubble. "You wished to speak with me?"

"We think it's Crouch!" blurted out Ron.

"He had the only opportunity to interfere with the Goblet before the Initiation Ceremony." Hermione explained, nervously wringing her hands.

Professor McGonagall's expression softened. "We came to a similar conclusion except we have also determined that the perpetrator is likely to be Bartemius Crouch Junior."

"Isn't he dead?" Neville asked shocked.

"Everyone thought so but the evidence would suggest otherwise." Professor McGonagall said dryly.

Hermione shook her head dismissing the matter of resurrected Death Eaters for the time being as unimportant if everyone already knew who had entered Harry in the tournament. "How's Harry really?"

Professor McGonagall gestured for them to sit. They took Neville's bed, Neville sitting on the half-finished letter to his Gran uncaringly.

"Mister Potter's protection reacted when the Goblet attempted to bind him to it." Professor McGonagall explained gently. "It was likely that the protection may have succeeded in destroying the Goblet and preventing it from taking his life and magic with it, but when he learned that such destruction would endanger the lives and magic of the other Champions, Mister Potter made the decision to be bound regardless. Unfortunately, the delayed nature of the binding reacted badly with his magical core. The activation of his protection has left him exhausted. Doctor Jordan is confident he'll make a full recovery."

"Blimey." Ron muttered.

"Dobby took all of Harry's things." Hermione said almost accusingly.
"Doctor Jordan has indicated Mister Potter will recover better at home," Professor McGonagall drew herself up smartly, "I am certain that Lord Black will make the best decision for Mister Potter's future once he has had a chance to recover from the immediacy of this evening's events."

Hermione nodded slowly at the underlying message that Sirius needed time to process Harry being hurt.

"Now, I should go and speak with the other Houses." Professor McGonagall said briskly, taking down the privacy bubble in anticipation of leaving. "Do not stay up too late."

They chorused their agreement and she left.

Hermione hated crying but her eyes stung anyway and she felt the sob catch in her chest, near to her heart. Harry was hurt and gone and she couldn't see him. She covered her face with her hands, barely aware that either side of her Neville and Ron shifted uncomfortably in the face of her distress, exchanging looks to discuss silently who should deal with her.

Ron awkwardly put an arm around her shoulders. "He'll be alright. He's Harry."

"I know." And she did. Harry would recover and be fine and probably would return to Hogwarts but the memory of him holding her hand so tightly during the selection of the Champions was vivid in her head.

"He's going to be annoyed when he wakes up because he was…he was going to ask you out tomorrow." Ron said hesitantly, squirming when she lowered her hands to stare at him.

"Ron." Neville said exasperated perhaps with Ron spilling the beans but Hermione understood that this was Ron's way of cheering her up.

Hermione wiped her eyes. "I know that too." She managed a small smile as she poked Ron in the ribs. "Neither of you are very subtle."

"Well, then…" Ron said flustered. "So you know…he's liked you a while, he was just waiting to know about the tournament; said it wasn't fair to ask you to be his girlfriend if you didn't know whether he was about to be…well…"

Hermione swiped at her cheeks to brush away more tears. "I would have said yes."

Ron gave her a too-hard squeeze but Hermione appreciated the thought.

"I think we all kind of figured you would." Neville said softly.

Hermione glanced at him, smiling. "If you tell me you had a bet with Blaise about it…"

Neville shook his head hurriedly. "He said it was a sucker's bet to vote for you saying anything but yes."

And Hermione figured that meant she hadn't been exactly subtle either. Her cheeks heated a touch.

"What do we do now?" Ron asked after they'd stayed silent a long moment.

Hermione drew in a breath. "We're going to help Harry stay alive and win the tournament."

Ron nodded. "Right." He frowned. "And how are we going to do that?"

"We need to know everything about the tournament for a start," Hermione stated firmly. "the likely
tasks, all that kind of thing."

"We can get the Potter alliance to help." Neville said. "There are a dozen families with personal libraries that might have additional information to that in the Hogwarts' library."

"Spells!" Ron offered. "We should go through the curriculum and make a list of spells Harry hasn't mastered yet but would have if he was seventeen."

"Good suggestion." Hermione said. She rubbed her head where an ache was building from the stress of the evening. "I think I'll have an early night, start on the plan tomorrow."

Neville nodded. "I'll finish writing to my Gran." He grimaced at the crumpled letter beneath him. "Maybe I'll start again."

"She'll probably appreciate that." Hermione commented. She got up and smoothed down her robes.

Ron got to his feet. "I'll, uh…"

"You don't need to walk me out to the girls' staircase, Ron." Hermione assured him. Yes, she'd been upset but she was fine.

He nodded uncertainly.

"Good night, you two."

Hermione made her escape, grateful for how sweet the boys had been but desperately wanting to get behind the privacy of her bed curtains to come to terms with the reality of what had happened on her own. She almost ran into Dean and Seamus as she got to the bottom of the stairs (and realised they had been hovering waiting for it to be alright for them to head up) and shot them an apologetic smile before she entered the Common Room.

She didn't linger but she caught sight of Angelina apparently once again laying the law down to Ginny, Lydia and Jessica. She slowed her step…

Katie Bell appeared beside her and nudged her onward. "Don't worry; the Quidditch team have got this. We're going to stay in the Common Room and make sure nobody sneaks out to check on Harry."

Hermione gave a grateful nod and hurried up the stairs to her dorm.

As soon as she entered, Lavender and Parvati got up from Lavender's bed to make their way over to her, and Hermione steeled herself for the usual press of questions and attempt to gossip – or more scarily, discuss Ron's sexy attributes. Instead, both girls simply hugged her. Hermione stiffened for a long moment before allowing herself to relax. Her throat closed up again at their silent comfort. They weren't close by any stretch of the imagination but their quiet caring touched Hermione.

Parvati tugged on Hermione's arm. "Come and sit down."

Hermione allowed herself to be led to her bed and she sighed in relief as she sank to sit on the edge.

"Harry's going to be fine," Parvati assured her, "he's Harry."

"I know," Hermione said softly, "it's just…he can't get a break from it, you know?"

Lavender nodded back surprisingly serious.
Hermione smiled at the two of girls. "Thank you both for this."

Lavender shook her head. "No need to thank us. I know we're not close, Hermione, but we – Parvati and I – we like to think we're your friends too?"

Hermione felt incredibly stupid – and guilty for thinking less than nice thoughts about Lavender and Parvati's gossiping and less than studious behaviour. Maybe she should make more of an effort to be friendly rather than just always dismissing them. "Of course we're friends."

They smiled at her again.

Parvati suddenly brushed a hand over Hermione's hair. "You have such great hair; it's so thick and the colour is fab."

Hermione blinked at her. "It's pretty untameable though. Yours always looks perfect."

"We could do yours for you if you'd like?" offered Lavender.

"Maybe…" Hermione motioned with a vague hand-wave, "maybe the day Harry comes back to school?" And she blushed as they both clapped their hands together in glee.

o-O-o

Draco immediately made his way to greet Professor McGonagall as she entered the Slytherin Common Room. It was a rare occurrence for the Head of Gryffindor to set foot in the dungeons never mind the Slytherin heart of it.

"Professor McGonagall, how is my cousin?" Draco asked, knowing the appearance of being concerned about Harry was critical and tried to ignore the tug of unacknowledged genuine concern for Potter deep down in his psyche.

"In a moment, Mister Malfoy," she rapped her wand against the wall, "everyone! If you could gather round, I won't keep you long."

The Slytherins were quick to move into position; each wanting to know what was going on.

"Aurors are on the grounds attempting to apprehend the individual responsible for placing Mister Potter's name in the Goblet." McGonagall said briskly. "Your curfew has been brought forward and begins immediately for all students for your protection. Please do not attempt to wander around the school."

"And the status of my cousin?" Draco prompted again.

She looked vaguely uncomfortable. "Mister Potter attempted to resist the Goblet binding him to the tournament; he was injured. He is in the infirmary overnight for observation and will return home tomorrow to fully recover."

"He felt the binding?" Marcus Flint growled.

Draco repressed the urge to roll his eyes at the Slytherin Captain.

"But only the most powerful wizards…" Philip Adams blanched and shut up.

McGonagall held up her hand. "I suggest you all stay away from the infirmary should you be tempted to leave the dungeons. Lord Black is with Mister Potter and is likely to cast first and ask questions later."
She adjusted her stance, something giving in her expression.

"I realise that many of your families have a very different political view from Lord Potter." The change in designation for Potter brought complete silence to the gathered Slytherins. "It cannot have been easy for some of you to make the decision to stand with the rest of the school in support of him this evening especially given our traditional house rivalry." Her lips twitched. "I commend your bravery."

Ouch, Draco thought with admiration at her Gryffindorish praise.

"One hundred points to Slytherin." McGonagall said crisply and left before Slytherin could do more than blink at her in shock.

Chatter broke out immediately.

The Head of Gryffindor had just awarded Slytherin one hundred points.

Flint straightened, silencing the room once more, and pinned Draco with a frank stare. "Let's not kid ourselves; most of us stood because not to stand when the press was watching would be the height of stupidity. But just how powerful is Potter?"

Draco raised an elegant eyebrow refusing to be intimidated and knowing that his reply was important to his own standing in a way that he had never before appreciated. "Powerful enough that the House of Malfoy welcomes the return of a resurgent House of Black and is happy to be under its protection." Slowly he flicked some imaginary lint off his robes. "It's not just Potter though. Did you know that Lord Black killed eighteen Death Eaters during his time as a Hit Wizard?"

There was an uneasy low murmur that rippled over the students.

"Why do you think the Houses of Nott, Wilkes, Gibbon and Selwyn have sought a détente?" Draco waved a hand at Theo who simply smiled enigmatically. "They don't want their Heirs killed when Black hunts down anyone who threatens ours, and he will hunt them down."

He flicked his wrist as he adjusted his cuffs. "Potter and I may not have the best history but Malfoys will always choose the winning side." He motioned at Flint. "You may have stood this evening because it was politically expedient; I stood because I fully intend to support Potter as he wins this tournament and defeats the bastard who thinks it'll kill him."

"There are rumours, Malfoy." Flint barked. "Rumours that the Dark Lord is rising again and the death threats are at his instigation."

Draco let his gaze travel around the room. "Longbottom was right this evening; the House of Potter will consider itself at war and by extension, so will the House of Black. Regardless of my previous point that Lord Black is fully capable of killing anyone who would stand against Potter, personally I'd rather stand with Potter than beside a son of a muggle proclaiming to be a Dark Lord fit to rule us all just because he's all that's left of the Slytherin line and has delusions of grandeur."

He felt a thrill at the number of shocked faces looking at back at him.

"A son of a muggle?" Millicent Bulstrode's nostrils flared. "You lie!"

"Look up the genealogy of Thomas Marvolo Riddle." Draco said firmly and dismissed her with an impatient hand-wave. "Perhaps it's time everyone considers that Potter defeated the Dark Lord when he was a baby; he defeated Quirrell who was possessed by the Dark Lord when he was eleven; he killed a sixty-foot basilisk at twelve; he has a fully formed patronus at thirteen," and wasn't that an
embarrassing memory of him being chased down by said patronus when he'd pretended to be a Dementor, "who knows what he's capable of doing now? Did you know that Potter talks to our House family magic totem, a silver cobra? It loves him."

He was pleased to see how unnerved most of them were as he turned for the stairs. The Slytherin dorm was quiet and he sank onto his bed in relief.

Nott entered first. "Zabini's observing. I'm in the service to the House of Potter so I'm not considered trustworthy; nobody was going to say anything worthwhile if I stayed."

Draco nodded. "You have a theory on who entered him into the tournament?"

"So do you." Nott said. "Had to be someone with opportunity based on Moody's lessons, so it was someone who nobody considered to be a threat and therefore was allowed near to the Goblet."

"My thoughts exactly." Draco said. He wondered about Karkaroff, knowing the man's history.

"The Initiation Ceremony dictates when candidates can be entered so it had to be sometime after that." Nott continued. "Or within the ceremony itself. That means it was either Crouch, Bagman, Karkaroff, Maxime or Dumbledore. Moody observed only, I think, so someone would have noticed if he threw in a name."

"Bagman is an idiot."

"An idiot with gambling debts with goblins but he doesn't have any other motive." Nott mused. "And presumably the identity checks would have turned up something if it wasn't actually Bagman?"

"Maxime has no motive, Karkaroff does; didn't Crouch do their identity checks just on arrival and then they have diplomatic dispensation?" Draco mused out loud.

"It would mean that Karkaroff would have been replaced between arrival and the ceremony." Nott pointed out. "With Moody's patrols and security measures, how likely is that?"

"You have another candidate?"

Nott shrugged. "Crouch had the most opportunity and he has a grudge against Lord Black."

Draco nodded. "I guess we'll see when they release the identity of whoever it is to the public."

"I'll talk to Longbottom tomorrow." Nott said. "There's no way that somebody in Potter's inner group won't know."

"How do you think it'll play out?" Draco waved towards the door.

"I find it amusing that most of their parents haven't informed them about the identity of the Dark Lord." Nott admitted. "But it'll sway the majority of them especially once Bulstrode finishes her research and informs everyone of the truth." He looked at Draco contemplatively. "Your comments about Potter's potential and his power were well-judged; it may help sway others. Some won't have a choice either way."

Draco nodded. "What do you think the rest of the school will do?"

"The Potter alliance is going to snap tightly around Potter that's for sure." Nott said dryly. "As far as Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw go...it depends on how much influence the alliance members are willing to exert. Hufflepuff has an issue with Diggory since he's also a Champion. He's essentially
competing against Potter."

"Diggory isn't a match for Potter." Draco commented. Potter did have incredible magical prowess; his practical skills the entire two months they'd been back at Hogwarts were far beyond fourth year level except in Potions and there he had to contend with Snape's biased view of not just Potter but Gryffindors in general.

"Then you intend to back Potter in the tournament?"

Draco raised an eyebrow in response as though the question wasn't worthy of a verbal reply. Nott smirked at him. "Just checking." He made for his trunk. "I should prepare a letter for my father."

It was a wise decision. Draco moved to find his own writing supplies. He briefly wondered about Potter injured and in the infirmary, of Lord Black keeping watch over him. Perhaps, Draco mused, in addition to his own parents, a letter to Lord Black informing him of events in the Slytherin Common Room would also be appreciated.

o-O-o

Amelia grimaced as she almost lost her balance apparating to Bartemius Crouch Senior's home. When the Crouches' had lost their Wizengamot seat due to a scandal which was shrouded in secrecy, the old Crouch mansion had been lost in a massive fire. The family had retreated to what had been a residence for holidays, for those sworn to service…but an abode never intended to be a family homestead.

Lit up with the bright lights of the Magical Forensics Unit, Amelia couldn't help but see the crumbling façade and dirty windows; the air of desperation that called out from every angle.

Rufus strode up the garden path towards her. She erected a privacy bubble when he stopped, grim and determined as he met her eyes.

"Crouch Senior is dead." Rufus said bluntly. "Cutting hex to his jugular; paralysis hex prevented him from moving. He bled out."

Amelia closed her eyes at the confirmation of the death. She'd known intellectually it was likely he would be found dead but…she sighed and focused. Barty had been a hard boss to work with and a prickly colleague. She regretted his death but couldn't say she mourned his passing.

"We found Mickle's body beside him." Rufus said. "I don't think they kept her in case of needing more amniotic fluid but for sport from the looks of her. She died from the Killing Curse. Forensics say there were two different perpetrators given the magical residue."

"We already know Voldemort is likely travelling with at least Pettigrew, Crouch Junior, Greyback and Travers. Any of them could have performed the spell although Greyback would have just broken her neck." Amelia mused out loud.

"There's some evidence that Voldemort and Pettigrew were in residence in one of the bedrooms." Rufus grimaced. "We found traces of the advanced Polyjuice in the kitchen. Forensics was going to get it to a lab, see if they can come up with a counter."

"Good." Amelia was pleased at that.

"There's no sign of where they've gone." Rufus said. "Greyback's pack is a possibility."
"I'll ask Remus to make some inquiries." Amelia conceded. "But from what he has already said about the pack's willingness to follow Greyback in the matter of Voldemort this time around… I don't think we'll find him with the werewolves. If so, I think we can expect to hear the new location via Remus."

"You think Voldemort has another bolt hole?" Rufus asked.

"They're all Death Eaters. I think all of them had other locations to run to if their positions became untenable for whatever reason." Amelia said, mulling over likelihoods in her head. "Travers is too new to the group. I would think Voldemort considers him on probation so him trusting Travers to organise their next location seems unlikely."

"Greyback's brawn not brains." Rufus chimed in. "Like you said, we'll know soon enough if he has taken up with Greyback's pack but it seems unlikely."

"Pettigrew… Pettigrew's charged with Voldemort's safety and meeting his needs. He's a possibility." Amelia said. "Sirius and Remus would be the best sources of information on his life prior to being a rat."

"Crouch Junior is also an option." Rufus pointed out grimly. "He's had free run of the wizarding world this last few months without anyone being on the lookout for him."

"Get the Rat Squad focused on dissecting Junior's entire life up to his incarceration." Amelia said briskly. "Severus Snape may have information to offer. He spent some time with the LeStranges while Junior was involved with Rabastan."

"Is there a possibility Voldemort himself has somewhere?" Rufus asked.

"Other than Little Hangleton?" Amelia considered it and sighed. "Perhaps. I'll check with Bertie. It's possible that there are locations he's considered for the treasure hunt that may be relevant to us."

"What's the official position on this clusterfuck?" Rufus said bluntly.

"A statement has already been released to the press that the person behind the death threats has been identified as Bartemius Crouch Junior." Amelia sighed heavily. "That posing as his father, who conspired in his escape from prison, Junior managed to enter Harry Potter into the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Junior is considered armed and dangerous, etcetera, etcetera…" She grimaced. "Cornelius is assigning a Special Auditor to examine the Department to see what chaos Junior may have done in his father's place. We're all of the opinion that he couldn't do anything to majorly screw things up since he didn't want to draw attention to himself but minor things?"

"Speaking of minor things," Rufus said, "I've sent Shacklebolt to the Weasleys to make an assessment of Percy Weasley. It's possible Junior had him under the Imperius."

"Good idea." Amelia said but she didn't think it was probable. She motioned at the house. "Anything else to report?"

"Not yet." Rufus said.

Amelia gazed up at the house again. "Take it all apart, brick by brick. I want everything examined." Her lips firmed. "We're going to catch these bastards."

o-O-o

The bang on the door was almost a relief for Bill as he sat tensely in his parents' living room, sipping
a Firewhiskey, and trying hard to ignore Percy prattling on about the Tri-Wizard tournament and how important Mister Crouch was to the whole affair.

His father got up and went to answer the door, a small frown on his freckled face as he registered the visitors were Aurors. "Yes?"

"Senior Auror Shacklebolt and Auror Tonks, Mister Weasley." The deep baritone echoed through the Burrow. "We need to speak to your son, Percival?"

Bill glanced at a surprised looking Percy. His mother got to her feet, concern already starting to appear on her homely face.

"I wonder what this is about." Percy said out loud, giving away his own insecurity as their father ushered the Aurors into the room. Bill recognised the older Auror from his work with at the DOM. He took in the sight of a serious looking Tonks with concern; she had gone to school with Charlie and he'd renewed his acquaintance with her through the various Black family events; she was usually very bubbly and friendly.

Shacklebolt's dark eyes landed on Percy with unerring accuracy. "Percival Weasley?"

Percy stood up. "Yes, that's me."

"If we can speak to you in private, Mister Weasley?" Shacklebolt said formally.

"I'm sure that's unnecessary." His mother cut in. "We're family."

"It's official business, Mrs Weasley." Shacklebolt said.

Percy frowned at his mother before turning back to the Auror. "Perhaps we should go to my room? We'll have privacy there."


Bill wanted to protest as the tall Auror followed his brother out of the room. He exchanged a worried look with his father.

"This is silly," his mother said brusquely as Bill's father put an arm around her to comfort her, "can't you tell us anything about what this is about?" She gestured at Tonks.

Tonks shifted her weight, a regretful look of awkwardness crossing her features as she shook her head. "Senior Auror Shacklebolt will explain when he returns."

Bill's mind raced with speculation. Shacklebolt wasn't formally part of the Rat Squad but he was leading the investigation into the pregnant women and was associated with the search to find them, the suspicion it was Pettigrew and an unknown associate behind the abductions. It was likely then that the visit to Percy had something to do with that.

But what, Bill mused, rubbing his chin. He ignored his mother offering refreshments to Tonks as he considered the problem.

He truly believed that the Auror's couldn't suspect Percy of actually helping to abduct pregnant women. It wasn't just brotherly loyalty but just an understanding of Percy's own character. But if they were questioning him then it left three possibilities; firstly, that Percy wasn't Percy.

Bill ran over the conversation from dinner. Percy had been fixated on his work but he had joined in a
discussion about the play about Merlin and the Dragons that Bill was going to take Alicia to see, and which Percy had already seen with Penny. He also vaguely recalled a rejoinder that had Percy poking fun at something in Bill's childhood so, Percy was Percy.

Not polyjuiced then.

Imperiused? That was the second option.

Bill sent an anxious gaze towards the stairs. He would have noticed if Percy was under an Imperio spell. Wouldn't he? His brother's behaviour – his workaholic tendencies and his adoration of Barty Crouch – was irritating but not prompted by anything other than Percy's own ambition. He was certain of it. But there was a sliver of doubt sliding through his veins that had him avoiding his father's keen gaze.

No, Bill considered with more confidence. He was sure he would have spotted something in Percy's demeanour if his brother was being controlled by a spell.

All of which left the third option for the Auror's visit; that they wanted to question Percy about somebody else's behaviour – someone in the Department – maybe even Crouch…

But wasn't Crouch supposed to be at Hogwarts dealing with the Tri-Wizard Tournament?

The tournament!

The thought smacked into him like a bludgeoning spell. His eyes widened as he realised something must have happened at the tournament and the naming of the Champions. Had Harry been named Champion? Did they suspect Crouch?

He shifted restlessly, wanting desperately to grab his communication mirror so he could talk with Sirius and knowing that if Harry had been entered, Sirius would be at Hogwarts dealing with the fallout. Maybe there was another way to confirm his suspicions.

He cleared his throat and caught Tonks' eye. "The tournament?"

Tonks winced and gave a small nod.

"Harry was named as a Champion?" Bill continued.

Tonks moved her weight, rocking from one foot to another. "I shouldn't say anything else, Bill."

That was a yes then and they suspected Crouch…

Crouch!

Bill had never liked the stuffy man but he had never pinned him for someone who would join up with the likes of Voldemort. But then hadn't his son become a Death Eater in the last war? Maybe that and the knowledge that he had screwed up any hopes of a political career with his wrongful incarceration of Sirius had caused Crouch to have a mental breakdown. Maybe.

Footsteps on the stairs had them all turning expectantly.

Percy was pale under his freckles and their mother immediately moved to his side, glaring at the Auror behind him.

"Auror Shacklebolt," Bill's father said briskly, "I can appreciate this is official business but as Bill has rightly guessed this has something to do with events at the tournament this evening, perhaps you
can give us an overview? This family is allied with Lord Potter. I can assure you that whatever you
tell us will go no further than these four walls."

Shacklebolt sent Tonks a chiding look but nodded slowly. "The news will be in the press by
morning so I can tell you this much: Lord Potter was named as a fourth Champion by the Goblet of
Fire earlier this evening. It was surmised that Bartemius Crouch was the only one with opportunity to
interfere with the Goblet. However, his body was found in his residence approximately an hour
ago."

"Oh goodness!" His mother raised a hand to her mouth in horror.

"Upon inspection, it's clear that he'd been held hostage for a while, possibly dating back to the
notification that he had Wizard's flu." Shacklebolt continued. "As he passed the identity checks upon
return from sick leave, we think the only explanation is that his son, Bartemius Crouch Junior, took
his place using Polyjuice."

"But he's dead!" His mother exclaimed.

Shacklebolt shook his head. "We don't know how but we have found evidence that suggests Crouch
was keeping the son locked up in the basement prior to the reversal of who was the hostage."

Bill frowned heavily, his mind racing as he worked out the sequence of events. "It was Junior at the
World Cup? He was the one who attacked the Potter alliance tent and set ours on fire."

His father's mouth dropped open a touch but snapped shut again, anger replacing the shock on his
face. "Is that true?!"

"We believe so," Shacklebolt said cautiously. "but all I can say is that an arrest warrant has been
issued for Bartemius Crouch Junior which includes suspicion of being involved with the events at the
World Cup."

"He's still at large?" His mother said anxiously.

His father hurried over to wrap an arm around her comfortingly again.

Shacklebolt nodded unhappily. "He and his associates escaped."

"Associates?" His father questioned sharply.

"Pettigrew at the very least." Shacklebolt said and held up a hand. "I really can't tell you anything
more."

Percy sank into a chair, his gaze a blind glaze of shock. "I can't believe it."

"Thank you for letting us know as much as you have, Auror Shacklebolt." His father said stiffly.

Bill glanced at his parents and gestured towards the front door. "Why don't I show you out?" He led
the Aurors outside, stepping out himself for a moment, closing the door behind him. "Is Harry
alright?"

"Magical exhaustion," explained Tonks quickly before Shacklebolt could say anything, "he'll be
right as rain in a couple of days. Sirius has put Black Manor on lockdown though since the healer
said he can take him home to recover."

"Can't say I blame him." Bill sighed, pushing a hand through his hair.
Tonks gave him a sympathetic smile but turned to Shacklebolt and a moment later the two Aurors had disappeared.

Bill headed back into the house. His mother was bustling in the kitchen making tea; his father was talking in a low voice to Percy by the fireside.

Percy glanced up at Bill and flushed. "They were checking to see if I was imperiused!"

"Ah." Bill sat down on the sofa across from his brother. "I'm sure it was just a precaution since you've been in close contact with him."

"I should have realised that he wasn't Mister Crouch!" Percy said shakily. "I mean, he hardly acknowledged me the first few months but he was so complimentary to me when he came back after the flu... so supportive of my career goals and... I thought he just appreciated all the help and information I'd given him when he was sick!" He groaned and dropped his head into his hands. "Merlin, I was the one who told him about Harry's party here and the security arrangements at the World Cup!"

"It wasn't your fault, Percy." His father patted Percy's shoulder. "Nobody knew it wasn't Crouch. I'm sure Cornelius, Amelia and Rufus told him additional details or asked for his advice about the Cup. You weren't to know."

"I should have known!" Percy's head snapped back up. "You were all almost killed and I..." he lurched out of his seat and stormed out, clattering up the stairs and into his room; the door slamming shut and echoing throughout the Burrow.

"What did you say to him?" His mother demanded angrily.

"Nothing." Bill answered before his father. "Percy's doing a fine job of blaming himself." And Bill knew in his position he'd do the same. Percy had effectively been feeding their enemy information that could have killed their family for the past few months – unknowingly, yes, but feeding him information all the same. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

"Poor Percy." His mother cast a look up the stairs.

"Leave him be, Molly." His father said, sitting down heavily in the vacated chair. "He needs some time to come to terms with it."

Bill jerked his thumb towards the door. "I should head to Hogwarts and see if Sirius needs anything."

His father nodded briskly in agreement. "Let him know that he has our support; anything he needs... anything at all, he just has to ask."

He left with a hug from his mother and an admonishment to stay safe. Bill pulled on his leather jacket and, as soon as he was clear of the Burrow, apparated to Hogwarts.

o-O-o

Severus knocked back the glass and felt the familiar burn of mellowed alcohol hit the back of his throat as the sharp scent of peat and barley filled his nostrils. He poured himself another glass and knocked that back too as his mind drifted back to the antechamber and Potter's astonishing magic.

Lily.
He closed his eyes and placed a hand over his brow as he brought up the memory; the shift of the golden Potter griffin into the familiar lines and form of Lily Potter. She had been a glowing golden spirit. She had been magnificent. Untouched by the ravages of time, still beautiful, still stronger in her beliefs than anyone he had ever known.

Grief stirred inside of him again, familiar and painful.

She hadn't looked in his direction once.

The spirit of Lily had been totally focused on her son, on protecting him. The image of her wrapped around her child…would she have held him the same way if she had lived?

Undoubtedly.

Would she have ignored Severus if she had lived?

Undoubtedly.

He was responsible for leading the Dark Lord to target her son, to kill her husband. And the hard truth was that Lily had not lived.

She had not lived.

If he had only kept the prophecy to himself…if he had only realised sooner the error in judgement he had made in joining the Death Eaters…

Severus knocked back another drink.

When Black had confronted him with the knowledge that Black knew it had been Severus who had told the Dark Lord the prophecy, Severus had felt sucker-punched. In some ways, he would have preferred Black to have reverted to form and beaten him bloody rather than being subjected to the look of complete disgust and the harsh, truthful words that had cut like a knife.

"…you are the reason why he doesn't know her; why the only memory of her he has is of her dying to save him."

Because hadn't that been the truth that he had avoided recognising for many years? Yes, it was far easier to blame the boy, the child, for existing; for being born with the power to vanquish Voldemort and so placing Lily in danger, causing Lily's death because she had died to protect her child; far easier that, than for Severus to accept the truth that he was at fault; that it was his own want to please a Master who cared nothing for him or any of his followers had ultimately started the chain of events which had led to her death.

It was Severus's fault Lily had died; Severus's fault that her son had only a spirit to protect him and not Lily herself.

Black was right about that and wasn't that galling?

He ignored the glass and took a swig from the bottle.

He shook his head.

Black had also ignored Severus during the events in the antechamber; he had also been focused on Potter to the exclusion of all else. Despite their history, Severus acknowledged that Black was a
devoted father.

But once again they had all failed to protect the boy sufficiently.

Severus had failed to protect Potter. *Again.*

Why, why, why hadn't he understood that his memories had been hidden only because of Crouch Junior? Why had he assumed the presence of someone else? He had been so stupid.

He gave a small growl and took another gulp of alcohol.

He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

A loud bang on the door to his quarters almost made him drop the bottle he held. He settled for slamming it onto a nearby table and stalking over to the door. If it was a student, he was going to verbally eviscerate them for being out after curfew. He flung the door open and stared blankly at the sight of a glowering Moody.

"Why the dickens did you run off?" Moody snapped, pushing inside the room before Severus could stop him.

"Director Croaker had enlisted the help of Remus Lupin." Severus said tersely. "My presence was no longer required."

"It isn't a popularity contest, lad." Moody's magical eye whirled around the room. "Throwing yourself a pity party?"

"I checked on the students under my care," and found the Slytherin Common Room to be immersed in debate that he had effectively broken up with his entry and which had no doubt resumed on his exit, "and I decided to retire for the night." He breathed in sharply. Why was he explaining himself?

Moody sat down abruptly and conjured a glass. "You could at least share."

Severus was torn between outrage at Moody's presumption and…and some strange feeling of comradeship. He poured Moody a glass and summoned his own non-verbally to pour himself another. He sat down on the sofa.

Moody drank his whiskey, stared at the bottle in approval and placed the glass down with a small thud on the table. "It wasn't your fault."

"My memories…" Severus said stiffly.

"You couldn't have known that the only person within them of interest was Crouch Junior. You still have some to sort through don't you?" Moody pointed out brusquely.

"I should have gone to the mind healer as you suggested." Severus confessed, guilt surging through him and making his stomach roil. "If we had known there was no other involved with the LeStranges…"

"We might have concluded that it was a dead end since Junior was dead." Moody huffed. "Your subconscious probably knew; that's why you had the dead Death Eaters listed."

Severus glared at him. "You're not helping."

Moody picked up the bottle and poured himself another glass. He swirled the amber liquid around. "Senior's dead."
"His usefulness had come to an end." Severus murmured. The Dark Lord thought nothing of discarding people.

"They found one of the missing women." Moody noted in a clipped voice that gave away her condition more than a graphic explanation would have done.

Severus nodded gravely.

"Amelia wants copies of your memories on the LeStranges to give to the Aurors; we're trying to see if we can't find where they've run to hide." Moody said bluntly.

"She shall have them." Severus thought it was the least he could do.

Moody nodded. "Good. I told her we'll be in first thing before breakfast."

"We?" Severus's eyebrows rose in faint surprise.

"We." Moody said firmly.

Severus knew he should protest that he would go alone, that he didn't need someone to hold his hand when he was questioned by Aurors, but instead he inclined his head, his dark hair falling forward.

"I would also appreciate the recommendation for the mind healer you previously suggested." Severus said. "It would be beneficial to retrieve the rest of my memories quickly."

Moody grunted his agreement, raised his glass and tipped the alcohol down his throat. He set the glass down and got to his feet. "I expect you on guard duty in the infirmary immediately."

Severus's eyes widened in alarm. "What?"

"Three hour shifts; you're taking the first one." Moody stated blithely continuing without any acknowledgement of Severus's outrage. "Potter's healing means no students near his room. Some of the little buggers are bound to test that and Black's as likely to kill them as he is to send them packing."

Severus simply stared at him.

"You'll want a sobering potion before you take your post." Moody said and limped out.

For a long moment, Severus swore roundly at the DADA Professor before he accepted that he should take a sobering potion and do his duty. Moody was probably right about Black's frame of mind and the students' likely behaviour.

Five minutes later, he left his quarters and walked briskly towards the infirmary. He turned a corner and almost barrelled straight into Lupin. The werewolf stepped back to avoid the collision and Severus's lip curled upward as he registered Lupin's superior reflexes.

"My apologies, Severus." Lupin said politely. "Are you on your way to the infirmary?"

"Professor Moody was insistent that I take a shift to prevent Black killing any of the students." Snape snapped as they both began walking again, unfortunately in the same direction.

Lupin smiled sadly. "I can't say I blame Moody for his vigilance in the circumstances and Sirius…” he shook his head and focused on Severus instead. "Are you alright after…?"

Severus bristled. "I am fine. There is no reason for me not to be alright, Lupin."
Lupin hummed. "The first time the spirits appeared I spent most of the evening thinking of
everything that I wanted to say to Lily and wishing I could have spoken to her just for a moment."

Severus stopped abruptly. "It's happened before?"

"Yes," Lupin said softly, "but the event was deemed need-to-know, just like this evening." His
scarred face took on a chagrined air. "I suppose we shouldn't be talking about it."

"Especially as one of us is under a vow." Severus pointed out beginning to walk again.

"You're not to talk about it with people who were not present." Lupin rejoined. "I was there."

Severus considered it for a long moment but finally his curiosity was too great; he had to ask. "Did
she…was she so focused on Potter the last time?"

"Yes." Lupin said. "But that's the nature…" he drew them to a halt and provided a privacy charm,
"Lily cast an ancient spell to protect Harry; one based on Wiccan magic, the Old Religion."

"Which explains the presence of Morgana Le Fey; she was a High Priestess within the Old
Religion." Severus said.

"Perhaps," Lupin admitted, "Bertie and I believe that at the moment Lily cast the spell, the Potter
family magic was called to help power it, and somehow, Lily's sacrifice of life and magic became
one with the family magic just as each Head of House and Heir of House are bound to it."

"Her spirit was consumed by the family magic?" questioned Severus sharply.

"In a way," Lupin said gently, "we believe the family magic recognised her sacrifice and honoured
her by allowing an imprint of her essence to remain within it. It super-powered the spell."

Severus nodded slowly.

"But her last act was protecting her son; the reason for her being part of the Potter family magic is
because she protected her son." Lupin continued. "She has only been called forth by Harry when he
has been in need of protection."

"I see." Severus said trying to keep the sadness out of his voice. He studied Remus for a brief
moment. "I am…grateful for your explanation." He said stiffly.

"I understand, Severus, and I do remember how close you were to her at school." Remus said. "She
regretted the loss of your friendship quite keenly."

Severus stared at the werewolf in shock. "You can…you are not aware…" he lifted his hand briefly.
"I was responsible for her death."

Lupin looked at him sharply. "Voldemort struck her with the Killing Curse. He is the one responsible
for her death."

"Then Black didn't tell you…"

"That you were the one who gave Voldemort his reason for being there. Yes. I know about that."

And there was the disapproval and dislike he'd been waiting to hear from Lupin since they had
begun speaking.

"I was there when Sirius found out and I admit that there are days I'd like to hex you for it, but
then…” Lupin sighed wearily as he pushed a hand through his hair, "all of us played a part in the events leading to that night. You think Sirius doesn't blame himself constantly for encouraging James to go with Peter as his Secret Keeper? Or that I don't blame myself for letting my spying with the packs interfere with my friendships with James and Sirius to the extent that they mistrusted me and didn't choose me instead?"

Severus blinked as he absorbed Lupin's words.

"You made a mistake, a bad one." Lupin said strongly. "No matter who it was that the prophecy referred to, you had to know telling Voldemort was giving them a death sentence and any who stood between them." He drew in a breath. "But I figure when you found out it was Lily's child; when Lily died because of the sequence of events you telling him began…I'm sure there's not a day that goes by that you don't blame yourself for her death, Severus, and frankly, I couldn't come up with a better punishment for you than that; you simply having to bear the knowledge of what you have done."

Once again, it felt as though he'd been sucker-punched; all the breath left his body. Lupin's words lacked the vitriol of Black's but perhaps they stung deeper because of that.

Lupin dismantled the privacy charm and they set off again.

"I sometimes wish Lily and James had gone ahead with the portrait that Charlus wanted them to do after the wedding." Lupin said breaking the silence as they neared the doors to the infirmary.

"Why did they refuse?" Severus asked idly, at once regretting as Lupin did the lack of a portrait, and yet at the same time wondering if he would have been able to bear it if one had existed.

"I'm not certain." Remus admitted. "I think possibly both of them thought that they were too young."

Severus inclined his head. It would have been just like Lily. She had always loved life so much; to have believed that she wouldn't live a long and happy life would have been an anathema to her.

Severus was so preoccupied that he unthinkingly followed Lupin into the small private room. He froze just inside the doorway at the sight of Potter, prone on the bed with his hands bandaged. Black was camped out on the far side, surrounded by folders and pieces of parchment, yet one hand remained on Potter's arm, maintaining contact with his…his son.

Severus recalled Lupin's admission that both he and Black suffered guilt about the deaths of the Potters, about the death of their best friend. Severus stared at Black. It would have been easy for Black to have done the same as he, Severus mused, to have buried his own guilt and self-hatred, and blamed the child. But Black had done no such thing. Instead Black loved the boy fiercely; would gladly have accepted the pain and hurt Potter had suffered as his own, that was evident after the events in the antechamber. He had derided Black's position as Potter's godfather but perhaps James Potter had been right to give Black the honour; perhaps James Potter had known that regardless of whatever happened Black would love his son unconditionally. Severus wondered if he and Lily had remained friends, if he had been Potter's godfather…

Black barely looked up as Lupin entered but he did a double take as he spotted Severus. Black frowned as Lupin conjured up a chair.

"How is he?" Lupin asked. "Did Doctor Jordan manage to speak with Noshi?"

"His core will be fine." Black said with visible relief. "Noshi thinks it's just the scarring that's made it unhappy. He believes based on knowledge of the Goblet's interaction with previous Champions that the magical renewal won't affect his power levels."
"Good." Lupin said happily.

Black’s eyes flickered back to Severus and he was clearly about to demand why Severus was there when Lupin spoke again.

"We've been asked to talk with the Aurors about Peter. They think him or Crouch are responsible for deciding where next to hide so want our insights into Peter." Lupin said.

"I believe I've been asked to provide my memories of my time with the LeStranges and Crouch for a similar reason." Severus said, understanding Black's look of distaste at having to talk about Pettigrew. "Moody and I are going tomorrow morning."

"Thank you." Black said tersely. "If we can find them…"

Severus nodded sharply, knowing that if Black found Crouch Junior or Pettigrew, nothing would stop him from killing them.

A knock on the door had them both turning to find Bill Weasley stood in the doorway.

"Bill," Black gestured for him to enter, "I take it you heard the news?"

"Shacklebolt and Tonks turned up to check Percy wasn't imperiused." Weasley explained succinctly. He pointed at Harry. "How is he?"

"Exhausted." Black replied. "But he'll live. How's Percy?"

"Suddenly regretting how helpful he's been to Crouch Junior over the last few months." Weasley sighed heavily. "He's very upset about it all."

Severus swallowed the harsh retort that jumped to mind.

"Nobody realised it was him or suspected anything." Black grimaced. "More's the pity."

Weasley nodded. "What are these?" He picked up a file.

"My grandfather's files on the LeStranges, Crouch Senior and Crouch Junior." Black stated succinctly. "Maybe there's a clue somewhere in here about where he would have gone."

"Dear Merlin!" Lupin said, looking at the vast amount of information. "This is going to take us years."

"I can help." Weasley offered.

Severus hesitated but plunged ahead anyway. "Perhaps I may also assist you?"

Black glared at him as though he wanted to refuse but he motioned with the parchment he held. "Conjure up chairs and pick one."

Weasley immediately drew his wand and conjured up a comfortable chair.

Severus paused. "I will alarm the corridor first. Moody assigned me guard duty in case there are foolish students who wish to disobey the order not to come to the infirmary." He fully expected the younger Weasleys would turn up sooner or later.

Black nodded.
Severus hurried to set the alarm and made his way back with a speed which surprised him. He conjured a chair at the foot of Potter's bed and reached for the nearest file; Bellatrix.

It bemused him that the late Lord Black had apparently kept files on his own family members.

He cast a look at Lupin and Weasley, both absorbed by their own reading, and finally toward Black, wanting to check how his old rival was taking his presence. Black's attention was elsewhere; he was smoothing Potter's hair back with gentle tenderness. Severus swiftly returned his gaze to the file.
4th November 1994

Harry stared gloomily out at the blurred shape of the back garden of Griffin House, streaks of rain on the windows of his bedroom turning the view into an abstract watercolour. Hedwig swooped over to him and nuzzled at his bed hair before taking off to her perch. Harry sighed and rested his chin on his upturned hand, propped up by his elbow on the back of the chair. It didn't look as though he'd be able to go flying that day.

Three whole days had passed since he had been entered into the Goblet and Harry had spent most of it in a healing sleep. He'd woken early on Wednesday morning surprising Sirius who'd been camped out by his bed. Doctor Jordan had immediately been called and pronounced him recovered from the magical trauma of the Goblet binding, the exhaustion from the protection he'd unconsciously summoned against the binding in the first place, and the burns on his hands. He'd still spent the last couple of days grumpily tucked up in bed, weak as the proverbial kitten. Sirius had promised him if he felt better by Friday he could have some time on his Firebolt but clearly the weather was conspiring against him.

He shivered despite his warm flannel pyjamas and believed he could feel the bonds of the Goblet tighten around him momentarily. It felt like the world – the universe – was conspiring against him and not just Voldemort and his cronies.

Nobody had found where the Dark Lord and his followers had gone to hide out. There were a lot of theories but no real clues as to where the group had gone. Most of the theories revolved around Crouch Junior. It had been established that his mother had taken his place in Azkaban and that it was likely his father had kept him locked up in the basement of their home. The prevailing wisdom suggested that Crouch Junior might not be quite sane and probably saw Voldemort as a rescuer; a hero, someone to follow above and beyond the mark he had once taken that declared Voldemort his Master. (And bizarrely, Harry could empathise with that because he loved Sirius in part because he'd rescued him from the Dursleys).

"Junior has major Daddy issues." Sirius had commented when he'd brought Harry up to date.

Crouch Junior had also been Rabastan LeStrange's lover, and it was assumed he was intent on getting revenge for his lover's death and saw Harry being in the tournament a way to torment Sirius. Harry glowered unhappily at that thought but Sirius had accepted it calmly enough as a truth.

In addition to the Daddy issues and the drive for revenge, Crouch Junior was an unpredictable and formidable opponent. His academic record had been impressive and Harry couldn't help recall the duel he'd fought with the wizard with chagrin.

It was most probable that Crouch had been the one to arrange a bolthole for the group and with the abandoned and derelict LeStrange mansion still abandoned and derelict, there was no clear clue as to their location. How did someone guess what an insane person might do, Harry mused.

Pettigrew was the other option as the bolthole-arranger and as Sirius had put it when he'd explained it to Harry…

"If they're counting on Remus and me knowing where the rat might have bolted to, we're screwed. We did kind of miss the fact that he was the spy so I'm not sure what kind of insight we can provide beyond we didn't really know him very well at all."
What minor information they had been able to provide – childhood haunts, his mother's old home and his father's hometown – had revealed nothing new.

Remus's contact in the werewolf pack indicated that Fenrir was absent and the slow trickle of werewolves claiming sanctuary within Remus's pack had begun. The Potter Chateau was currently housing two werewolf couples and a young werewolf man by the name of Patrick; none had been involved with any kind of terrorising activity or violence. They were happy to have the offer of safety and Wolfsbane. It was a delicate thing though, Harry thought. Remus was very obviously uncomfortable being an Alpha to their new pack-mates, and torn by his sense of responsibility toward them and his on-going responsibilities to Harry and Sirius – especially with the tournament debacle. He'd left for France that morning with a frown on his face and a promise to be back for the Weighing of the Wands Ceremony.

The ceremony notionally ensured each wand was examined for cheating charms and was to take place a week on Sunday, a week and a few days ahead of the first task which would take place on November twenty-fourth. Harry was kind of hoping that he would be back at Hogwarts well ahead of the ceremony, but he was all too aware that there was a decision pending and that Sirius was the one who would make it.

Harry sighed.

He understood Sirius's immediate decision to bring him home and Doctor Jordan had stated that being in his own bed had probably helped his healing. And he loved Griffin House. He loved being back in the room Sirius and Remus had picked out for him and surrounded by memories of his wonderful Summer. He loved Dobby's enthusiastic care and fondness. More importantly, he felt safe within the walls of his home; protected by people who he knew loved him beyond measure. It had also been a relief to wake up and realise he didn't have to deal with being Harry Potter, Lord Potter, the Boy Who Lived, Unexpected Tri-Wizard Champion, or any other title someone wanted to call him, and could just be Harry.

There was a temptation to stay. A really, really big temptation. A part of him wanted to never leave Griffin House; to hide away and ignore the tournament, ignore the threat to his life and remain wrapped in the comfort of home and his father's constant loving protective presence.

He also knew there was a large part of Sirius which was tempted by the same thing; a want to keep Harry hidden away from the rest of the world. It was a temptation he knew others were aware of since Minerva had turned up the day before with Harry's school assignments and delivered them to him with a challenging look at Sirius as though daring him to argue that Harry was no longer attending Hogwarts. Everyone knew it would be easy enough for Sirius to arrange tutors and have Harry home-schooled.

But…Harry wasn't unaware that the reality was that both he and Sirius had responsibilities as Lord Potter and Lord Black; that they had an alliance which was waiting on them to do more than simply acknowledge the fact of what had happened. That they should be coming up with a response to what was, as Neville had declared, the opening salvo in a war. Among the letters he'd received since he'd woken up were missives from friends, allies and Draco (who seemed to occupy a category all of his own in Harry's head), all detailing the political fallout at Hogwarts.

And there was the reality of the tournament itself.

Hermione had a plan.

Which was so very Hermione and Harry was pleased that there was a plan because he had never really had a plan for anything, and it was one of the constants of his, Hermione and Ron's friendship
that she was their designated planner. On the other hand, Harry's Summer had matured him enough to acknowledge that he should be involved with the planning (although admittedly his own attempt at planning for the tournament had stalled on 'surviving' before he'd fallen asleep again), and he felt some slight wariness that he didn't know how to break that to Hermione.

Especially since he still very much wanted and intended to ask her to be his girlfriend.

He sighed heavily.

"Raining, huh?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder and found his father just inside the bedroom doorway, leaning on the dresser. Sirius wore muggle clothing; black denim jeans and a thick cable-knit jumper in a dark maroon colour. His shoulder-length hair was tied back with a strip of black leather, and for the first time since Harry had woken up from his healing, Sirius looked well-rested.

"Yeah." Harry motioned despondently at the window, turning again to stare at the never-ending precipitation, "no flying."

"How about some hot chocolate and a chat, then?" Sirius offered quietly.

Harry's head whipped around to stare at him hopefully since Sirius had deflected the topic of Harry's return to Hogwarts at every brief mention and most sharply when Minerva had visited.

"I'd like that." Harry said.

"Get dressed and meet me in the living room." Sirius instructed. "I'll organise the drinks." He winked and walked out, closing the door behind him to give Harry some privacy.

Harry immediately leapt from the chair and headed for the bathroom. The shower was quick and perfunctory but it did the job. He pulled on similar clothing to Sirius; jeans and a green jumper. He was pleased that by the time he made his way downstairs he was fine and not fatigued.

Sirius sat on one end of the couch, cross-legged, his bare feet tucked under him. Harry picked up his mug of chocolate from the coffee table, snagged one of the chocolate chip cookies from the plate, and took the other end, settling himself into a similar position.

"Warm enough?" asked Sirius, concerned; his grey eyes sweeping over Harry's damp hair.

Harry nodded. The fire in the hearth was low, embers rather than flame, but the room was cosy and the mug warmed his hands.

"So, we have a few topics to discuss." Sirius began. "All related and all really boiling down to the question of what do we do now?"

"Yeah." Harry winced in agreement.

Sirius caught Harry's eyes with his. "I said it on the night but I'll say it again now: I'm very proud of you. The decision you made to accept the binding saved the lives of your fellow Champions and," he lifted a hand from his mug to wave it at Harry, "actually I think it saved Hogwarts because your protection destroying the Goblet might have led to the destruction of the school."

Harry blinked. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Bertie's been fascinated by the whole theoretical argument as has Albus." Sirius said dryly. "I think
they're both planning to write a thesis about it when we don't have to keep your protection a secret."

Harry grinned. "Jointly or separately?"

"You know I don't know?" Sirius said, amused. "Separately, maybe, since Bertie thinks based on Godric's Hollow and the strengthening of your protection with Morgana's blessing, you would have decimated Hogwarts; Albus says the school wards would have contained the magical explosion to the antechamber and perhaps, worst case scenario, the Great Hall."

"Wow." Harry frowned. "Is that an argument for or against me going back to Hogwarts?"

"Good question." Sirius sipped his mug. "Albus isn't worried you pose a threat to Hogwarts."

"Are you?" asked Harry bluntly. Because he was himself maybe a tad worried.

"No," Sirius said immediately, "not even a little bit. You'd rather tear off your own arm than destroy Hogwarts or hurt innocent people so I have faith you won't ever let your protection or your powers get away from you for something like that to happen."

Sirius's complete faith in him, reassured Harry.

"So, that's a plus in the Going Back to Hogwarts column." Harry offered tentatively.

Sirius harrumphed. "What do you want to do?"

Harry took time to consider his answer because what he wanted to do wasn't necessarily the same as what he needed to do – and frankly what he wanted to do depended on what aspect of life at Hogwarts he was thinking about at the time.

"I'd like to go back to Hogwarts." Harry said eventually.

"Reasons?" Sirius prompted.

"Well, the first one is that I miss my friends. I want to spend time with them and…" Harry felt his cheeks heat up, "and I was kind of about to ask Hermione out?"

Sirius smirked and waggled his eyebrows. "Hermione, huh?"

Harry blushed but nodded.

"You and your Dad…" Sirius sighed dramatically, his eyes twinkling. "Complete suckers for the smartest witch of their generation; that should be the Potters' family motto."

They smiled at each other.

"For what it's worth, I approve," Sirius said solemnly enough that Harry knew he wasn't teasing, "and I hope your relationship goes splendidly but," he held Harry's gaze firmly, "if doesn't, I'm confident that you and Hermione are mature enough to maintain a civil relationship within the House of Black."

Harry nodded quickly. "I was going to discuss that with her. I want to make sure we stay friends whatever happens."

"Good." Sirius said warmly. "Well," he continued teasingly, "I can see one attraction of going back to Hogwarts."
"It's not just Hermione." Harry quickly pointed out. "I mean, if I stayed here I'd miss all my friends. Lessons at home are great but during the Summer I had my friends with me, except for the occasional lesson you and Remus would give me on my own. I don't...I learn more when I study with others."

"Even though you're ahead of your peers?" questioned Sirius.

"In DADA, Charms and Transfiguration." Harry agreed. "But it's hit and miss on the theory side... and really in everything else I'm about the same."

"If you do go back to Hogwarts, we'll need to look at your educational needs." Sirius said firmly. Harry shifted. "So whether I stay or I go, I'll end up with individual tutoring?"

"You need individual tutoring, Harry, for the practical magic, that's clear." Sirius grimaced. "The issue is accelerating your theoretical knowledge enough to match your practical capability especially given the demands of the tournament, and I will say it's unlikely that we can push too much on that. I don't want you to have to sit OWLs at the end of the year when you'll have the final task and avoiding whatever additional trap Voldemort has set for you to worry about."

It made sense, and Harry felt his anxiety that he was going to be fast-tracked ease.

"In certain subjects you're also right; you're at the top of your peer group but consistent with them in knowledge and understanding." Sirius continued. "All of which means is that whether you stay or go, you'll need an individualised lesson plan even if you ultimately remain at the same level in some subjects as your friends."

"I understand." Harry said; truthfully he'd been expecting it.

"The other good news is theoretically your new curriculum could maybe be constructed to ensure that you have an equivalent practical skill level of a NEWT student." Sirius said with his best innocent expression.

So, basically teach him what he needed for the tournament.

"Hermione has a plan for the tournament that sounds a lot like that." Harry admitted.

"Hmmm," Sirius smirked, "have I told you before that Remus was the Marauders' Hermione?" He motioned vaguely at him. "We'll have to sit down and compare plans."

"I was thinking I should do some planning myself." Harry said.

"Let them plan." Sirius advised. "Both of them need to feel that they're helping. You should definitely go over their plans though and select what you want and what you don't want to do. You're the one in the tournament and ultimately the decision should be yours. The rules are pretty clear on that."

"How much help am I allowed for the tournament?" Harry asked, curious.

"According to the original spell-work on the Goblet, your teachers are not allowed to directly help you prepare for the tasks but they can tutor you in specific spells or provide answers to deepen your theoretical understanding if you request it." Sirius said briskly. "They can also provide general advice such as 'play to your strengths' and other such pep talk classics. The definition of a teacher though is someone who is employed by the school you represent within the tournament."
"But I don't have a school within the tournament. 'The Light' thing doesn't exist." Harry said.

Sirius grimaced. "Exactly but I think anyone teaching you should err on the side of caution. I might talk with Albus about creating an official document designating anyone teaching you to be considered as faculty of 'The Light.'" He sighed. "It's also why Amelia and the Aurors are taking over the duelling club on Wednesday nights. While Hogwarts don't pay Remus or I…I don't want any confusion if you do go back and if you don't…well, I don't want to lose the time I could spend with you instead."

Harry accepted that with a nod.

"You are allowed direct help by friends and family to assist you in training, to consider what the likely tasks will be and to prepare for them. The Goblet considers part of a Champion's skill set is to take advice and guidance from others, having the ability to understand what is good advice and guidance, and what isn't." Sirius waved his hand. "It gives us some leeway. However, neither Remus nor I can know what the tasks will be whereas the Headmaster can share that information with other teachers should he choose to do so. All your main helpers and you yourself will effectively be blind to what is actually needed."

"But that's true for all the Champions?" checked Harry.

Sirius nodded, unhappiness written all over his expressive face. "Afraid so."

"At least the playing field is equal in that respect." Harry murmured.

"Back to your reasons…” Sirius dragged them back to the actual topic, "love, friendship…” he teased gently.

Harry did the mature thing and stuck his tongue out at him. It made Sirius laugh which was a big plus in Harry's eyes.

"There's also…” Harry sighed heavily. "Don't I have a responsibility to be there? From an alliance perspective? Neville's on point at the moment but…I'm supposed to be the one leading them and…I should be there. Draco's trying to reach out to the Slytherins but he needs to show he and I are…” he pulled a face, "friendly, kind of, at least in appearance."

Sirius huffed. "It's a good point."

"And don't we run the risk of saying to Voldemort that he's scared us and we're hiding if we stay here?" Harry continued, warming to his theme. "I mean, public image wise, shouldn't we both be showing that just because they want to torment us and torture us with the tournament, they can't get to us that way; that they've failed?"

Sirius hummed and regarded Harry with a fond look. "Your Mum and Dad said something similar about going into hiding with you when you were a baby."

"Why did they do it then?" wondered Harry out loud.

"You." Sirius admitted. "They were happy to risk themselves but they would never risk you."

And neither would Sirius; that was the message, Harry thought.

"You were a baby then, Harry." Sirius murmured as though he had read Harry's mind. "Defenceless except for the innate affinity you have with the family magic. They couldn't risk a public defiance."
But maybe they could now? Harry searched Sirius's expression for a clue as to which way Sirius was leaning on the decision.

Sirius shifted position and nudged Harry's foot with one of his across the expanse of the couch. "Any other reason for wanting to go back to Hogwarts?"

Harry shook his head.

"It's a good argument," Sirius commented, "you covered your personal, political and strategic reasons for returning very well."

"But?" prompted Harry with a hint of cheekiness because he could hear the 'but' in his head.

"But, I also want to know the reasons why you've considered not returning to Hogwarts and why you've elevated the reasons for going above them." Sirius confirmed with a smile.

Harry grimaced. He sipped his chocolate and tugged on his sock, realigning the toe section to sit more comfortably. "Well, we covered the individual lesson thing and wanting to be with my friends in lessons," he began hesitantly and raised his gaze to meet Sirius's, "but I guess the main reason for not going back that I had was because I can just be Harry here." He lifted a shoulder and tried to convey some of what he had been thinking earlier. "I feel safe…and well, you're here."

Sirius's expression melted into something painfully wonderful; his love for Harry so blatant that Harry almost felt he could reach out and touch it.

Sirius cleared his throat noisily. "Well…" he cleared his throat again, "well, that's…I'm glad you feel safe here. With me."

"It's home." Harry said simply and looked down at his chocolate. "I never really…Hogwarts was home before when…" he made a brief hand gesture meant to convey his past and the Dursleys and how much of a home he hadn't had living with his relatives, "but this is home now and when I'm at Hogwarts I miss it." He missed Sirius.

"But?" gently prompted Sirius.

"It would be easy to hide here." Harry confessed. "And I know if I said I wanted to stay, you'd make it happen so the media would think it was a good move, and Voldemort would second guess whether he'd made the right decision, and the alliance would think they'd suggested it but…"

He lifted his gaze and found Sirius waiting.

"It would be you who did that and it would be easy to let you," so easy to hide behind Sirius, "but I'm not a child anymore. Maybe," he conceded before Sirius could speak, "I'm not an adult yet either, but I do have responsibilities to the House of Potter, to you and the House of Black, and I didn't understand at the start of the Summer but I do now and I need to feel like I'm doing my best to fulfil them; that I'm making…making my parents proud." *Making Sirius proud.*

Sirius moved, reaching over to snag Harry's chocolate and setting it and his own aside. He tugged Harry into a loose sideways hug on the sofa.

"I know without a shadow of a doubt that your parents are incredibly proud of you." Sirius said eventually.

"Yeah?" Harry fingered the edge of his jumper.
"Yeah, because I am so proud of you I could literally burst with it." Sirius admitted gruffly. "And if I'm proud of you, I know they are too."

Harry's grip on Sirius tightened.

"And since I very clearly remember the pout on your face the first time I mentioned the word politics to you," Sirius continued in a lighter tone, "I am delighted that you take it so seriously now." He paused. "No Sirius pun intended."

Harry chuckled and shifted, getting comfortable as he leaned up against Sirius's side and leeched his warmth. They didn't often cuddle; hugs, yes, lots of them; cuddling, not so much. They occasionally ended up resting against each other during movie night – and on one occasion, Harry had fallen asleep on Sirius – but not what they were doing right then; just holding onto each other for comfort.

"This sense of responsibility you feel not to hide here," Sirius asked quietly, "is some of it related to the prophecy?"

"Some of it," Harry allowed, "and I know you hate it but there's no getting away from the fact that Voldemort is determined to make it about him and me… and I don't want him to think he's winning."

"You're right that I hate it." Sirius grumbled but he sighed. "I guess I can't argue against a sense of responsibility to go back to Hogwarts trumping the sense of safety you feel here."

"I wish…" Harry hesitated but ploughed on. "I wish I could have both? I do know going back isn't going to be easy. There's going to be the press and being stared at again and needing to be what everyone expects Harry Potter, Lord Potter, Heir of the House of Black, to be, and it would be nice to have an escape from that; somewhere I can be just Harry. And I know it's not going to be a hundred per cent safe because… it never has been. And I… I miss you at Hogwarts. The mirrors are great but it's not the same."

"Best of both worlds?" Sirius questioned and ruffled Harry's hair eliciting an irritated huff from him. "I can get behind that."

"So…" Harry pulled himself away from Sirius to look at him. "Does this mean I can go back to Hogwarts?"

"It means that I'll try and arrange things so you can go back." Sirius stated firmly.

Which totally meant Harry was going back to Hogwarts.

"I want to discuss your security with Albus, your schooling with Minnie, and I'd like the alliance and the Ministry to feel they had some input." Sirius continued. "Personally, I'm anticipating being encouraged to allow you to return and provide a visible banner under which the alliance and the Ministry can gather against the threat of Barty Crouch Junior and Peter Pettigrew, since actually telling the general public they're just a front for Voldemort would create a mass panic."

Keeping their allies happy; it was a good move.

"How do you want to play this publically?" Sirius asked.

Harry considered the question for a long moment, slumping down to rest one shoulder against the back cushion, his torso twisted toward Sirius. Sirius rearranged his own position, propping up his head with a hand, elbow on the back cushion, his own body twisted toward Harry so they could talk and see each other but still sat closely together. He knew he should probably suggest they do a 'so we're in the tournament and making the best of it' approach but it felt too passive, too much like
letting Voldemort have another win since no doubt Voldemort was probably thinking putting Harry out of action for a week was a win on its own.

"I want Voldemort to regret ever thinking about putting me in the tournament." Harry blurted out. "I want him to know it was my choice, that I could have destroyed the Goblet like I destroyed him when I was a baby. I want to do more than survive it; I want to say that I'm going to play to win it – to give it my best effort. I want them to think that I may be tested for nine months but I won't be tortured by being in the tournament…and neither will you by proxy."

Sirius regarded him with a raised eyebrow. "Your Dad would call this a 'Fuck You' strategy."

"It's something he'd do?" Harry asked curious.

Sirius grinned and shook his head. "No, he'd call things that whenever he was trying to talk me out of something he considered marginally crazy. 'Sirius, just because Regulus tried to kill you and you handed him his ass on a platter, doesn't mean that you should give into your need to say a follow-up 'fuck you' by sneaking into the infirmary and threatening him in the dead of night.'" He gestured vaguely. "Possibly not the best example, but a 'Fuck You' strategy." He frowned suddenly. "And if Remus asks I never used the 'f' word in describing this strategy or the anecdote that I've just told you."

Harry mimed his lips being sealed and grinned. "So, you think it's marginally crazy?

"It's a very Gryffindorish strategy; ballsy and bold." Sirius mused. "It would definitely piss off the old snake and his cronies if we decided to make lemonade instead of focusing on the lemons and that might lead them into making mistakes." He pursed his lips. "I'm concerned we'd give away how powerful you are with this strategy."

"He's going to know that anyway," Harry argued, "between the Slytherins reporting I've had to change to an individualised lesson plan and my competing in the tournament. And truthfully my raw power isn't going to be what defeats him because it's a power he already knows; he's just as powerful."

"True." Sirius acknowledged. "We'd need to do a press interview to get the message to him."

Harry winced but nodded. The Prophet had been running daily articles during his recovery, emphasising his selection as a Champion and barely mentioning the other three Champions which made Harry feel a bit guilty. Skeeter's articles had also hinted at how stressful it must all be for him and what the latest events would mean for his sanity.

"I think it's doable for you to win." Sirius admitted. "The tasks are set even if Voldemort played with the originals, and even then, he can't have made them so hard that he's actually expecting to kill you with them because he needs you alive at the end for the ritual – so it's not like he can come after you during the tournament."

"But he might come after others in retaliation." Harry deduced from Sirius's contemplative expression.

"He might try." Sirius conceded. "But Remus and I can take reasonable precautions and your friends are secure as they can be at school." He shrugged. "We'll discuss the strategy with the alliance members and make sure they take precautions."

"So?" said Harry hopefully.

Sirius nodded. "You'll return to Hogwarts…"
"Yes!" Harry leaped across the space between them and hugged Sirius hard.

"Oomph!" Sirius laughed and wrestled Harry into a more comfortable position. "Wait! This is on the condition that my discussions with Albus, Minnie and the rest go as anticipated! Alright?"

"Alright!" Harry happily agreed.

He was going back to Hogwarts. The binding from the Goblet hummed in what Harry thought was contentment. Maybe the universe wasn't conspiring against him after all.

O-O-o

It was almost amusing the way the entire Ministry atrium froze when Sirius stepped out of the floo during the lunch time rush.

He ignored the stares and wide-eyed looks, adjusted the cuffs on his black robes and continued on his way to the security check-in. He knew he looked imposing; he had tied his hair back into a warrior knot at the base of his neck; the open robes might look sharp and close-fitting but were in actuality loose and flowing to allow ease of movement. Beneath them, the leather trousers and tight black t-shirt showed off his physique. The dagger holster on his left thigh and the wand holster on his right signalled his battle readiness.

The Auror nodded at him respectfully. "Lord Black."

"Dukcan, isn't it?" Sirius asked politely, recognising the lanky dark-skinned Auror from previous visits.

"That's right, sir." Auror Dukcan passed him a parchment.

"I have my own knife." Sirius withdrew the dagger from his holster and pricked his thumb, allowing one drop of blood to fall on the paper. Immediately, his name appeared confirming his identity.

Dukan immediately burned the parchment in front of Sirius and banished the ashes. "Thank you, sir. And may I say it's good to see you. How is Lord Potter?"

Sirius allowed a small smile. He wasn't unaware of the gathering crowd that was waiting with bated breath to hear what he would reply. "Mostly annoyed with the rain interfering with his flying now he's feeling better."

Dukcan grinned. "My boy's the same, sir. Can't keep him off his broomstick."

"How old?" asked Sirius, genuinely interested.

"Twelve, sir." Dukcan's face took on a proud parental note that Sirius thought must be written all over his own. "Just made his class team at King's. He..." he hesitated before ploughing on. "He hero worships your boy. He's backing Lord Potter to win the tournament."

"I'll tell Harry." Sirius said simply with a nod of gratitude for the support.

"And what about you, Lord Black, are you backing Harry to win the tournament?"

He recognised the strident tones of Skeeter and rolled his eyes expressively at Dukcan who ducked his head to hide the laugh that bubbled up; Sirius turned around to face her.

"Rita, lovely to see you," he made a broad gesture to encompass the rest of the press that had stampeded to the front of the crowd, "and everyone else."
"Do you have a statement, Lord Black?" asked an eager cub reporter who barely looked out of school.

Rita shot the boy a dirty look. "He has yet to answer my question."

"Perhaps I can reply to both, Rita." Sirius suggested. "My brief statement is this: As you all know Harry was entered by someone wishing to do him harm, and selected as a Champion by the Goblet. While he did initially resist the binding, he chose to honour it after it was revealed if he destroyed the Goblet, which he has the power to do, it would have serious implications for the other Champions who had already been bound. The initial resistance led to severe magical exhaustion. Since Harry woke on Wednesday morning, he has chosen to embrace his situation. While I don't know the other Champions well, I do know that to be selected means that these young people are powerful, intelligent and honourable. I have a great deal of respect for all three on that basis alone. However," Sirius let himself smile sharply; all teeth and dangerous attitude, "I will always back Harry to win any battle he sets his mind to win."

And that was most definitely 'fuck you, Voldemort!' written out large for the bastard to see, Sirius thought with satisfaction.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to attend." Sirius said firmly and strode away before anyone could ask anything else, disappearing into the lift and letting it take him down into the bowels of the Ministry to the DOM.

With Black Manor in lockdown, they'd decided to convene the War Council in one of the DOM's research rooms. Sirius found the room easily and was pleased at the layout; a set of comfortable chairs around a small coffee table with a light lunch already set out; a side-table had a pensieve in case one was needed.

Bertie rose from his comfy armchair to greet Sirius. "How are you, Sirius?"

The genuine concern had a lump rising in Sirius's throat but he gave a sharp nod. "Better now that Harry's up and about."

Bertie's wizened face broke into a wide smile and he patted Sirius's arm enthusiastically. "Excellent news."

Amelia arrived shortly with a grin. "I heard you were in the building, Sirius. In fact I don't think there's a person within the Ministry who now doesn't know you're in the building. Cornelius wouldn't have minded you using his floo."

Sirius shrugged. "Making a public appearance seemed the easiest way of informing everyone that we're back in business."

Amelia's eyes sharpened speculatively. "And are you?"

"Oh yes." Sirius smiled as he remembered his statement to Rita.

"I remember that smile from Arcturus," Bertie commented, handing Sirius a cup of coffee, "it never boded well for whoever had attracted his ire."

Sirius was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he was more like his Grandfather than he had ever thought he was or wanted to be. It wasn't exactly a comforting thought.

"Sirius! Thank Merlin!" Cornelius hurried over to him and clasped his hand strongly. "It's so good to see you!"
He might have been touched, Sirius mused wryly, except for the fact that he knew Cornelius's main concern was political. But there was genuine concern underneath that, buried deep, and Sirius appreciated the thought as Cornelius bustled into the best armchair and accepted a cup of tea.

Albus arrived in a flurry of his pale pink robes that reminded Sirius of a girl's doll that Lily had once shown him. The Headmaster apologised for his lateness complaining that he had been stuck discussing the tournament with his fellow Heads.

"How is Harry?" asked Albus. "Minerva said he was bored but still exhausted when she saw him."

"He's better." Sirius said succinctly.

"Good." Albus sighed with relief.

"Shall we begin then?" Sirius said. "I think it would be wise to add the tournament as a separate item on our agenda if everyone agrees?"

They all nodded.

"Cornelius, I know we'd normally discuss the politics first but..."

"No, no," Cornelius waved benevolently at him, "we should discuss the tournament first. I assume it will have an impact to the rest of the agenda?"

"Exactly." Sirius confirmed, relieved at Cornelius's easy acquiescence. "So, the tournament. Albus, why don't you update us first on what the situation is with the structure – as much as you can with the constraints of your position?"

Albus nodded sagely. "The tournament has not been fundamentally altered from its original parameters except in the inclusion of a fourth Champion. There is a reduction in judges and we have discussed today whether the fourth position rather than been taken by Ludo as the Ministry representative, should be given to someone who represents Harry as I and the other Headmasters represent the school Champions. There was a difference of opinion with Igor suggesting the possibility of double favouritism for both Harry and Mister Diggory if another person was added. Olympe was much more willing to accept the view that my representing both Champions is unusual." He sighed. "There is the problem that the individual would have to be bound to the Goblet as Harry's representative and in the same way that we are not allowed to discuss the specifics of the tasks, they would not be able to do so either."

"I don't necessarily see it as an issue having Ludo be the fourth judge and you representing both Harry and Cedric." Sirius said. "In discussions on the tasks, I'm sure your input would be the same either way, and in judging I know you'll be fair."

"Ludo is also meant to be there as a neutral judge anyway to balance any notion of favouritism among all three judges." Amelia pointed out. "But I would recommend, Albus, that you speak with Cedric himself just to check that he has no issue with your representing both him and Harry from his perspective. I know Amos isn't happy."

"I shall take your advice, Amelia." Albus replied. "I'll discuss the matter with young Cedric Diggory. If he has an issue than I shall revisit the matter and insist the fourth judge is someone to wholly represent Harry."

"What about the rest of the tournament?" asked Bertie, steering them back on track.

"Each task remains as we had previously scheduled it." Albus said. "Elements of the tasks we
planned remain but they have been altered to become more dangerous. I can't say anything more than that I fear. However, I have checked the history records and confirmed that the revised tasks are no more dangerous than those held in previous tournaments. They are also achievable if the Champions perform with the intelligence and determination that prompted their selection.”

"Fantastic." Sirius drawled dryly. What about Harry who had been selected because he was the only candidate?

Albus’s lips twitched and his moustache quivered as though he’d read Sirius's mind and held back a laugh. "I also believe that Harry was selected as a Champion and not chosen as a default. The original spell-work suggests if the Goblet found nobody worthy of standing as a Champion, it would be declared so and that school would be out of the competition."

"I'm not sure that makes me feel better, Albus," Sirius said. But it did ease his mind a little. "What about Harry's standing as the Champion of the Light? How will the Goblet interpret that?"

Bertie leaned forward eagerly. "I may be able to shed some light here." He waved a hand. "Pardon the pun. The Goblet doesn't recognise schools or Headmasters per se. The number of Champions to be chosen and for whom they were competing is always defined by the Initiation document. When someone enters their name as an official representative of a competing group, they become bound by the Goblet's tournament rules. However there is no check that the number of representatives matches the number of groups; only that the number of Champions to be selected matches those chosen."

"So basically the Goblet doesn't really care that Harry is competing under the banner 'The Light,'" Sirius checked, "it just knows 'The Light' doesn't have an authority representative but it does have Harry as its Champion."

"A good summary." Bertie said.

"Thankfully Sirius can summarise unlike some." Amelia bantered.

Bertie smiled at her serenely. "Essentially, there is nothing in the spell-work that enforces the Headmasters to enter their names. They could choose not to, thusly not be bound by the tournament rules and potentially provide specific help to their Champions about the tasks. But whether the magic of the Goblet would find this acceptable...the Spirit is much more sentient than we had ever thought."

"But possibly we should ensure Harry's schooling situation is sorted sooner rather than later." Albus said.

"A good point," Sirius conceded, "if you could arrange a meeting with Minnie this evening, we can discuss it then."

"For those of us with a vested interest," Cornelius spoke up, "may I ask; what is the likely outcome? If Harry were to leave Hogwarts..."

There would be a panic and others would leave the school. Internationally it would be a political blow beyond the damage to Hogwarts' own reputation. Sirius could see why Cornelius was concerned.

"Harry has expressed a desire to return." Sirius stated simply and saw the relief flood Cornelius's expression momentarily while Albus smiled widely. "But there's a great deal to be discussed before I agree."

Albus quickly nodded. "I'll arrange a meeting for seven, if that's convenient for you? We could come
"The Manor remains in lockdown for the time being." Sirius said firmly. "Your office at Hogwarts will suffice and I'm sure Harry will have letters for me to deliver to his friends."

Albus nodded again. "In that case would you be willing to allow Severus and Alastor to attend in addition to Minerva?"

"That's fine." Sirius said. He honestly didn't mind Moody's presence and although he would have preferred it if Snape wasn't invited along, he was beginning to appreciate Snape was sincere in his wish to kill Voldemort, so maybe they could work together.

"Alastor's putting in other security measures for the tournament," Amelia said dryly, "including a redo of the identity checks that were done by Crouch."

"It did take a bit of persuading." Cornelius admitted, "but all the foreign embassies involved agreed it was a necessity and allowed us to redo the checks."

"Everyone passed?" asked Sirius bluntly.

Amelia nodded. "Alastor's determined to keep an eye on Karkaroff regardless."

Sirius wasn't going to argue it wasn't necessary; Karkaroff was a former Death Eater who would sell his soul to the highest bidder.

"We're also implementing Alastor's magical ticket security system for the tournament's public audiences." Amelia said. "No-one without a ticket issued by Alastor personally will be allowed on the grounds, and anyone trying to use someone else's ticket will cause a particularly nasty hex to appear identifying them easily as an imposter."

Cornelius sighed. "It's a pity such a thing is necessary."

"But reassuring given the circumstances." Sirius countered.

"With any luck we'll be able to counter an attempt by Voldemort to get access to Harry for the final part of the ritual." Amelia agreed.

Sirius wasn't counting on it. Voldemort was an excellent tactician; he wouldn't have almost had the wizarding world in his grasp at the end of the last war if he wasn't. The self-styled Dark Lord had to have some kind of plan to get Harry for the ritual. And regardless of how disparaging Sirius wanted to be about those Voldemort had gathered around him…the truth was that they were committed to Voldemort's service. Junior wasn't to be underestimated; none of them could be underestimated.

"The scuttlebutt says that you announced Harry means to win the tournament when you arrived." Amelia commented dryly, reaching for one of the tiny sandwiches that were arranged in front of them.

Sirius snagged a cheese sandwich to keep her company and nodded. "Harry believes that embracing the tournament is the way to go as a strategy and I'm inclined to agree with him."

Bertie's face lit up. "Oh, excellent idea! It will weaken the notion of his being in fear of his life for the nine months…"

"And limit the potency of that particular ingredient in the ritual," Albus agreed, "should it get that far."
"And also, with any luck, annoy Voldemort and company into making a few mistakes." Sirius added.

"Yes," Albus nodded, "Tom will not be pleased if Harry steps back into the public eye uncowed and unbroken by his machinations."


"Is it a good idea to provoke Voldemort though?" Amelia asked, gesturing with her half-eaten sandwich.

Bertie cleared his throat. "I think Harry is probably best placed to determine how to deal with Voldemort. Setting aside the incident when he was a baby, Harry has thwarted his plans twice since. He has a natural gift for countering Voldemort, it seems." His eyes flickered towards Sirius who refused to acknowledge the allusion to the prophecy. "I believe it would be sensible to allow Harry to take the lead in how he wants to respond."

"You really think it will annoy Voldemort into making mistakes?" Amelia turned to Sirius.

Sirius shrugged. "Voldemort wants to think he's winning; that he successfully entered Harry into the competition to risk his life and make him ready for the ritual. Harry's determined to make it known he chose to accept the binding and will do his best to win the competition...he's not there under sufferance just trying to survive. It says to Voldemort that at best he's gotten a draw. That should infuriate him."

Amelia nodded slowly.

"Unfortunately, some of our political allies may not be so accepting of such a strong response." Cornelius commented worriedly. "Some will feel a low key reply is best."

Sirius gave Cornelius an understanding nod. "I think that's a good segue into the next item on the agenda. I'm meeting with the Potter alliance directly after this meeting to get their views and input."

"Excellent!" Cornelius said approvingly.

"Regardless, Neville Longbottom was right when he declared that the House of Potter is at war. I don't believe any of those currently in the alliance will want out but I expect some grumbling about tactics especially about Harry's decision to play to win."

"I know he's not in the alliance but Amos is going to be furious." Amelia said, picking up her cup. "He's already complaining to anyone who will listen that Harry is taking the limelight away from the real Champions."

Sirius gave a small huff acknowledging that Amos Diggory was likely to be a problem.

Cornelius cleared his throat. "I admire Harry's bravery in moving forward in such a direct way but it is likely to have an off-putting effect on those we're still courting to become part of the alliance."

"Yes," Sirius agreed, "it'll deter the Houses on the pureblood side from asking for détentes, and I suspect some of the minor neutral Houses will not want to openly side with the House of Potter in case it draws attention to them."

"It may benefit Wenlock's drive to build an opposition." Cornelius commented.

"Maybe," Sirius allowed, "he has made some headway with the minor pureblood Houses according
to Lucius, although most of them are giving Wenlock a hard time since he's all but ignored them previously."

"What's the political agenda for the delayed November session?" asked Amelia.

"Primarily, the Committee reviewing the laws governing Magical Races and Creatures is going to recommend the suspension of the laws that were pushed through last year restricting the ability of werewolves to work." Sirius said succinctly.

"We're expecting a full report in December and new laws providing a more equitable governance of magical races and creatures in January and February." Cornelius added.

Albus smiled with delight. "An excellent first move in the political battle. Tom will find himself without many magical allies if we can prove that the other magical races will get fairer treatment from the current government."

"We're already seeing an impact," Cornelius agreed enthusiastically, "the Goblins have sent word that they were pleased by the October session and look forward to seeing what we do going forward. We've also had similar messages from representatives from the Centaurs and the Vampires."

"The werewolf packs bar Greyback's have also declared neutrality." Amelia added.

"Although we do need to keep a close eye politically on how our opposition takes the House of Black and Potter providing sanctuary to members of Greyback's pack." Cornelius sent Sirius a concerned look.

"At the moment it's only a handful and most of them are happy to be gainfully employed running the Potter chateau in France." Sirius said firmly. "Remus will keep close control of it."

Cornelius grimaced but gave a nod. "It may be a good idea to do some publicity, perhaps with the international press?"

"Let's leave it for now." Sirius said, believing it was safer for Remus and the werewolves at the chateau for the news of the sanctuary to be kept quiet for the short term. "Speaking of the international forum, what's happening with Crouch's Department?"

"We've appointed Henry Hatter as a Special Auditor – that will need to be ratified by the Wizengamot." Cornelius said pompously. "Henry served in the Department up until his retirement five years ago…"

"He didn't like Crouch." Amelia commented in an aside.

"He has a good international reputation," Cornelius said defensively, "and I have every confidence that he'll find anything that may have gone awry during the time Crouch was being impersonated by his son." He sighed dramatically. "Beyond that, of course, we've taken quite a blow internationally with the news of Crouch's death and being hoodwinked by Junior for so many months. However, we have had expressions of support and most of the ambassadors have been eager to assist us in ensuring agreements made since June are reviewed and authenticated."

"We've already confirmed that nobody in the Department was being controlled by Junior." Amelia added. "Four of the five employees had few dealings with him. Percy Weasley was the only one to maintain regular contact during the supposed sick leave and Junior elevated his position to his assistant on his return, keeping him close."

"I understand from Arthur that Percy's been devastated by the news." Sirius said with some
sympathy for the plight of the young man. Percy had pinned his flag to the wrong banner but he'd only acted out of a desire to improve his career prospects, and to realise his ambition had provided Junior with information that had almost led to the death of his loved ones…Percy had a lot of guilt and self-recrimination to deal with in the wake of Junior's unmasking.

"I believe Henry will recommend that Weasley is removed from the Department." Cornelius admitted.

"It will be a struggle for him to remain with the Ministry in another Department," Amelia pointed out, "he hasn't endeared himself to anyone."

Sirius made a mental note to speak with Arthur again.

"Politically, I think that brings us up to date." Cornelius said brightly.

It did. Sirius indicated for Amelia to begin.

"Well, Tag the Death Eater has been useful if only in eliminating the possibility that any of the previously known Death Eaters has any idea where Voldemort and his band of minions have run off to hide." Amelia's voice was seeped with frustration.

"Lucius confirms that his alliance is at a loss." Sirius said. "Lots of theories but no real leads, since most of them weren't aware of Junior's association with Rabastan until they were all arrested for the attack on the Longbottoms, and Junior hasn't approached anyone since he was liberated from his father's basement."

"What we do know has come from Snape's recovered memories of his time staying with the LeStranges." Amelia said, reaching for another sandwich. "Among the final memories that were recovered with the help of a healer from Saint Mungo's, there was one specifically where Junior and Rabastan discussed buying a small seaside cottage as a bolthole with the South and West coasts mentioned as possible locations."

"It's a solid lead." Sirius commented, relieved that they had something when he'd previously believed there was nothing.

"The Rat Squad is hunting down all possible sales that took place prior to the arrest of Rabastan and Junior back in 'eighty-one, and they are repeating that for sales since June." Amelia confirmed. "If that's where they are hiding, we should be able to close in on them eventually."

"What about Pettigrew?" Bertie asked, sipping his tea.

"All of the possible places Sirius and Remus have identified for us have come up empty." Amelia sighed.

"Not surprisingly." Sirius said. "Peter isn't stupid, as much as I want to believe that he is with the choices he's made. He'll keep away from anywhere that Remus and I know about."

Albus nodded in agreement. "He has shown a remarkable sense of self-preservation." He gestured, sending one lurid pink sleeve flying. "He also demonstrates a need to follow. I believe it's more likely that he will let Barty Crouch Junior take the lead."

"That's true enough." Sirius grimaced, remembering how Peter had followed him and James at school.

"I also believe that it's likely that Crouch Junior will try and insert himself into the tournament again."
Albus continued. "We will need to be vigilant with the identity checks."

"Agreed." Amelia said. "We're going to ask for additional budget to increase security again for the tournament."

"We'll see what we can do." Sirius promised.

"Any luck with the elf?" Amelia asked.

Sirius shook his head. "Kreacher reported that she's not appeared in any of the usual elf places and isn't using her magic."

"Is she still alive?" Bertie asked bluntly.

"There's still an elf bond according to my elves so we think so." Sirius sighed heavily. "Junior was aware that we knew about the elf's part in the threats he sent thanks to the information he received when he impersonated his father. He's smart enough to realise using her again might be a way to trace him."

Amelia nodded sharply and sat back, her hands up. "That's all I had."

Bertie cleared his throat. "Well, there's not a great deal of progress on the Treasure Hunt side of things either. We've cleared Godric's Hollow. There was a dagger we think originally belonged to Godric Gryffindor found by the crib. It wasn't one of the objects we're looking for but possibly was intended for that purpose. We've destroyed it anyway."

"Better safe than sorry." Cornelius said officiously.

"That leaves the missing item at Hogwarts, likely to be Ravenclaw's diadem, and I think we're all agreed that the snake travelling with Voldemort should be eliminated since it was present when Voldemort killed Frank Bryce at Little Hangleton." Bertie continued soberly.

"Bill and Caro have started the search at Hogwarts." Sirius commented.

"They've devised a systematic search pattern based on the route that we believe Riddle will have used from the path to the Headmaster's office. They'll start with the route and move out in a concentric circle from there." Bertie sighed again. "It's going to be tedious work."

"Ostensibly the staff and the students have accepted that they are being loaned by the DOM at my request to provide additional security for the tournament." Albus commented.

"Good," murmured Sirius, "so that brings us up to date, unless anyone has anything else?"

Amelia leaned forward. "How are you and Harry really, Sirius? Do you need anything?"

Sirius smiled at her, appreciating the genuine concern. "We're fine, Amelia. This isn't what we wanted but…we'll make the best of it."

"Well, anything you do need, Sirius, just let us know." Bertie said seriously.

He nodded again. "Thank you."

It was a good ending to the War Council. Sirius made his escape from the DOM, accepting Cornelius's offer to use the private floo in the Minister's office rather than going out through the atrium as he had arrived. It meant spending a half hour with Cornelius discussing the various strategies they had in play but it was time well spent.
Sirius flooded back to Black Manor but immediately left again for the Tonks' house.

Andromeda greeted him at the door and showed him through to the comfortable sitting room. Ted sat in a leather recliner, a cup of tea resting on one arm. He got to his feet to shake Sirius's hand.

Narcissa and Lucius also rose from their position on the leather sofa but they gave brief nods of greeting and Sirius returned the gesture, motioning for them to sit.

"Thank you for coming at short notice." Sirius said formally, taking the remaining leather chair as Andromeda perched on the free arm of her husband's seat.

"How's Harry?" asked Andromeda.

"Much better." Sirius said. "I've called this family meeting to bring you up to date and to make sure that we present a united front going forward in terms of our public comments and demeanour."

They all nodded understanding the need for the meeting.

"Firstly, as Remus informed you while I was with Harry, he was injured resisting the binding." Sirius said.

"Then he was able to resist it?" asked Lucius carefully. "There are conflicting rumours."

"He was able to resist it and he might have been able to destroy the Goblet with the help of the family magic." Sirius explained. "Unfortunately, if he had done so, the Goblet would have tried to take the lives and the magic of all those already bound and those promised." He gave a shrug. "Harry would have likely survived but the other Champions…"

"So he accepted the binding in a noble act to save them." Lucius sneered. "How very Gryffindorish."

Sirius shot him a warning look.

"It will play well with your allies and the press." Narcissa commented, adjusting her skirts and drawing Sirius's attention away from her husband.

"Harry did it because it was the right thing to do." Sirius pointed out sharply.

Narcissa arched one elegant eyebrow. "Which will simply mean that it plays even better; the hero of the Light, the Boy Who Lived no less, forced into a tournament that he could have avoided because he wasn't willing to sacrifice the lives of the other Champions...it's legend brought to life. Rita Skeeter will eat it up with a spoon."

Sirius grimaced but couldn't argue with her summation. "Harry is going to play to win the tournament."

"Is that sensible?" asked Andromeda, concern tensing all the lines in her face.

Ted slid his hand into his wife's. "If he does the least he needs to do, surely that would be sufficient for him to survive?"

Lucius sent a snide look towards his sister-in-law and her husband. "It will make him look weak and pathetic if he plays simply to survive." He smoothed a hand over the head of his cane. "If he plays to win, he looks strong."

Ted frowned. "I would have thought the Slytherin approach would have been self-preservation
above all else and besides," he motioned towards Sirius, "wouldn't it be fairer on the other Champions who did enter knowingly to allow them to have their competition without Harry in the mix?"

"And there speaks the Hufflepuff!" Lucius mocked.

"Enough." Sirius said sternly. He caught Ted's gaze. "Despite the way Harry was entered into the tournament, Harry was chosen by the Goblet as a Champion because he was judged to be deserving of being a Champion. He has much right as the other Champions to compete and try to win." He sent a fleeting look to Lucius. "And Lucius is right." As much as Sirius hated to admit it. "Harry simply doing the least he needs to do will give the impression that Voldemort has managed to terrorise him. If he plays to win, we effectively tell Voldemort he has failed in that respect."

Ted sighed heavily. "I understand even if I don't like it, Sirius."

Andromeda placed an arm around her husband. "How can we help?"

"Public support for Harry," Sirius said immediately, "there may be a backlash against him because he has decided to compete. Others may have a similar view that Harry should let the others have the glory of winning."

"He'll have our support, of course, Sirius." Ted stated firmly.

Sirius turned to Lucius. "Draco's doing well at Hogwarts. He's maintained a supportive position and he's kept me informed to the Slytherin reactions. He's noted that Bulstrode has revealed Riddle's lineage and that most are not happy with the idea that they are meant to swear loyalty to someone espousing a pureblood agenda who isn't a pureblood."

"Yes," Lucius said dryly, "it's caused quite a commotion among the parents who had chosen to keep the information quiet." He smiled. "They've found their offspring are unwilling to be fodder for the Dark Lord."

"I believe it would be beneficial to deliver your praise directly to Draco." Narcissa shifted beside her husband. "I should not need to tell you how precarious his position is within Slytherin."

Sirius swallowed the retort he wanted to make and nodded instead, because truthfully Draco was in a precarious position and that he had apparently held fast to supporting Harry and the House of Black deserved recognition. "I'll see what I can do." He gestured at Lucius. "What reactions have you observed?"

"Those that carry the Mark are even more concerned." Lucius conceded, fidgeting with the cane. "We understand that this was done at the Dark Lord's behest if not at his hand. He is gaining in strength to challenge Potter so openly." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "The majority are unwilling to allow him to come to power again but are unclear how to remain out of the imminent war. My position can be explained with the primacy, and those who have established détentes have some cover, but there are many who have none."

And wanted cover because they had no backbone to stand up to Voldemort on their own, Sirius mused.

"Wenlock may find some traction as the minor Houses look to him for that cover." Lucius murmured. "Whether Wenlock will understand why they are seeking his protection is another matter. He is focused on the political landscape and he has no Mark."

"So he may find himself caught in the crossfire when Voldemort realises Wenlock is taking his
supporters?" Sirius was torn between glee and the nagging voice of conscience that said he should warn Wenlock.

"It's a possibility." Lucius allowed.

And one that Lucius would pursue whatever concerns Sirius or anyone else might have, Sirius realised. Did he want Lucius to back off putting Wenlock in that position? Sirius knew that if he did he should say something. He wrestled for a long moment with his ruthless urge to let Wenlock make his own bed on one hand, and with the knowledge that he should do the right thing on the other. Thinking of Harry and the example he wanted to set for his son decided Sirius.

Sirius sighed. "Try to give Wenlock a subtle heads-up. If he worries about why some are seeking his protection, it may make him hesitant to make alliances which will cock things up for him politically and help us that way. He'll probably ignore you but we'll have the higher ground knowing we warned him."

Lucius inclined his head.

"Have you heard anything about Junior and the rat?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"Nothing, except the obvious exclamations of surprise at Junior's resurrection and competence as a lieutenant of the Dark Lord." Lucius replied. "The general consensus is that Junior only took the Mark for Rabastan." His cool eyes met Sirius's. "Junior will want to avenge his death. I'm certain he'll believe taking Harry from you will suffice but your death would probably be a bonus."

Which Sirius had already worked out for himself.

"OK, so the final thing you should know is that Harry is likely to return to Hogwarts by the beginning of next week, certainly by the Weighing of the Wands ceremony." Sirius confirmed. "I'll be discussing the matter with Albus later." He checked the clock and stood. "I have to get to the Potter alliance meeting at the Longbottoms. Are there any questions?"

"Will you or Harry be talking to the press?" asked Narcissa.

"Tomorrow." Sirius said. "I want everyone allied briefed today."

"A sensible plan." Lucius rose and held a hand out for Narcissa to hold while she got to her feet. "With your permission, I'll do the same?"

Sirius agreed swiftly. He let the Malfoys leave before him but Andromeda stopped him before he could follow them through the floo.

"I hope you realise that our comments are…"

"Are because you care about Harry." Sirius smiled warmly at his cousin.

Andromeda sighed and pushed her hair away from her face. "Harry must be scared, Sirius, no matter what brave front he's putting on for you."

"I know, Andy." He knew because he was scared too.

Andromeda let him go and Sirius flooed to the Longbottoms.

He was greeted by Augusta personally, vibrant in a green robe with the crest of the House of Longbottom. She looked regal; her eyes alight with fire, her stride determined and purposeful. She
accepted his kiss on her hand, squeezing his gently before letting go.

"How are you, Sirius? And Harry?" Augusta asked as they made their way to the large formal drawing room.

"I'm better now Harry's woken up." Sirius admitted honestly. "I hate it when he's hurt."

"It's a particular kind of ache, isn't it?" Augusta said with a pained smile. "I remember the first time Frank got sick. I almost drove Gerald round the bend with my panicking."

They entered the room and Sirius wasn't surprised when the babble of chatter came to a sudden halt. He took the seat that Augusta pointed to, arranged himself comfortably and accepted the cup of coffee she pressed on him.

"Thank you all for coming," Sirius began and went through his briefing once again; Harry's status, the proposed strategy, the news from Lucius. He wished for a moment that Remus was with him so he could have another pair of eyes checking out who was completely with them and who was doubtful.

Daniel Greengrass cleared his throat first. "I think I speak for us all, Sirius, in saying that we said we stand with you and we meant it; we're not going anywhere."

Mutters of agreement swept the room.

Sirius allowed himself a small sigh of relief. "You'll need to protect yourselves. The strategy…"

"Means Voldemort and his cronies may try to take his anger out on Harry's supporters since he cannot touch Harry himself." Richard Bones nodded. "Frankly, though, I'm glad Harry wants to go back to Hogwarts. We can protect all the kids better if he's there; consolidate our efforts."

"And they all look to him – even the kids outside of the formal alliance." Daniel added.

"I agree and, for what it's worth, I think it's a good strategy." Augusta said firmly. "It's high time we started to fight back and made it clear that they won't have it their own way."

Albert Goldstein frowned. "Can Harry win it?"

"I believe he has the potential." Sirius replied. "He's smart, fast on his feet in a crisis, and has tons of raw power at his disposal." He took a sip of his drink to ease his dry throat. "What he lacks is spell knowledge and experience."

"Amos believes Cedric will win for that reason." Leonard Abbott spoke up. "He's pretty upset that Harry has taken the lion's share of the publicity to date."

"So I've heard." Sirius regarded Leonard carefully. "I understand you're in a difficult position with Amos being a personal friend but I'd appreciate your view of his possible response."

Leonard squirmed in his seat but sighed in acquiescence. "Amos is already set against the alliance in his political views on magical creatures. He's responsible in part for many of the extreme magical creature laws, for understandable reasons since he lost his younger brother to a werewolf attack. The fact that Harry is now set in direct competition to Cedric will compound that sense of Amos against the Potter alliance to an unfortunate degree." He paused. "I went to visit Amos at the Ministry last week and saw Wenlock coming out of his office."

"They share an agenda where magical creatures are concerned." Albert commented. "It's not too
surprising that Wenlock would look to Diggory as an inside source on the issue."

"Drill him for numbers of attacks, the nature of them – all the sordid details that you need if you're
going to be fear-mongering." Sirius commented dryly.

Daniel shrugged unconcerned. "We can counter that with our own spiel. But if Leonard is right,
Amos is going to be going after Harry in public beyond the pot shots already taken."

Sirius nodded. "We need a press strategy on his approach to the competition and throughout."

"Exactly." Carl Branstone said. "I can help with that. I'm good with the media."

Branstone had been a journalist until he'd taken over from the family estates, Sirius remembered. He
gave an appreciative smile.

"Thank you." Sirius said.

"Augusta and I will take point on the politics like we did last session." Daniel suggested. "We can
give you the time to focus on Harry."

More suggestions flooded out and by the time Sirius left the Longbottom mansion, he was spinning
from the level of unconditional support the alliance was giving him and Harry. Maybe guilt was a
factor in their wish to be helpful or maybe they had developed a sense of responsibility – especially
the Ancient and Noble Houses, Sirius thought, as he dropped by Griffin House to check on his son.
Whatever the reason, he wasn't going to baulk at the help.

Harry was fast asleep on the sofa in the living room. Hedwig was keeping watch, perched on the
back of a chair nearby. There was a stack of letters written, folded and named on the coffee table.
Sirius pulled over the tartan throw Minnie had added to the décor and tucked it gently around Harry.

Voldemort was one step closer to getting Harry's blood and that boiled Sirius's own. He had a feeling
Harry's instinct that in the end it would be Harry and Voldemort was right and that burned even
more. He wanted to step between them; wanted desperately to keep Harry safe and protected. Had
James felt the same, Sirius wondered, and knew if it came down to it, he would do the same as his
best friend; he'd give his own life for Harry's. He dropped a kiss on Harry's forehead and picked up
the letters.

Hedwig's feathers flared in outrage.

"I'm playing delivery owl today, Hedwig." Sirius murmured, saluting her with the letters. "You stay
and watch over Harry."

Hedwig cocked her head and settled back onto the chair.

It was rather creepy just how intelligent that owl was at times, Sirius thought as he left again, tucking
the letters into the inner pocket of his robes.

He was right on time for his trip to Hogwarts. He stepped out of the floo into Albus's office, pleased
to see that everyone was already present.

Minerva sat in one visitor's chair; Moody in another; Snape stood by the wall behind Albus who was
at his desk. Sirius waved them back into their chairs and took the remaining empty chair between
Minerva and Moody, facing Albus directly.

"How's..."
"Harry is doing much better. Still tired." Sirius said cutting Minerva's enquiry short. "He was sleeping when I left him."

"The lad used up some energy at Halloween." Moody grumbled, adjusting the position of his peg leg while his magical eye whirled. "Never seen anything like it."

"Nor I." Snape added quietly.

Albus ignored the comments in favour of focusing on the topic they were there to discuss. "We're here to discuss the matter of young Harry's schooling."

"Harry has expressed a desire to return," Sirius confirmed again, "and the Potter alliance has expressed a belief that it will be easier to protect the kids as a group if they're at Hogwarts rather than separated into their own homes. Cornelius made a point of telling me before I used his floo that Harry withdrawing from Hogwarts would add salt on the international wound we're sporting thanks to being hoodwinked by Crouch Junior."

"But you have concerns." Albus stated simply, his expression grave.

"I have three main concerns." He sat back and held Albus's gaze. "The first is leaving his security in someone else's hands at this time. Hogwarts hasn't been the safest place for Harry since he started schooling here," he signalled for Albus to wait until he had finished his point, "and while many of my issues have been resolved with Alastor's security measures, I can't help feeling that the bad guys seem adept at slipping through the smallest of cracks."

Moody snorted. "I can't argue with that. They're good. Junior used the one moment he had alone with the Goblet and ran with it." He grimaced, his scarred face twisting. "I can't guarantee that he won't slip through again. The tournament brings strangers onto the grounds for preparation and during the events. The ticket system is good but overall, this tournament is a bloody nightmare security wise."

"I know we can't cancel the tournament but can we cancel the public nature of the competition?" Minerva asked.

"I fear not without revealing the real perpetrator behind Harry's inclusion and why he was included." Albus sighed. He lifted one hand from his desk in a vague gesture of negation. "I don't believe any of us want to give Tom that amount of publicity and acknowledgement at this stage."

"No," Sirius agreed, "and internationally we'd take another hit which as I mentioned Cornelius is keen to avoid." He motioned out towards the windows and the accommodations of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons delegations beyond them. "Moreover, the other Champions could challenge it. They put themselves forward in part for the public recognition. I know Amos Diggory will probably make a fuss since all I've heard all day is how unhappy he is at the amount of publicity directed at Harry and not at Cedric this last week."

"That is true." Minerva sniffed. "According to Pomona, Cedric has tried to distance himself from his father's comments."

"Despite his desire to come back to Hogwarts, Harry admits he feels safer at Griffin House." Sirius said, returning them to his initial point. "However, I'll concede that the tournament events are the most risky in terms of Harry's safety and that would be true even if he stayed at Griffin House between the tasks."

"You said you had three concerns." Moody said to Sirius. "We've heard the first and can hardly
argue with it."

"The second concern is one I raised before Harry was entered into the tournament." Sirius said, lifting his hand. "He's not being challenged educationally in the core wand subjects especially on the practical elements."

Minerva nodded briskly. "Filius, Alastor and I are all in agreement with you."

"Lad's a natural at DADA and with his power…" Moody grimaced. "It's difficult giving him something he finds challenging without going outside of his year group."

"Same in Transfiguration and in Charms." Minerva opened up a piece of parchment and tapped it with her wand. "His theoretical work is excellent in these subjects too. If it weren't for the tournament, I would be suggesting we focus on getting him through his OWLs and into the NEWT level classes."

"OWLs are out." Sirius said firmly. "Harry's going to have enough on his plate without sitting exams."

"What of the other subjects?" Albus asked.

"On a par with his classmates in History of Magic," Minerva read from the parchment, "same with Potions although arguably he is under-marked," she cast a look toward Snape who looked impassively back at her, "and he is maintaining a top three position in each of his electives including Runes where he is a year ahead."

"He's way ahead with Duelling according to young Tobias which isn't surprising since he has a natural aptitude, and you and Remus have been tutoring him all Summer." Moody commented.

"Regardless of the tournament, I would have suggested an individualised and accelerated lesson plan for Harry." Minerva said with a sigh.

"We're all agreed then that he needs a different schooling plan to his contemporaries." Sirius said, ignoring Snape's expression of discomfort.

"Your final concern, Sirius?" Albus prompted.

Sirius took a moment to gather his thoughts. He smoothed the front of his robes. "Harry will be under tremendous pressure if he comes back to Hogwarts. He'll be the focus of all eyes and he'll be expected to be strong as a leader of the political alliance the House of Potter has formed. He'll also be waging a war on Voldemort through the tournament as he attempts to win it. There'll be press and publicity. It's a lot for a fourteen year old to handle on his own."

Albus's gaze had sharpened and Sirius mused whether the Headmaster had guessed where Sirius was heading.

"The staff will support him, Sirius." Minerva said fervently.

"But the staff can only do so much with the strictures of the tournament." Sirius countered. "He needs emotional support more than anything else, and while he has good friends, they're also young and laying that burden on their shoulders isn't fair. He's already said to me that the main reason why he wouldn't want to come back is because he can't be just Harry here."

Moody's eye swivelled until it was focused on Sirius. "You have a point."
"Yes, and a very valid one." Albus agreed. "What is your proposal?" he smiled fondly at Sirius. "I suspect you have one."

"Harry comes back to Hogwarts but, as Hogwarts has a Champion and Harry is competing against him, to keep things clear from a tournament perspective, he will not be considered a Hogwarts' student. Hogwarts' professors who are assigned to him under the new lesson plan Minnie will create will also be considered de facto faculty of 'The Light,' the banner under which Harry is competing. He will be given his own suite of rooms where he will live with me as his guardian." Sirius said firmly. "Harry gets the best of both worlds – Hogwarts and somewhere he can be just Harry. Everyone else has Harry back at Hogwarts as they wanted and I get to be here for my son when he needs someone to lean on and to provide additional security for him."

They all stared at him.

Snape frowned heavily. "You want to live here?"

"Well," Albus said brightly, "I think this will be a most interesting discussion."
Ensuring Pronglet Survives:3

Severus darted a look toward Black as they made their way through the corridors of Hogwarts towards the Slytherin dungeons.

He didn't want to admit it but Black had been masterful in his negotiations with the Headmaster. Black had gotten a suite of rooms designated for himself and Potter within the walls of Hogwarts as a competing group within the tournament. Black had conceded that Lupin would stay in the Black residence in Hogsmeade rather than at Hogwarts but it was hardly a large concession. Albus had also been inveigled into allowing Black's own house elves to see to their needs rather than imposing on Hogwarts' elves thus ensuring their privacy and security.

The deal had Potter taking breakfast and dinner usually with Black but lunch with the school. Quidditch practice was allowed although Potter would no longer play on the Gryffindor team as he would ostensibly not be a Hogwarts' student, and was banned because of the tournament anyway. Black had wrangled for Potter's friends and allies to be allowed to occasionally dine with in the suite of rooms with prior notification to their relevant Hogwarts' House Head.

The individualised lesson plan for Potter had also been successfully negotiated; Potter's new schedule had him taking private tuition from Moody, Minerva and Filius three evenings a week with the curriculum to be agreed. Potter would attend the rest of the fourth year lessons and his fifth year Runes elective as previously scheduled. It left a good swathe of time free for Potter to prepare for the tournament.

Black would also be notified and have input into the security plans for the tournament events. That had been a tricky discussion because it was clear that some of the plans might give away what the tasks would be. But Black had agreed that he would abide by Moody's word on what he could and couldn't know. As Moody had trained Black, Severus guessed at an established trust and a past of accepting Moody's decisions.

But in essence, Black had gotten everything he wanted.

Masterful.

And Slytherin.

His request for Severus to accompany him so he could deliver a letter from Potter to Draco also hinted at a Slytherin agenda; Severus wasn't unaware of how it would look to the students if the Slytherin Head of House, a known double spy, was seen accompanying Lord Black. Nor had it escaped Severus's notice that the act of visiting Draco would increase the young Malfoy's political standing with his pureblood peers.

It had been so easy to forget in the haze of memory that the Gryffindor nemesis who had so tormented Severus at school had been raised to be the quintessential Slytherin just as Severus himself had. The similarity of their upbringing jarred because the only difference was that Black had rebelled and fallen in with Potter…

Had it ever occurred to Severus to rebel and follow after Lily?

Severus considered the question as he silently led Sirius to the portrait guarding the Slytherin Common Room.

He had once or twice before Hogwarts considered that Lily would not end up in Slytherin herself –
she was too open in her reactions, too fearless in her defence of what was important to her – but he had never considered following her so much as trying to convince her of the virtues of Slytherin despite his knowing she wouldn't be Slytherin. Perhaps, Severus mused wistfully, if she had gone to Ravenclaw…maybe then he would have argued with the confounded Hat and attempted his own rebellion. But she hadn't gone to Ravenclaw and, at eleven, Severus would have given up his wand arm rather than willingly enter Gryffindor.

Would Lily still be alive he had made that choice? He would never know.

The Common Room fell into silence as Severus entered with Black beside him. He noted how Black's gaze swept the room almost contemptuously before settling on Draco who was attempting to swiftly erase surprise from his young pointed features.

Draco stood and walked over hurriedly, a small bow of his head giving deference to Sirius as the Head of the House of Black. "Cousin."

"Cousin." Black replied with the same neutral tone. "Your mother and father send their greetings." He reached into his robe and pulled out a letter. "Harry gave me this to give to you."

And with a few simple statements, Black had put the Common Room on notice that he acknowledged Draco's place in his family line; that the Malfoys were part of Black's circle and knew of his movements; that Draco and Harry were building their own relationship and Black approved.

Severus glanced carefully around the room, noting the various reactions and what they told him about each student and their family affiliations.

"Professor Snape," Black recaptured Severus's attention, "is there somewhere more private where I can brief Draco and the other Slytherins allied to the Houses of Potter and Black?"

Immediately, the small group gathered; Nott, Zabini, Greengrass and Marsha Rickett, a first year.

"Of course," Severus's dark eyes flickered back over the Common Room, "if you and the students would follow me to my quarters, Lord Black?"

And there was his own declaration of support, Severus thought with satisfaction as some of the students paled at the implications of Severus falling in with the House of Black. The advantage of a spy was always to know which side was actually winning. He wasn't too worried about his defection getting back to the Dark Lord; he could claim he was cultivating a relationship to use in his spying for the Dark Lord if he was ever questioned about the matter. He didn't expect to be; the Dark Lord had surrounded himself with a few trusted followers and Severus rather doubted he was trusted enough to be brought into that fold before the Dark Lord regained his full strength.

They trooped out of the Common Room and down a set of corridors to Severus's quarters. He showed them into the living area. Most of the group squashed themselves into the large sofa but Draco and Nott remained standing – it looked more dignified, Severus thought with approval.

"Harry is fine," Black began, "he'll be returning to Hogwarts before the Weighing of the Wands ceremony and will continue to take schooling from professors here but he will not ostensibly be a Hogwarts' student." He clasped his hands behind his back. "The Houses of Potter and Black are taking a suite of rooms here. Harry will reside with me there outside of the school day."

Severus noted the satisfied look on Nott's face; he'd evidently guessed at that particular scenario.

"Draco," Black said, drawing the attention of his cousin, "as a member of the House of Black, you are invited to join us. However, I believe there is benefit to the House of Black if you remain within
Slytherin."

"I agree." Draco said hastily.

Black nodded before turning to Nott. "The same offer applies to you, Theo, as a member of the House of Potter."

Nott inclined his dark head. "Thank you, Lord Black, but I believe my remaining within Slytherin will be of greater service to the House of Potter."

Black nodded again, apparently unsurprised at the reply. He gestured towards the others. "Harry sends his regards to you all and his thanks for your support on the night of the Champions' draw." He regarded them all seriously. "I will add my thanks to his. To stand up and ally yourself with Harry at this time shows great fortitude and loyalty." He met each of their eyes for a brief moment, connecting with them individually. "It will not be forgotten."

"May I ask what the strategy will be for the tournament?" Nott asked politely.

Black smirked. "Harry has decided he wants to win it."

The Slytherins exchanged satisfied glances.

"You should know that such a strategy is likely to irritate his enemies." Black told them bluntly. "Things may become difficult for you in Slytherin so you should keep in mind that should you need it, you all have the protection of my House and the House of Potter."

Severus cleared his throat. "You may also come to me with any difficulties that you may encounter."

He found himself the focus of their attention and stiffened uncomfortably under Black's assessing gaze.

"You may trust Professor Snape in this," Black stated calmly, his eyes never leaving Severus's, "as I trust him with your safety. He will provide you with protection if I am not immediately available."

It took every ounce of Slytherin guile Severus had not to react to Black's fulsome support. The young Slytherins nodded and Severus knew that his endorsement by Black would be relayed to their parents in short order.

"That's all for the time being." Black ended the meeting briskly. "I'll send word when Harry and I will be moving into Hogwarts through Draco."

There was a flurry of goodbyes and in short order Severus found himself alone with Black.

"Don't expect me to thank you for the character reference." Severus sneered, trying to cover his chagrin.

Black raised an eyebrow. "Perish the thought. If you did, I'd have to thank you for giving the Aurors the tip about Rabastan's and Junior's seaside cottage plans."

Severus hummed at that. "I should have gone straight to the healer as soon as I recognised the memories could reveal the identity of the person threatening Potter." He said stiffly. "My information may be too little too late."

"Let's hope not." Black said bluntly. He gestured at the door. "I should get over to Gryffindor and deliver the rest of Harry's letters."
"I trust you know the way there." Severus replied dryly.

Black's lips quirked upwards in something that might have been a brief smile and he made for the door.

Severus watched him leave and wondered at the civil exchange.

Something had shifted between them, he realised. He turned it over in his head. Perhaps their new détente was because the night of Halloween had been the first time Severus had offered his help because he had wanted to protect Potter, not because of a promise made under duress and in guilty haste to Albus Dumbledore, but because for the first time Severus accepted that Harry Potter was as much Lily's as he was James Potter's son, and nothing was more important to her spirit than protecting her son. Perhaps because Black had accepted Severus's help because clearly Black would do anything to protect the boy entrusted by James and Lily to his care, and Severus had seen that they were right to impart that trust to Black – the memory of Black tending to Potter surfaced briefly.

Or, Severus thought with sombre regret, perhaps their détente existed because Severus had finally faced the truth of his own culpability for Lily's death instead of simply blaming her child.

Whatever the reason, Severus was glad of it. He doubted Black and he would ever be friends but it eased something to know that he would be part of the Dark Lord's defeat, and that he would be allowed to in some small way perhaps find redemption.

Redemption; to finally apologise to Lily for choosing to go to Slytherin rather than follow her; for choosing the Dark Lord and his lies over her friendship; for telling the Dark Lord of the prophecy which led to her death; for projecting his own guilt, self-hatred and blame onto her son, the child she had died protecting.

"I am attempting to do better, Lily." Severus whispered into the stillness of the room.

A faint scent filled the air and had him whirling around in shock.

Lilies. He could smell…

His heart beat loudly as he breathed in the faint scent until he couldn't sense it anymore, half-convinced it was his imagination...half-enthralled that it was real. It was real and he was not forgotten...he had finally earned her approval.

Severus sat down abruptly. He placed a hand over his stampeding heart. He closed his eyes against the storm of emotion that rolled through him. "I won't let you down again, my friend." He promised quietly. He would protect her son in her stead and he would do it with a willing heart.

o-O-o

5th November 1994

"Dear Hermione,

Thank you for the letters and the training plan. It looks great. Everyone agrees that I need more spell knowledge. We should talk it through as Remus gave me a plan too (Sirius says he's the Marauders' version of you) so it would be good to look at both and come up with a joint one. I want to win the tournament if I can, or at least give it my best effort.

I'm feeling much better but I still get tired quickly. Doctor Jordan thinks I used up a lot of magical energy because I resisted the binding for so long. She's said that I can get up and do small things..."
though so I can get started on all the homework Professor McGonagall brought me.

I am coming back to Hogwarts. Well, Sirius is talking about it with the Headmaster and hopefully I'll be back soon.

I hope you, Ron and Neville are OK. From all your letters, it sounds like the last week has been weird at Hogwarts. Can you make sure Cedric knows I think it's brilliant he's the Hogwarts' Champion? The press has been saying some absolute rubbish.

Ron told me he told you what I wanted to ask you, and he told me what you said which made my day. But I kind of had a whole plan to do it properly and I'd like to see it through if that's OK with you? I hope it is.

See you soon (hopefully)!

Love, Harry."

Sat cross-legged on her bed with the early morning sun just beginning to brighten the room, Hermione reread the letter again and carefully folded it up before tucking it between the pages of her book on meditation. Her heart was almost giddy from the final paragraph. He wanted to ask her out properly. Which meant it was real. He liked her. She sighed happily.

It was almost enough to make her forget the rest; Harry's magical exhaustion, the imminent tournament that he had to compete in where his life would be in danger. But the delight of knowing Harry was going to ask her out when he returned to Hogwarts was offset by the very real worry that gnawed at her belly.

Her teeth sank into her lip as she anxiously considered everything she had read about the tournament and its tasks. She knew that Voldemort had changed the planned less dangerous tasks to be more dangerous from what they had been told by Sirius, but the basic structure of the tournament had been left intact along with elements of the original tasks.

So, the first task traditionally involved magical creatures somehow. In some ways that was a good thing because Harry was brilliant with magical creatures. He seemed to have some kind of affinity with them. But she doubted that the task would be as easy as getting a ride on a hippogriff – which had been one of the tasks in an early tournament. There had been several tasks associated with getting past a Sphinx to treasure which would give a clue to the next task. There had been one task involving a unicorn, one involving dragons, and several involving handling dangerous magical snakes. Of all the magical creatures Voldemort could use, Hermione figured snakes were the most obvious but, perhaps because it was obvious, it wouldn't be magical snakes.

She touched the edge of her letter again and wondered what Harry thought. Did he know the first task would be magical creatures? She couldn't wait until he got back to Hogwarts and she could talk to him.

"A letter from Harry?" Lavender's teasing voice broke into Hermione's contemplation. Somehow her dorm mate had woken and wandered over to Hermione's bed without Hermione noticing.

She felt the blush rise on her cheeks but she nodded. "Sirius brought it last night when he came to talk with us."

"It's great news that Harry's coming back." Lavender said, plopping down onto the bed next to Hermione.

Ron had announced it as soon as the portrait to the Common Room had swung closed. The cheer
had nearly taken the roof off. Everyone was a little disappointed though when they had explained
Harry wouldn't be back in the dorms, but living with his guardian in his own suite of rooms since he
wouldn't be a Hogwarts student officially any longer for their fourth year because of the tournament.
Hermione had been invited to live with them as a sponsored daughter of the House of Black and she
had declined. She believed Sirius had requested the rooms to give Harry somewhere away from
other students, somewhere Sirius and Harry could spend time together, and she wouldn't intrude on
that. Plus, if she and Harry did start to date, it would create a lot of gossip if they lived in the same set
of rooms.

Besides, she was content with living in the dorms. The past week had seen her, Lavender and Parvati
spend more time together and Hermione had surprisingly enjoyed it. The other girls still gossiped
more than Hermione was comfortable with and maybe she was still too serious about studying for
them on occasion, but they were more tolerant of the differences. Maybe they were all growing up,
Hermione mused.

"You're up early." Lavender commented, yawning.

Hermione nodded and checked her watch. "There's an alliance meeting before breakfast. We're using
Robert and Natalie's office." She gazed at Lavender thoughtfully. "Do you and Parvati want to come
along?"

"We're not in the alliance." Lavender said, her eyes wide.

Hermione shrugged. "Luna's coming because she's Harry's friend even if her family isn't in the
alliance. So are the Weasleys. You're friends too. You'd be welcome."

Lavender smiled prettily and reached out to take hold of one of Hermione's hands. "Thank you." She
glanced over at Parvati's bed and sighed. "I think I'm going to have to say no though since Parvati
will kill me if I wake her up now and she'd kill me if I went without her." She turned back to
Hermione. "You'll tell me though later?"

"I will." Hermione promised. She put the book in her bag and slid off the bed, making her way down
the stairs to the Common Room where she'd promised to meet Ron and Neville.

She had to wait for them but it gave her another chance to read her letter. She made sure though it
was all tucked away again when the boys arrived. She wondered at what had been in their letters
from Harry as she took in the sight of them.

Neville was first down the stairs, his stride determined, his chin up. Hermione had known in an
abstract way that Neville had grown in confidence during the Summer, that he'd shed some of the
awkwardness that had characterised him in the previous three years she'd known him; that much had
been evident in his improved magic, his easy friendship with Blaise, and his practice dating with
Hannah. But it hadn't been until the past week that Hermione believed she'd glimpsed the man
Neville was becoming; authoritative, one used to leading, politically astute in a way Hermione could
admit she wasn't. He had set the tone for the Potter alliance in Hogwarts; absolute and unconditional
support for Harry, but respectful appreciation for the other Champions.

Ron was close on Neville's heels. He also walked with purpose, his freckled face set into stern lines
instead of its usual friendly affability. And just as she had with Neville, Hermione glimpsed the man
Ron was maturing into with the events of the past week; a true and considerate friend. He had been
supportive of her, making sure she was OK – partly as he himself had joked because Harry would go
spare if Ron didn't, but there had been genuine caring in his attentiveness to Hermione's state of
mind. He had also supported Neville, providing in Harry's absence the encouragement Neville
needed to embrace his leadership role. And Hermione believed that the ease in which Ron accepted
Neville would lead, that it wouldn't be Ron, was also a sign of how much Ron had matured.

She stood up to join them and wondered whether they saw her differently too; whether they had noticed her quieter confidence about her intelligence instead of her previous brash displays of smarts, and how she accepted their position when they explained that something she thought was a good idea wasn't because of the cultural differences between the muggle and the wizarding world. She wondered if they saw the woman she hoped she was becoming; a confident smart woman who was at ease in both worlds – an attractive woman who could capture the attention of someone like Harry.

They fell into step as they left the Common Room.

Ron nudged her. "Good letter?"

Hermione smiled and nodded. "You?"

Ron nodded back. "Yeah, it was good to hear from him."

"You can say that again," commented Neville, "it was really good to hear from him." There was a note of relief in Neville's voice and Hermione guessed that Harry had confirmed Neville had taken the right tone in respect to the tournament.

The Head Boy and Head Girl's office wasn't that spacious and it was a bit of a squash as they made their way into the room.

Hermione was surprised that so many of the Potter alliance students had beaten them to the office given the early start, but then there had been a lot of owls at dinner the night before, and she suspected some of them had received directions from their parents.

Susan and Hannah waved the Gryffindor trio to the front of the fireplace where they would take centre stage. Hermione nodded briskly at Draco sitting in a corner with Zabini and Greengrass. Nott was over by Jeremy Branstone and Michael Corner, their heads bent together as they discussed something in quiet tones.

Neville cleared his throat and the room grew silent. "Robert, if you could…" he waved a finger in a circle.

The Head Boy immediately got the message and erected a privacy bubble.

"Right, first things first: Harry sends his thanks and gratitude for our support. He says it's helped him enormously to know that he has us standing with him." Neville began.

Hermione noted the pleased faces and silently commended both Harry and Neville for their opening gambit. It had made everyone feel important and valued.

"Some of you may have already heard from your parents that Harry's decided to take the bull by the horns and throw himself fully into the challenge of the tournament." Neville looked around the room with quiet authority. "He believes that it is the best way of fighting back against Voldemort's intent to terrorise him. I'll send a strong message that Harry won't just cave in the face of Voldemort's evil; that he'll continue to stand up against him."

"He can't expect to win it though, can he?" asked Michael sceptically.

"I think he can." Lydia spoke up.

Hermione tried not to grimace at the younger girl, and an abashed and subdued Ginny stood beside

Michael held up both hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm just saying he's going up against the likes of Krum and Diggory, and presumably the French bird has some skills since she was chosen."

Natalie Warren cleared her throat. "Michael has a point."

"Harry was chosen by the Goblet." Luna stated dreamily. "He was considered worthy or the Goblet would have declared no-one was to stand for the Light."

"So the Goblet thinks he has a chance to win it?" asked Heather Belby, a sixth year Ravenclaw. "I guess that makes sense."

"Harry can win." Ron declared firmly. "Have any of the others gone up against a basilisk or a Dark Lord and lived to tell of it? I don't think so."

"On that basis, I wouldn't bet against him." Blaise commented dryly.

There was a smattering of laughter.

"Ron's right," Hermione said, jumping in, "Harry's very good at these types of situations, and he's had more practical experience than the others. Their main advantage is going to be spell knowledge."

"Which he can gain in training." Neville added. "And where we can help – or at least the upper years."

"That's true." Robert said thoughtfully. "We can help tutor him or be duelling partners for him when he tests out some of the advanced spells."

"Agreed," Natalie said with a sharp nod, "my father suggested as much in the letter he sent."

"Which brings up a good point; we need to coordinate with the adults." Robert said firmly. "Presumably Lord Black already has a training plan worked out?"

"Harry indicated as much in his letter." Hermione admitted.

Theo gestured. "According to the tournament lore, Potter has to be the one to determine his training and who he accepts advice from though. He may give more weight to Lord Black's advice but I don't think he'll ignore anything we come up with."

"Well, that makes sense since Harry also said he would look over everything and come up with a joint plan." Hermione said.

"So if we come up with a different view from our parents and guardians, it's good to know Potter won't just disregard it." Daphne commented.

"My Dad mentioned that we'll probably get some of their research funnelled through us." Susan said.

"And research is probably where those without the spell knowledge to help Harry with his training can help out instead." Neville confirmed. "It would be good to have a research group form up that can coordinate with the adults' information as they send it through."

"Granger should head that up." Theo said. "I'm betting you've done a ton of research already and Potter's used to you taking that role."
Hermione felt her cheeks heat as she nodded. "I'll be happy to head up the research group."

"Those of you wanting to assist should give your names to Hermione after then." Neville said. "The rest of us should make ourselves available as sounding boards and…"

"He'll need cheerleaders." Lydia interrupted, flicking her long hair back and staring at the group defiantly.

"She's not altogether wrong." Jeremy said as the others looked at her with irritation. "Harry's going to incur a lot of publicity – some good and some bad. My Dad's going to help out with the media stuff outside school, but at the very least he needs a cheering section during the tasks and maybe some visible sign of support around the school."

"How about badges declaring support for Harry as the best Champion?" suggested Draco.

"Maybe something a bit more subtle." Jeremy said with a frown. "We don't want to alienate those supporting Diggory by being too boorish."

"A thread bracelet with red and gold beads worn as a bracelet might suffice." Hannah offered. "We could also make up combined ones with yellow and black for those who want to show support for both because of House loyalties like me and Susan."

"That sounds great," Neville said with a smile for his practice girlfriend, "and Harry is keen to make it known that he's pleased Cedric was chosen for Hogwarts, and that he's got no issue with us supporting him too."

Zacharias Smith snorted. "He may not have an issue with Diggory but there's a question mark over whether Diggory has a beef with him. The most fervent of Diggory's supporters are saying a lot of stupid stuff in Hufflepuff, although some of them are just repeating what Diggory's father is quoted as saying in the press about Harry being an attention seeker and crazy."

Susan nodded. "Some of the comments are getting vicious and Diggory isn't exactly denying them."

"So, two issues," Neville said sombrely, "first, one of us has to talk to Cedric."

"I'll take that one." Robert said. "As Hogwarts' Champion he's in a similar position to the Head Boy and Girl; he's representing all of us, and allowing his supporters to bad mouth Harry isn't acceptable."

Neville nodded. "Good. I guess the second issue is that possibly some of us need to be actively defusing rumours and hearsay within each of our Houses on a daily basis."

Draco gestured at him. "We're already doing that in Slytherin but someone needs to be doing that for the other Houses."

Ron sighed. "Gryffindor is pretty much pro-Harry but we still have to deal with misinformation and setting the record straight."

"So I can maybe take up that role in Ravenclaw," offered Jeremy.

"And I can do the same in Hufflepuff." Robert confirmed.

"I think having someone take the lead to do it is important," Susan said, "but we can all do our part."

The group murmured their agreement.
"Right," Neville said briskly, "the final thing we should discuss is the possibility that Harry's enemies get annoyed when Harry does well and try to take their frustrations out on us."

"And safety here at Hogwarts is a relative thing." Daphne said dryly.

Ron folded his arms over his chest. "Let's face it; Sirius found ways around security last year enough that he got into the dorm! Moody's good enough that it's not probable that would happen again but Crouch Junior is smart and sneaky and might find a way to slip through the cracks."

"So what are you suggesting, Weasley?" Draco prompted sharply.

"Buddy system." Ron said succinctly. "Pair up with someone else in the alliance and make sure your buddy knows where you should be at all times. Set up a code word with them to make sure they always know you are who you say you are and vice versa."

"Constant vigilance." Daphne stated with a smirk.

"Exactly." Ron said, taking her seriously. "Junior almost killed my family. He's mad and I doubt he'll think twice about killing a couple of kids if he thinks it'll get to Harry."

They all sobered a little and Hermione gave Ron an approving nod.

Neville cleared his throat. "I think that's it for now. Anyone have anything else?"

There was a flurry of offers to help with the research as the alliance drifted out of the office. Luna skipped over to wait with Ron and Neville.

Robert sighed as he ushered the last of the others out. He and Natalie exchanged a look and both of them turned regretfully to Neville.

"I know," Neville said before they could say anything, "we need to find a different place to meet."

"Thanks." Robert said with relief.

"It's just..." Natalie began awkwardly.

"We understand," Hermione said immediately, "you're representing all of Hogwarts and housing us gives the impression that you're completely on Harry's side when you need to appear impartial to Cedric Diggory and his supporters."

"For what it's worth, I don't think Cedric agrees with what his father's said in the press." Robert sank into the chair by his desk and waved his hands expressively. "I think he's embarrassed by it all."

"It can't be easy for him," Natalie commented, "he can hardly criticise his Dad in public."

"But he could do more to stop his supporters from adding fuel to the fire." Neville stated firmly. "Harry only agreed to participate in the tournament to save the life and magic of the other Champions. In some quarters it might be considered a life debt. If Diggory allows his supporters to heap abuse on Harry, at the very least he's going to come off like an arrogant arse."

"And he's going to rack up some serious bad karma." Luna noted.

"I'll talk with Cedric today." Robert promised, sighing heavily again. "He stood up on the night of Halloween, maybe he just needs a nudge to stand up again."

"Let's hope so because if Cedric's supporters insult Harry the way they've been doing the last few
days anywhere near Sirius, he's likely to turn them all into newts." Ron pointed out bluntly.

Hermione grimaced but nodded. It would probably be only the beginning of what Sirius would do.

6th November 1994

If there was one thing Peter appreciated about their new accommodation, it was the view. Diagon Alley stretched out below him like an endless river of people; chatter bubbling up to murmur at the window. It made Peter feel like he was part of it in a comforting way. It was a much better situation than the isolation he'd felt at the Crouch house, locked in most of the time with only the creepy house elf for company while his Master napped under his snake's watchful eyes. Of course, Peter reminded himself ruefully, he was still locked in with a napping Dark Lord and his snake but at least the sense of isolation was gone as was the creepy house elf.

He shifted his gaze to look around the well-appointed flat above the apothecary. There was a small kitchenette under the archway to his left. Mostly it was used for potions which luckily the smells from the apothecary masked. There was the Polyjuice Barty primarily used; the nutrient potion that kept the body his Master occupied in good enough condition for him to continue occupying it; the beginning of the potion required for the ritual that would return his Master to a corporeal body of his own.

Peter glanced away from the kitchen, his gaze drifting over the small dining table he sat at by the window, and over the comfortable sitting area. There were two bedrooms; one was set aside for the Master and one was occupied by Barty when he was in residence. Peter slept on the couch.

He didn't mind too much.

Barty had done a good job. He'd developed the alias of Rupert Patch as soon as the first Polyjuice had been made. Patch was a wizard who worked from an eccentric wizard who collected antiques, and whose job entailed being in London enough to need a base. Patch had a wife and child (who would be played by Peter and the Dark Lord if it ever came to that) who had eventually joined him in London following the sale of their country property. Thankfully, their landlord wasn't all that interested as long as Patch paid the rent, and luckily Barty had embezzled most of his father's money into a new account for Patch long before their escape from the Crouch residence had become a necessity.

Barty was riding high on his success at getting Harry into the tournament and Peter couldn't blame him for the celebratory smugness. Barty had done a good job especially since the security had been very tight.

Still, resentment nibbled at him because the Dark Lord had been very pleased at Barty's success.

Peter frowned as he looked out on the surging mass of people all bustling about their daily lives. Since Barty had entered the picture, the Dark Lord had turned more and more to him to do things of importance. In many ways it had made sense back in the Summer when Peter was a wanted criminal and Barty had been an unknown to their enemies, but it continued even with Barty's existence being revealed publicly. And Barty was impressive; incredibly powerful and smart.

Not like Peter.

Oh, Peter had his talents but he was prepared to admit that on pure magical terms, Barty beat him hands down. Like James Potter had done. Like Sirius did.
He shuddered delicately and reached for his abandoned cup of tea, wincing at the cold bitter taste.

So, Peter had been relegated to second best again, Peter thought morosely; he should be used to it.

And it wasn't quite true.

The Dark Lord had granted him a special place as a loyal and willing servant within the ritual that would bring him back to full strength.

_Servant._

A position which meant that he would serve the Dark Lord's needs for the next nine months without question, and that rankled in the face of the praise heaped on Barty who clearly occupied the position as favoured lieutenant.

Peter tapped his cup anxiously and darted a look over his shoulder. It was dangerous thinking things around the Dark Lord or even the snake which seemed to have a closer bond than simply familiar with her Master. He shivered and fought the urge to turn into his animagus form because as comforting as being a rat was, he wasn't unaware that a rat was natural prey for the snake.

He dragged his mind back to his previous thoughts. Barty was away again, helping Dennis Travers with his mission; Travers, who was proving just as loyal as his father to the Dark Lord.

Peter had been recruited by Travers's father who had been his supervisor at the Ministry back in the late Seventies; scared by the threat of being hurt and lured by the promise of protection, Travers had brought him before the Dark Lord, and the Dark Lord had taken one look at Peter and seen the rat and the possibilities. Peter had been immediately hooked by the self-importance of being the Dark Lord's hidden spy. Travers had been made to forget Peter and Peter had turned his attention to pleasing the Dark Lord in return for knowing he was protected from harm.

There had been days, of course, when he had questioned his decision, when he had met up with James or Sirius or Remus or worse, _Lily_, and felt the pang of horror that he was betraying them, betraying what they all stood for in terms of principles and values. Because he did love them; remembered nights when Remus had helped him study; Sirius's help through the final transfiguration into his animagus form; James stepping in between Peter and a Slytherin without thinking. But there had been distance between them since school with James's marriage and Sirius's work and Remus drifting off to the packs so there was also the knowledge that he was safe and that they would never know of his betrayal; of a secret delight in tricking them, in spying on them without getting caught. He had even used his position to save them. Once.

But then, of course, there had been Harry. Baby Harry who had gurgled at Peter and pulled his tie; a strange fragile creature that captivated and repulsed Peter all at the same time; power liming Harry's skin and crawling over Peter's Dark Mark as though he knew and would tell at any moment.

And the Dark Lord had been strangely fascinated with the baby, demanding reports on Harry's progress.

Peter hadn't thought twice about telling the secret of the Potters' hideaway, knowing refusal would be his own death. He'd hoped in an abstract way that James and Lily would survive; had been much more ambivalent about Harry. It had been shocking on the night to witness James cut down fighting to save his family; to hear Lily begging for Harry's life. But more shocking had been the moment when the Dark Lord had tried to kill Harry and the curse had been thrown back at him on the panicked wave of a child's pure power, slamming the Dark Lord's spirit from his body and almost bringing the cottage down around the cot.
Peter had never had any illusion that Harry wasn't a powerful wizard. But he'd cast his lot that Halloween night and he'd known Sirius and Remus would never forgive him his betrayal. He'd considered it a minor miracle that it had taken them until Harry was almost fourteen before they'd tracked him down. Of course, Sirius being in Azkaban, tricked there by Peter, had helped forestall that confrontation as had his living as a rat for so many years.

He still couldn't believe Harry had saved his life that night at the Shrieking Shack.

Guilt wormed its way through Peter again and he was grateful for the soft rap on the window heralding the arrival of the newspaper delivery owl, distracting him from his memories. At least he was grateful until he saw the headline.

"A TRUE CHAMPION: THE BOY WHO LIVED PROCLAIMS HE WILL COMPETE TO WIN!"

"Bugger!" Peter stated under his breath. He quickly read through the rest of the story and squashed it into his chest when he'd finished as though he could hide it there.

In one way, he wasn't surprised.

He had lived as Scabbers long enough around Harry to know that his friend's son had a lot of James's sense of duty and honour underneath the appalling muggle upbringing he'd been subjected to living. Deciding not to destroy the Goblet of Fire (and really Peter had known Harry was probably capable of destroying the artefact – he had destroyed the Dark Lord when he was a baby) to save the other Champions was exactly the self-sacrificing instinct that had gotten James killed.

But in lots and lots of ways, the Harry Peter had known for the previous three years at Hogwarts while he had been masquerading as Ron Weasley's pet, had always reminded Peter mostly of Lily. Lily, who had pitted herself against the Marauders from the beginning and who wouldn't be impressed or intimidated by them; who dealt with their pranking her in second year by pranking them back in a more evil way designed to scare them away from ever pranking her again (it had worked). Lily, whose ultimate victory had been making James grow up in many ways and stealing him away from the Marauders. Lily, who had stood toe to toe with a Dark Lord and begged not for her own life but her child's, and still had cast something that had stalled the Killing curse enough for her son to shove it back at the Dark Lord.

Outside of the Dark Lord, Lily was the most dangerous person Peter had ever met, and that included Sirius Black who was also in a league of his own when compared to normal people.

Harry was his mother's son.

The bold and fearless statement that his enemies might mean for him to come to harm in the tournament, but he would play as a Champion to win it, had Lily's courage and bravery stamped all the way through it.

And perhaps a smidgeon of Sirius's 'Fuck You' reckless bravado.

The Dark Lord was not going to be pleased.

Peter snorted softly. That was an understatement. The Dark Lord was going to be furious; raging and ranting kind of furious. He was going to be furious that Harry eschewed being tricked into the tournament and instead insisted he had chosen it to protect others and he was going to be furious that Harry wasn't cowed by the danger he was facing.
Although maybe in hindsight they should have already known that. Harry had followed a thief into the bowels of Hogwarts to protect a legendary Philosopher's stone; he had battled a basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets; he had thwarted the Dark Lord three times. Maybe, Peter mused, they should have considered that Harry wouldn't be cowed.

Maybe, Peter continued to muse, he should have considered that before running to Albania and allying himself with the Dark Lord again.

But what choice did he have?

Harry had granted him mercy in preventing his death only to insist that Peter would face justice and be sent to Azkaban for his role in James's and Lily's deaths...for the deaths of the muggles he'd caused setting up Sirius...for framing Sirius...for being a Death Eater. In some respects he would have preferred the quick and no doubt painful death Sirius and Remus would have given him rather than face Azkaban and the Dementors...a cell and no respite from his crimes.

Yes, Harry was his mother's son. Lily would no doubt have found Peter's fate appropriate and fitting.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled and Peter acknowledged the animal instinct by freezing, scenting the air to confirm the presence of the snake as it slithered into view, a deadly black slash against the Argyle carpet.

"He's awake." Peter acknowledged as the snake hissed. "I'll get his potion." He moved slowly so not to alarm her. It only took a moment to pour the potion into the required silver goblet. He snagged the newspaper on his way back through the living room and walked quickly to the Dark Lord's room.

The small child of three that the Dark Lord inhabited had been healthy and robust; dark haired and blue eyed. The latter had long changed to red and the hair was slowly falling out as the body decayed under the weight of the possession.

Peter set aside the goblet and newspaper on the dresser and hurried over to attend the more basic bodily needs of the child. Neither he nor the Dark Lord spoke during the trip to the bathroom, through the bath and change of clothes. Peter clean-spelled the bed-linen, lit scented candles to light the room and propped the Dark Lord up against a veritable mountain of pillows before handing him the goblet. The potion was downed swiftly and the goblet handed back to him without a word. The Dark Lord motioned impatiently at Peter and he slowly laid the newspaper out on the bed, fearing the worst.

He wasn't expecting the low chuckle that emerged from the twisted smile on the Dark Lord's infant face.

"Master?"

"I see our little boy is all grown up at last, Peter." The vocal intonation was not a child's and Peter resolutely did not want to know what body modifications the Dark Lord had made.

"He is arrogant to think he can win it, Master." Peter said obsequiously.

"Is he?" asked the Dark Lord mildly. "I have discovered it is best not to underestimate the Potter boy, Peter." His fingers trailed over the picture of Harry which glared at the Dark Lord and brandished its wand threateningly. "And now...now he finally presents a real challenge."

Peter was speechless. Did the Dark Lord want a challenge?

Something must have shown on his face because the Dark Lord chucked dryly again.
"When I face at him after the ritual," the Dark Lord said, "when I crush him and send him to join his parents," his finger tapped the photo again, "no-one will deny that he was my most formidable challenge nor that I prevailed and he did not."

Ah. Well, Peter could understand that. The whole being beaten by a baby was a tad humiliating and if the Dark Lord thought Harry winning the tournament helped to correct that impression…Peter could understand that.

"Crushing his defiance will make my victory that much sweeter." The Dark Lord continued as he read over the article again, irritation at last seeping through his words and giving away how riled he really was that Harry had chosen to be entered into the tournament in the final analysis and had openly declared he was going to make an attempt to win it. "But defiance will sweeten the blood of my enemy for the ritual and make me stronger."

"Yes, Master." Peter said obediently. He wanted to fidget but knew better than to draw attention to himself.

"But we cannot allow Potter nor his cohorts like your old friend Black to believe that his defiance has cowed us." The Dark Lord looked up finally. "Have we heard from Fenrir?"

"He's waiting for instructions in a bolthole he has in the North." Peter immediately reported.

"Send for him." The Dark Lord ordered imperiously.

Peter bowed his head and scurried out to do his bidding as the snake slid back inside the room with the Dark Lord. He had some idea of what the Dark Lord would ask of Fenrir; terrorising attacks probably on Harry's supporters. He shivered, grateful that he wasn't one of Harry's supporters and feeling a touch sorry for those that were including the Weasleys who had unwittingly provided him with such a wonderful hiding place for so many years.

Perhaps, Peter considered brightly, he had made the right decision.

Harry might be a powerful wizard but the Dark Lord was the Dark Lord, and not even death had stopped him. Harry would be crushed sooner or later. Peter ignored the twinge of guilt and panic. When Harry died he would be nothing but pleased. Peter thought determinedly; nothing but pleased, and richly rewarded for his part in the boy's downfall.

o-O-o

6 th November 1994

Harry stepped out of the floo and smiled back at the beaming Head of Gryffindor even as Sirius surreptitiously brushed soot from Harry's hair.

"Welcome back to Hogwarts." Minerva said warmly. "Even if you're not officially a Hogwarts student for the rest of this year, we are pleased to have you return."

"Me too." Harry said simply.

He'd frowned a lot when Sirius had explained the grand plan that he was going back to Hogwarts but not as an official student, but he'd seen the sense in it. It made it very clear that Cedric was the Hogwarts Champion for one thing, and for another, it meant he could stay in his own set of rooms with Sirius.

He darted a quick look at his father and smiled brightly as love bubbled up inside of him. Sirius had
given him the best of both worlds that Harry had wanted; he had made it happen so Harry would feel safe and secure within Hogwarts; would have someone he could be just Harry with.

"Here is your new timetable." Minerva handed him the parchment.

Harry took it with a sigh and briefly glanced at it. It was everything Sirius had said he had worked out but Harry passed it to Sirius to make sure.

Sirius nodded. "This looks good."

"All the staff teaching Harry have signed a document that confirms for the duration of the tournament, they are also faculty of 'The Light.'" Minerva stated briskly. She caught Harry's gaze.

"That means we will treat you exactly the same as we treat Mister Diggory in terms of the tournament. We'll be happy to provide tutoring for spells and knowledge should you ask specifically but we will not be able to direct you as far as the tournament strategy is concerned."

There was a regretful tone to her voice and Harry smiled to reassure her more than anything.

"Sirius explained the rules." Harry said. "I'll ask for the tutoring if I need it."

"Good." Minerva said. "I understand that you've constructed a training plan?"

Harry nodded. The academic side was a combination of Hermione's and Remus's plan after some advice from Sirius, but there was also a physical training plan that Doctor Jordan had been happy to contribute, and a 'Keep Harry Sane' plan that he had discussed with Sirius which included things like his continued animagus training, Quidditch and what Sirius called goofing off time.

"Let me show you to your rooms." Minerva said. "Dobby has been busy all day and I'll think you'll be pleased."

Harry fell into step beside Sirius, glad of the weight of his father's hand on his shoulder. He knew Sirius had overseen the whole room thing so he wasn't too worried. They followed Minerva out of her office, down the stairs and along a corridor. They went up another very long flight of stairs and along another corridor until they came to a halt outside a floor to ceiling portrait of a lion.

"The password is currently set to Champion but you will want to change it." Minerva said before turning and giving the password. The portrait swung open and Minerva stepped inside, Harry and Sirius following her.

They were on the top of the tower, Harry realised immediately. The circular nature of the space gave it away as did the slightly overcast sky outside of the narrow windows. The room was a half circle; a den area to the left filled with two comfortable tartan sofas in an 'L' formation in front of the roaring fire, with a dining area to the right filled with a sturdy oak table and chairs. Two doors were positioned at the back of the room and a staircase curved up the side of the wall.

"Study," Minerva said pointing at one of the doors and then to the other, "and a training room with a duelling area, small potions store and a condensed library. There's a staircase leading down to a kitchenette although Dobby is also welcome to use the main kitchens."

She ushered them up the stairs.

They arrived on a landing with three doors. Harry was surprised to see his name on one door and Sirius's on another; the third was blank.

"I'm afraid you're sharing a bathroom." Minerva said with a sigh. "Something to do with the
plumbing but the house-elves couldn't alter the space further." She pushed Harry towards his room. "Take a look, Harry."

Harry opened the door and took a step inside, freezing as he saw how closely the furnishings had been duplicated to give him a sense of Griffin House. The bed wasn't the same four-poster that adorned his dorm at Hogwarts but a near copy of the bed he had in his own room. He frowned. Actually, he would swear it was his bed. He quirked a questioning eyebrow at Sirius.

"Dobby insisted." Sirius said brightly.

"Hmnph." Minerva snorted.

The wardrobe, desk, chair and bookcase were similar to those in the dorms though, and already filled with his things. Hedwig's perch was empty but the window was open and Harry had no doubt she'd be inside by the time night fell.

"This is great." He said simply.

Minerva exhaled with relief as her gaze moved to Sirius, an eyebrow arched in his direction.

"Yes, it's good." Sirius leaned on the wall, folding his arms nonchalantly. "Thank you."

Minerva nodded. "I'll leave you to settle in." She paused at the doorway. "I'll see you in class tomorrow, Harry."

Sirius straightened once the echo of her footsteps had faded. "So what do you really think?"

"It's…" Harry shrugged, "weird but good?"

"You know that's pretty much how I feel." Sirius admitted with a grin. He brushed down his robes and gestured at him. "I never thought I'd be living here again."

Harry smiled ruefully at him. "Sorry?"

Sirius lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug. "Frankly, I don't want to be anywhere else."

And Harry knew that was true. He wandered over to the window and looked out on Hogwarts. The Quidditch pitch was over to his right, the lake to his left, with the Forbidden Forest stretched out in front of him.

He sighed. "I can still go to Quidditch practice, right?"

"Right." Sirius said, coming over to stand beside him, "I think Minnie's keen you help the new Seeker."

Ginny.

The new Seeker was Ginny. She was the reserve. Harry groaned.

"What?" asked Sirius concerned.

"Ginny must be the new Seeker." Harry explained. "That's just…great."

Sirius gave him a sympathetic look. "Well, you can always stop helping if she spends more time focusing on you than on the practice." He nudged him. "Have you thought about how you're going to ask Hermione out yet?"
Harry nodded. He figured he would go with the same plan just maybe a different location and day. The only problem was that the Hogsmeade weekend wasn't going to be an acceptable date any longer. He and Sirius had discussed it and reluctantly agreed that they shouldn't take the risk of Harry being out so much in public, and definitely not without either Sirius or Remus with him. So he had to figure out a different date other than going into the village. Neville probably had some pointers from all the practicing with Hannah.

"You need any help or advice or…"

"No!" Harry snapped it out hurriedly. "Thank you but…"

"Mind my own business?" Sirius smirked at him. "I see how it is."

Harry motioned at him. "We could always talk about your love life."

"I have no love life." Sirius countered with no hint of embarrassment. "I'm living vicariously through you and Remus."

"Remus is interested in someone?" Harry jumped on that titbit immediately because he hadn't realised that Remus liked anyone.

"Old love affair who is now tragically for Remus but apparently happily for her married to another werewolf." Sirius explained succinctly. "You should be grateful that you missed having to spend an evening with Remus getting maudlin about missed chances and how he's never going to find love."

He poked Harry in his upper arm gently.

Harry batted Sirius's hand away and winced inwardly because he knew he had tendency to forget that Sirius and Remus had lives before that Summer, before the Halloween back in 'eighty-one that changed it all for them.

"What about you?" asked Harry, suddenly curious.

Sirius raised both his eyebrows. "What about me?"

"Did you have someone…in the past, I mean?" Harry asked tentatively. "A missed chance?"

"Nope." Sirius answered immediately. He looked out of the window and Harry got the sense that he was gathering his thoughts rather than avoiding the question. "I dated a lot through school but there wasn't any specific person that caught my attention – not the way your Mum snagged your Dad's anyway. When I left Hogwarts…there were occasional dates, here and there? Your Mum did go on a match-making kick soon after she and your Dad got hitched which your Dad thought was hilarious…but then I went abroad undercover and when I got back, I was healing and then there was you just born, and the war and…" he shrugged. "I always thought there was plenty of time."

"You could date someone now?" Harry pressed. "You know if you wanted to; I wouldn't mind." He ignored the churn of doubt in his stomach at the thought of someone else having a right to Sirius's attention and time.

Sirius smiled at him. "Let's get you through the tournament first."

Harry bit his lip as guilt quickly surged through him at the moment's relief he'd felt at Sirius's reply. "I don't…you don't have to put your life on hold for me."

Sirius's eyes widened as though startled. "Nothing's on hold." He reached out and clasped Harry's shoulder. "Look, if there was someone I was interested in, this would be an entirely different
Harry chuckled because Nora was definitely not subtle in her attempts to get Sirius's attention.

"And in all honesty," Sirius said firmly, "I'm happy with the status quo." He paused and waved a hand. "Well, I'd be happier if Voldemort was dead and you were able to have a normal school year without anyone trying to kill you but…"

"I know." Harry said warmly, reaching out and hugging Sirius. He still felt a little guilty that he didn't want Sirius to get involved with someone romantically but as long as Sirius was happy then that was OK wasn't it?

Sirius hugged him back before ruffling his hair and causing Harry to spring back with a warning expression. Sirius ignored it and hooked an arm around Harry's neck, grinning.

"Come on. I'll show you the training room and study." Sirius said.

Harry allowed Sirius to drag him downstairs. The study was decked out a lot like Sirius's study at Griffin House and had the same rule – Harry was always welcome even if all he did was read while Sirius worked.

The training room was cool. Shelves filled with books filled one wall, the duelling area was clearly defined and came with an in-built shield to protect the rest of the room, and there was an array of physical training equipment. Harry knew that Cedric had been given access to something similar in Hufflepuff to ensure there was no question of favouritism. He couldn't wait to get started.

The rest of the afternoon passed getting settled into his new room and finishing off the homework he'd had while he was recovering from the magical exhaustion. Hedwig turned up mid-afternoon, tired and grumpy from the flight. He comforted her with owl treats and she tucked her head beneath her wing and went to sleep on her perch.

By evening, the weirdness of being at Hogwarts but not in the dorm had worn off enough that he moved onto worrying about how everyone was going to react to him living in his own quarters with Sirius so he was pleased when Ron, Hermione and Neville turned up early for dinner.

All three of them sprang forward for a surprise group hug that left Harry breathless when he answered the portrait. He adjusted his glasses nervously as he stepped back and ushered them inside.

His eyes caught on Hermione's immediately and he gestured at her hair, which was smoothed down and pinned back in some complicated female hair-do that he'd seen on Penny before. "You look great."

Hermione's cheeks went pink at his compliment. "Lavender helped me."

"It took hours." Ron complained. "We would have been here ages ago but we were waiting forever in the Common Room."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Like I never have to wait for you." She retorted before turning to Harry with a chagrined expression. "Actually it did take longer than I expected. I don't think I could do this every day."

Harry shrugged at her apologetic tone, unsure why she thought she had to be sorry about it. "Maybe for special occasions then?" He suggested. "It does look great but your hair's good the normal way too."
Her cheeks went red again but she smiled brightly at him. "Thank you, Harry."

They both grinned at each other for a long moment.

Ron coughed loudly.

Harry swallowed the sigh he wanted to make but took Ron's non-verbal point – he had promised not to make his getting together with Hermione uncomfortable for Ron. He moved them into the living room and they all took seats on the sofas as Dobby popped in with mugs of warmed spiced apple juice. He turned to Neville.

"So, how are things?" Harry asked.

Neville straightened imperceptibly, changing from shy friend to confident second. "We're organised. Hermione's leading up research, Heather's in charge of your peer tutors since Robert and Natalie are both snowed under being Head Boy and Girl…"

"Although both will make time for the tutoring if there's something specific you need that they're good at." Hermione interjected.

Ron snorted. "They could do more!"

"They have responsibilities, Ron," Hermione contradicted him smartly, "they can't just drop everything to help Harry especially when they're supposed to representing Hogwarts." She sent him another apologetic look.

"No, don't worry," Harry waved her off, "I get they're caught between loyalties here. If all they can help me out with is an occasional tutoring session then that's fine."

Ron snorted again but softly. "You shouldn't settle for that."

"I kind of see Ron's point," Neville said before Harry could reply, "after all Robert swore fealty." He held up a hand. "But I agree that probably not making them choose gives us the higher ground and ultimately, I think they'll end up helping more because of that."

Ron subsided, taking a gulp of his drink.

Harry exchanged a grateful look with Neville. "OK, so Hermione's got research, Heather's got tutoring and…"

"And Jeremy's got PR." Neville concluded.

Harry grimaced. "Three elements, right? Press, gossip clean-up and cheerleading?"

"Yeah," Neville dug into his pocket and brought out a braided leather bracelet in red and gold, "Hannah made this for you. We were going to go with beads but some found those looked too girly."

"Way too girly, mate." Ron said emphatically.

"Wow," Harry turned it over in his hand. "This is nice."

Hermione smiled at him and displayed her wrist where a thinner version was already tied. "Professor Dumbledore agreed to the bracelets being part of the uniform so long as there was a bracelet for every Champion."
"Diggory's is Hufflepuff colours," Ron chimed in, shaking his wrist to reveal that he was also wearing a red and gold version, "Beauxbatons is blue and gold and Durmstrang's is a plain black."

"They've proved very popular." Hermione added. "And, of course, some of the Hufflepuffs' like Susan and Hannah are wearing both yours and Cedric's." She leaned over and helped Harry tie it around his wrist.

"Or in politically sensitive positions like Robert and Natalie." Neville said. "I have a couple spare for Sirius and Remus." He placed them on the table.

"Thanks." Harry said, knowing both men would be wearing them as soon as they were given them. The wrist-band looked cool. It reminded him of some of the leather necklaces and bracelets that he'd seen Noshi and his family wear in the States.

"All of Gryffindor is wearing yours along with the Potter alliance." Neville said. "So you do have visible support here at Hogwarts, at least comparable to Krum's and Delacour's."

More support than Krum and Delacour if he had all of Gryffindor, Harry mused.

"On the gossip side…everyone in the alliance is on message with you playing to win, but respect for the other Champions." Neville said. "Draco's even managing to not sneer every time Cedric walks near him so that's something."

"I can't believe Malfoy's coming to dinner with us." Ron complained.

"He needs the visible sign that we support him." Harry rejoined. He had been surprised at Draco's tenaciousness in supporting him, especially given their history, but he knew it needed to be rewarded with the same level of support back. "Theo's coming too."

Neville nodded slowly. "It'll be good to get an update on Slytherin. There are a lot of rumours going around about a massive argument once Bulstrode found out about Voldemort's genealogy."

"Yeah, Draco already wrote me a letter about that. Apparently a lot of them are not too happy with their families at the moment," Harry gestured with his cup, "which is great for us. It's undermining Voldemort's ability to gain supporters from this generation."

They all nodded.

"I guess I can put up with Malfoy at dinner then." Ron muttered.

"Speaking of the Houses, Hufflepuff's in a bit of disarray." Neville commented a little hesitantly.

"I think some of them are just upset that your being in the tournament has taken the spotlight off the fact that it's a Hufflepuff representing Hogwarts." Hermione explained. "But there is…hostility there."

"Diggory finally shut up some of his supporters after Robert had a word." Ron said bluntly. "But some of them are still spouting off the same rubbish as his Dad."

"That I entered myself because I'm attention-seeking and just plain crazy?" Harry nodded. Sirius had been furious with some of the comments Amos Diggory had made and Harry knew he had Brian and Mary on the case to see whether something could be done legally about what amounted to slander.

"A couple of them have had warnings from the teachers under the anti-bullying policy but until they..."
say it to your face…” Hermione sighed heavily.

Harry grimaced again. Great. Just what he needed. He rubbed his forehead and shook the thought away. Maybe being called attention-seeking and crazy wasn't nice but it would be worse if he didn't have support and he had plenty. He had to focus on that and forget about the rest, or at least try not to let it get to him. It could be worse, Harry mused, if Sirius hadn't taken over his guardianship…if he'd been entered into the tournament without warning and without people knowing he hadn't entered himself…

He didn't want to think about it. He'd probably be on his own or, his eyes flickered to Hermione, maybe with one friend helping him.

"The articles today have gone down really well though." Neville said, pulling Harry back into the conversation.

Harry waved at them. "Nobody's complaining about my having my own set of rooms and lesson plan?"

"Well, the article made it clear that it was Sirius who insisted so…everyone's blaming him." Hermione said. "We've, uh, kind of encouraged that."

"It worked with your mind healer thing." Ron commented draining his mug and setting it on the coffee table.

Harry nodded. "OK. Well, at least I know I won't get lynched tomorrow."

"Everyone's looking forward to having you back in class, mate." Ron asserted with a grin.

"He's right." Neville said with a smile.

The door chimed and Harry figured it was Draco and Theo. He went to answer it with most of his nerves about returning to Hogwarts settled. He'd made the right decision to come back.

It was a thought that stayed with Harry buoying his spirits as he got dressed in a variation of the Hogwarts' uniform the next morning. The cut was the same but where his Gryffindor crests had resided, the crests of the Houses of Potter and Black were proudly displayed. Harry ran a hand over them, checked his appearance again in the mirror and made his way downstairs.

Sirius glanced across the room from his seat on one of the comfy sofas. The newspapers lay in disarray around him. "All set?"

Harry nodded. "I'm meeting the others at the Great Hall." He made a quick tempus charm. "They should have finished breakfast by now."

"If you need me send your patronus." Sirius said firmly, getting to his feet and walking over to Harry.

Harry hugged him briefly, grabbed his book bag and left before he lost his nerve.

He skipped down the stairs, following the usual path to the Hall. A lot of the students he passed smiled at him and he smiled gratefully back, with each step believing it was going to be alright. He entered the Great Hall and ignored the lull in chatter that followed as he focused on his friends.

Two steps away from the Gryffindor table, his way was blocked by a sixth year Hufflepuff boy Harry vaguely recognised and a Ravenclaw girl. Both of them glared at Harry meanly. Harry's gut
tensed in grim anticipation.

"You have some nerve coming back, Potter." The Hufflepuff snarled. "You couldn't resist the attention of competing in the tournament, taking the glory from Hogwarts' rightful Champion."

Harry didn't reply. He could see Minerva and Professor Flitwick racing toward them and he signalled for Ron, Hermione and Neville to stay away.

"We'll be wearing these!" The Ravenclaw thrust a badge at him.

He glanced at it. It was a square badge proclaiming support for Cedric but the words changed in front of his eyes to 'Ignore Potter the Rotter,' and Harry was unable to prevent the flare of hurt that he felt at the nasty message.

"What is going on here?" Minerva demanded.

"Accio badge!" Flitwick said, holding his hand out to catch the badge as it leapt out of Harry's. His expression grew stony as he took in the message. He showed it to Minerva and glowered at the two sixth years. "Miss Tatler, I expect better from you."

Minerva cast a furious look around the Hall. "I suggest that if anyone else has possession of one of these...badges, they get rid of them immediately or find themselves in detention."

Harry noted a few hasty removals by students over on the Hufflepuff and Slytherin tables. He wasn't surprised even if he was slightly disheartened. Hufflepuff was loyal to Cedric and the Slytherins would support a troll over a Gryffindor. He was mostly disappointed by Cedric himself who ducked his head and was obviously intent on pretending nothing was going on.

"Our apologies, Lord Potter." Flitwick said. "This is definitely not the way we wanted to welcome the Champion of the Light to Hogwarts."

Harry admired the subtle manner in which Flitwick had told everyone in the Hall of Harry's changed status. He was no longer Mister Potter, Hogwarts student, but Lord Potter, a competing Champion.

"You carry on, Lord Potter," Flitwick continued, "but be assured the perpetrators will be dealt with."

"I'll take care of informing Lord Black." Minerva glowered at the rapidly paling sixth years. "You will both go immediately to my office and think about your actions and whether they are an acceptable way to represent Hogwarts and its Champion," she said sternly.

The sixth years shuffled out thoroughly chastised.

Harry glanced at Minerva and debated briefly whether he could convince her not to tell Sirius, and gave it up immediately as a lost cause.

"Thank you." Harry murmured. He slid around them and joined his friends who were hovering at the end of the Gryffindor table.

"You OK?" Hermione asked in a quiet voice.

Harry nodded briskly. "Let's just get to class."

They turned for the door and found Viktor waiting with his friend. Harry's heart sank. He really didn't want another confrontation. But he squared his shoulders.

"Viktor." He said evenly.
"Harry," Viktor bowed his head a touch, "I vish to welcome vou back. I am looking forward to competing against vou."

Relief stormed through Harry. "Thank you." He said gratefully. "I hope you can still join me for Quidditch practice."

"I would like that." Viktor agreed. "Let me know vhen." He made another bow and departed.

Ron gazed after him admiringly. "Now, that is a class act."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a mutual eye roll at Ron's hero worship, and suddenly everything seemed back to normal. It was almost enough to sustain him through the morning classes; through the whispers and stares that followed him on his travels through the castle. By the time he settled at the Gryffindor table for lunch, he was enormously relieved that he would have an escape at the end of the day.

Hermione smiled sympathetically as he played with the plate of chicken stew he had chosen. "It's pretty bad, isn't it?"

Harry shrugged. "About as bad as the Heir of Slytherin nonsense."

Neville sighed. He and Ron had sat opposite to Harry and Hermione. "It's pretty bad that you have something to compare it to at all."

Ron snorted. He was about to speak when his eyes went wide and he stared at something over Harry's shoulder.

Harry looked half expecting to see Viktor. Instead he found the very beautiful Veela representing Beauxbatons in the tournament. He hastily clambered to his feet and kissed Fleur's proffered hand.

"Miss Delacour." Harry said politely.

"Fleur, please," Fleur smiled prettily, "we are fellow Champions, non?"

"Sure," Harry said, bemused, "I'm Harry then."

Fleur's smile widened. "Bon. I am looking forward to competing with you in ze tournament."

"I look forward to competing with you too." Harry said, feeling very awkward in the presence of the poised and elegant Veela. He heard Hermione's small cough and gratefully waved at her. "May I introduce my friends?"

Fleur nodded. "But of course."

Harry smiled. "This is Hermione Granger."

Hermione stood and shook hands with Fleur as Ron and Neville hastened around the table to facilitate their introductions. Both boys were mildly affected by the Veela's allure, but the introductions passed without incident if not without slightly glazed looks. Fleur quietly excused herself after, ostensibly to leave them to their lunch.

"That was nice of her." Hermione said.

Ron motioned with his knife, sending a drop of sauce flying. "She copied Krum."

"It was still nice of her." Hermione insisted. She poked at her food wistfully. "She's very beautiful."
"So are you." Harry stated without thinking.

He was rewarded with a huge smile from Hermione and he resolved to ask her out as soon as he could arrange it.

Ron pointed again with his knife, but toward the door where Cedric was hurrying out with his head down. "You'd think after his whole 'the Hogwarts' Champion stands with you' spiel at Halloween, that he might have come over like the others."

Hermione sighed. "It's got to be difficult for him with the stuff his father is saying."

Harry tuned out their argument; he sympathised with Cedric but he was disappointed in him too. He caught sight of some of the Hufflepuffs glaring at him and pushed the last of his chicken stew away.

He really couldn't wait until the end of the day; the sanctuary of his own quarters and the solid comfort and support of Padfoot appealed more and more with each moment that passed.
The Wizengamot was in chaos.

Sirius watched carefully at the shouting brouhaha and reminded himself never to piss off Griselda and Augusta since both of them were doing a sterling job of shouting Wenlock into submission, and simultaneously staring down Flint and Gibbon who had stood up to agree with Wenlock's position on the proposed suspension of the Werewolf law.

He glanced across to where Lucius was observing the melee of heated debate with an expression of disdain and careful calculation. Too many people were giving themselves away, Sirius mused as he turned his attention back to the others.

Clearly Wenlock's wooing of the pureblood Ancient and Noble Houses that hadn't agreed détentes with Sirius had been somewhat successful since Flint and Gibbon had stood up in support of his argument against suspending the Werewolf law. Several of the minor pureblood houses were displaying supportive and submissive body language accompanied by approving expressions toward Wenlock. So Wenlock had a greater level of support than he'd had at the previous sessions.

Maybe, Sirius considered, Lucius's prediction of some of the minor houses rushing to hide behind Wenlock to avoid Voldemort's return was proving true. According to Lucius, Wenlock had sneered at Lucius's attempt to warn him. Sirius was satisfied they'd done the right thing and if Wenlock didn't take the warning seriously than that was not Sirius's problem.

For their part, the Potter alliance had done a good job of standing firmly behind Harry and not letting the threat of taking on Voldemort shake them. Daniel Greengrass had done a fantastic job of corralling the minor neutral houses. They might not be as ready to sign up to the Potter alliance as they would have been a month before, but they were also not wandering openly in Wenlock's direction. It helped that the neutral houses were not exactly in favour of the Werewolf law.

Since Sirius hadn't done anything but concentrate on Harry, he was immensely grateful to Daniel, Augusta and everyone else for stepping up. The flash of red and gold on his wrist had him smiling. Most of the Potter alliance was wearing them although a couple like Leonard Abbott were also wearing Diggory's yellow and black. His eyes slid to Amos in the fourth tier and he wasn't surprised to find the man glaring back at him. He moved his gaze onwards dismissively.

It was a confrontation waiting to happen.

Leonard had already run interference that morning at the session break, and Sirius was pleased for once that he had the use of Cornelius's floo which meant that he avoided the public forum of the atrium arriving because he had a feeling Diggory wanted a showdown in front of the press. Probably Diggoty wanted to confront him about the warning letter that Mary Baron in her capacity as Harry’s solicitor had sent warning Diggory that if he continued to make snide insinuations about Harry’s character and well-being in newspapers, they could and would sue him for slander, regardless of Harry's respect for Cedric. They'd sent a similar letter to the press warning them that they wouldn't tolerate slurs against Harry's character. They'd backed off since the letter which was good since the laws were completely nonsensical and Sirius wasn't too certain that they'd actually win if they brought it in front of the Wizengamot. Sirius wasn't too worried about the impact of a public showdown with Diggory in truth – he was fairly certain he could remain in control – but he didn't want to take part in something that would make it more difficult for Harry at Hogwarts.
It was tough.

Despite the visible support Harry was receiving from a good majority of the school population and his close friends, Harry returned every day from his classes with small lines of tension bracketing his mouth and eyes; a stiffness to his posture that suggested hours of being braced for an attack. It hadn't helped that the first day back, some students had worn badges proclaiming 'Support Diggory, Ignore Potter the Rotter.' The ringleaders had been punished under the Anti-Bullying policy, but it hadn't stopped Harry from being hurt by it. Sirius had never been so glad that he'd insisted on being on site for his son, for giving Harry somewhere that he could relax and be himself.

He wasn't impressed by Cedric Diggory either. Whatever good will had been generated in hearing Cedric's stand on the night Harry had been announced as a Champion had eroded. While there was nothing to suggest Diggory himself had known about the badges before they'd appeared, he hadn't exactly gone out of his way to state that they were unacceptable, and while Sirius had gathered from Harry's discussions with Neville, Ron and Hermione in their rooms that Cedric had stopped the more vociferous of his supporters from parroting his father, he hadn't quite shut them up either. The Hogwarts' Champion was, for the most part, ignoring Harry.

Strangely, both the other Champions seemed much more willing to think of Harry's inclusion as a good thing. Viktor Krum was surprisingly a stalwart supporter; he had turned up the evening before after apparently joining Harry and the Gryffindor team for Quidditch practice. Sirius had kept watch through an open study door to the living area in case he was needed but the discussion had revolved around Quidditch and Seeker moves, with Krum mentoring Harry like a big brother, or an older cousin. While Sirius still had concerns about Krum's befriending Harry, who was so much younger than him (and he figured some of it had to do with mutual issues with fame and because it was good politics), he was satisfied that as far as the tournament was concerned, Krum didn't have a hidden agenda.

It had been Wednesday night when Ron and Hermione had popped round to do their homework with Harry that Sirius had finally heard how Fleur Delacour had approached Harry at Monday lunch time to welcome him back and to inform him she looked forward to competing against him. Ron had been the one to blurt it out, mostly excited that Fleur was Veela. Harry had dismissed the whole thing as 'not a big deal' but accepted it was a nice gesture on Fleur's part. Sirius suspected that his dismissal of the French girl's action was partly to reassure Hermione that she was still the one he wanted to ask out.

Not that Harry had asked Hermione out during the past four days which was another source of frustration for Harry. The one time Sirius had asked how it was going and if Harry needed any help, he'd gotten snapped at in a way that Sirius remembered all too well from when James had been courting Lily. He had carefully not inquired since. Harry would work it out himself; Sirius knew that.

Sirius dragged his attention back to the Wizengamot which was settling back down after an admonition by Albus.

Dirk Cresswell, the Chair of the Committee reviewing the laws on Magical Races and Creatures, stood up again. "The Werewolf law passed in early June is a resoundingly ugly piece of legislation. It doesn't do anything except make it more difficult for a wizard or a witch infected with lycanthropy to find work in the wizarding world." The thirty-something good-looking wizard glared at the Wizengamot. "Imagine that you were bitten tomorrow. Immediately, you would be removed from your positions within this body. If you own your company, you are no longer able to retain ownership. If you work for someone else, they have the right to fire you. If you have money and property...maybe you will be able to buy Wolfsbane and survive. But if you need that job or need your company or rely on the status this position brings you...well, you will struggle the same way
that over two thousand wereis in our society already do."

There was a resounding silence.

Sirius glanced around and noted that there were some considering looks on those that a moment before had been vehemently opposed. His eyes swept over one of the minor neutral houses – Zeller – because according to Cornelius, there was a suspicion that Arnold Zeller was actually an unregistered werewolf.

"This legislation pushes werewolves into criminal behaviour out of desperation," Dirk continued passionately, "or it forces them to look for work in the muggle world and to place the secrecy of our world at risk." He made another sweeping look of the chamber. "I encourage you all to suspend this law immediately. Thank you."

Dirk was good, Sirius thought, impressed by the wizard. He had been Arthur's recommendation; a muggleborn wizard in the Goblin Liaison office who spoke fluent Gobbledygook.

Albus cleared his throat. "Let's vote."

The vote was passed in favour of suspension but it was a close thing. The Potter alliance remained steadfast despite some of the members previous voting through the law. Sirius breathed a sigh of relief as the session was closed and the Wizengamot started to empty.

Richard leaned over to him. "Shall we pretend to have an in depth conversation so Diggory can't approach you?"

"That would be great." Sirius said with a grateful smile as he sketched a privacy bubble. "Thank you."

"No problem." Richard said, grinning back at him. "I should be thanking you for sending me to Paris again. Flick had a great time." He waved a hand. "Only fly in the ointment was having to deal with Fevrier again. He really is a little turd."

Sirius nodded. Turd was a surprisingly good description of the French antiquities dealer; conman was the other term that came to mind. "I can afford his stringing me along for a while."

"At least we have our eyes open." Richard admitted. "Merlin knows how many people he must con out of a fortune."

"Too many." Sirius agreed. But he figured that Fevrier would acquire the Lumiere translation by the beginning of the next year and that was the only important thing.

"How's Remus?" Richard asked tentatively.

Sirius gave a soft hum in response. "Good, I think. He finds being Alpha a bit awkward but the others haven't given him any trouble at the chateau and seem to be accepting his leadership so..." he shrugged, "I'll be glad when he's back."

"And is Harry prepared for the Weighing of the Wands?" Richard asked.

"As much as he can be." Sirius smirked suddenly at the memory of Harry realised that his wand was going to be examined close-up. "He's taken a sudden interest in polishing his wand and I don't mean metaphorically or euphemistically."

Richard burst out laughing. He motioned towards the door. "We should be fine to leave now."
Sirius dismissed the privacy bubble and the two of them made their way down the stairs and out into the corridors of the Ministry. They parted at the stairwell; Sirius headed for Arthur's office and Richard made his way home.

Arthur waved him in, his blue eyes shining a welcome. "Sirius! I hoped you'd stop by."

"I wanted to apologise again for abandoning our weekly dinners," Sirius said, sinking into the visitor's chair, "but I don't want to leave Harry alone."

"Don't worry," Arthur assured him, "Molly and I understand. How's it going?"

"I'm glad I'm there," Sirius said simply. "I think I'd have gone mad if I hadn't managed to convince Albus to give us our own rooms and Harry had just gone back and I'd had to support at a distance."

Arthur frowned, his freckled face creasing with concern. "I thought the other students were being supportive?"

"His friends, yes; the Potter alliance and Gryffindor, for the most part although some are more vocal and visible than others; the rest of the school?" Sirius sighed. "It's a mixed bag because of the situation with Diggory." He motioned with his hand. "It was easy in the heat of the moment on Halloween for them to stand up and acknowledge that Harry hadn't entered himself but to continue to support him when he's gone on record as saying he'll try to win when the school already has a Champion?"

"It is a bold strategy," Arthur commented, "and given his history with facing danger, I wasn't surprised by it. But I know Molly was hoping that he'd walk out and do the least he needed to do to pacify the contract with the Goblet."

"It's not really Harry's style." Sirius murmured, a twinge of guilt running through him as he considered it wasn't his style either and he hadn't even attempted to convince Harry that there was another way of participating in the tournament. "Maybe I should have…"

"No," Arthur cut in before Sirius could verbalise the thought, "you're right to support his decision, Sirius. Harry is... he has instincts about these types of situations and if you'd done a Molly with him, he'd have walked out to do the task and gone with his instincts anyway, but without probably a tenth of the preparation he's getting now."

Whatever Sirius had been about to say remained unsaid as Percy barrelled into the room. Arthur's third son was clearly distraught and Sirius got to his feet, intending to leave.

"I've resigned!" Percy declared, giving no sign that he had even registered Sirius's presence.

"Oh Percy!" Arthur said, glancing in Sirius's direction.

Percy's chin came up. "It's pretty clear I'm going to be fired, and who can blame them since I was stupid enough to almost get my own family killed! I just didn't want to give them the satisfaction of kicking me out."

Sirius cleared his throat and finally Percy realised he was in the room. Percy went bright red then white under hid freckles.

"I'll leave you to it." Sirius said diplomatically.

"Thank you, Sirius." Arthur said. "Stay in touch and if you need anything, let us know."
"I will do." Sirius promised and made his escape.

It wasn't a surprise that Percy had resigned and Sirius thought it was probably the right decision. The likelihood of Percy being fired was very high since someone needed to take the blame for the breach of security that had happened with Barty Junior and Percy was a handy scapegoat. It was a shame but Percy hadn't endeared himself to his colleagues over the previous months. Sirius made a mental note to talk with Remus about it. It was possible that Remus needed an assistant to help with his steward duties and Percy, for all his faults, was a good worker.

Sirius had barely taken three steps away from Arthur's door when Amos Diggory appeared from a side office to stand in front of him, blocking his way.

"Black." Amos snarled.

"Diggory." Sirius returned evenly. Diggory had obviously waited for him. "I don't think we have anything to say to each other, do we?"

Amos's face turned a strange purple colour and Sirius briefly worried Amos was going to have a heart attack.

"Your solicitor may have threatened me, Black, but you'll find it's not that easy to shut me up!"

Sirius hummed under his breath and reminded himself that punching Amos wasn't a good idea. A waft of the other man's breath swept over him, and Sirius got hit with the stench of whiskey. This was not good, Sirius mused.

"You were slandering my fourteen year old son, Diggory. You can hardly be surprised that I stepped in. You would do the same if we were to make similar comments about your son." Sirius attempted to keep his voice calm.

"My boy isn't an attention seeking glory hound!" Amos blustered.

"And neither is mine." Sirius retorted, trying to keep his temper and reminding himself that Amos was counting on that very outcome. "I'll also remind you that my son didn't enter himself."

"Right," Amos said derisively, "he was entered by the oh-so-conveniently resurrected Bartemius Crouch Junior."

Oh, so that was his latest game.

Sirius smiled, and something must have registered with Amos that Sirius smiling wasn't a good thing because he took a step back.

"You don't want to go there, Diggory." Sirius said softly.

"Or what?" Amos bit out.

"Or you'll find yourself contradicting an official Ministry and DMLE view," Amelia's voice snapped, causing both men to turn to face her, "and the last time I looked, Amos, you weren't that stupid."

Sirius could have kissed her. Amos flushed brightly and scuttled away.

"You are a lifesaver." Sirius told Amelia as soon as Amos was out of earshot.

"I'm certain the life in question was Amos's." Amelia responded dryly.
"You'll get no argument from me." Sirius said candidly.

"Come on," she jerked her head towards her office, "you can floo to Hogwarts from mine and I'll give you my take on how Harry won our duel last night."

Sirius gave a grin and fell into step beside her.

o-O-o

13th November 1994

Harry adjusted his robes, letting the fall of material straighten. He looked at himself critically. His hair was as good as it was going to get, his glasses glistened showcasing his green eyes, and his outfit was smart - sharp black trousers and a green silk shirt under his best black open robes with his family crests proudly displayed. He was ready.

Panic stirred faintly in the back of his mind, but he pushed it away before it could take hold.

He marched out of his room determinedly. Sirius looked up from reading the paper and smiled at Harry as he picked up the pink rose Neville had dropped off earlier that day.

"All sorted?" Sirius asked.

"I think so," Harry replied, hating the note of uncertainty that crept into his voice. He took a deep breath and nodded with more confidence. "Yes. Ready."

For a moment Harry thought Sirius was going to tease him as he often did when the subject of girls was raised, but Sirius smiled again instead.

"I don't think you'll need it, but good luck." Sirius said with a wink.

Harry smiled gratefully and threw on his invisibility cloak – he didn't want to be seen in transit with the rose. He left their quarters and made his way through the school to the Runes classroom. It was empty and for a second Harry wondered if he was going to be stood up, despite knowing that Hedwig had delivered a positive reply to his request for a rendezvous that morning. Before the thought could take root, the door opened and Hermione slid inside.

"Harry?" She called out softly.

He belatedly realised he was invisible and yanked the cloak off, throwing it over his arm. Hermione smiled brightly at him and he smiled back at her.

"Hey," Harry said warmly, "you look great." And she did. Her hair had been tamed again into soft curls that fell to her shoulders, and although she wore her uniform it was pristine, the Gryffindor crest catching the sun coming through the large windows. She looked very pretty.

"So do you." Hermione said shyly. She gestured at his hand. "Is that for me?"

Harry walked over to her and held out the rose. "It is. It's a token of...of, well a small token of how much I like you." He tried to ignore how hot his cheeks were burning.

"Thank you, Harry." Hermione took the rose with a nervous smile, "I think it's the first time anyone has given me a flower."

Harry took confidence from her pleased expression. "I know you know, and I know you know I know, but I wanted to ask you properly." He said a little hesitantly. "So..." he took another deep
breath. "I really, uh, like you and I would really like it if you would agree to go on a real date with me?"

He was blushing again but so was Hermione and he held onto the delight in her eyes as a good sign.

"I really like you too and I would really like to go on a real date with you too." Hermione agreed softly.

They grinned at each other for a long moment before Harry reached for her hand and Hermione tangled their fingers together. The feel of her hand in his made Harry breathless. He squeezed her fingers gently.

"We do, uh, need to talk about…" He began.

She nodded enthusiastically, sending her curls bouncing. "Our friendship is the most important thing; I don't want to ever lose that." She said quickly. "And, of course, I don't want us to make things awkward for Sirius as far as the House of Black is concerned." She grimaced. "We need to make sure Ron especially doesn't feel left out too."

"Exactly." Harry breathed out a sigh of relief. "Sirius approves by the way."

Hermione smiled at him, her eyes alight with laughter. "I thought he might."

Harry smiled back because she was right; Sirius hadn't been at all subtle over the previous week.

"And so does Ron," Harry continued, "but I agree; we should make sure he's not left out."

"We will." Hermione assured him. Her face turned considering. "We really need him to wake up and realise Lavender is head over heels for him."

"Maybe he will now we're…we're dating." Harry said, hopefully. Delight sailed through him as he caught Hermione's flush at his words. He shifted position as his conscience prodded him. "About the actual date…"

"We need to wait until after the first task." Hermione said firmly. "You've only got just over a week to prepare after today's Wands ceremony and that has to take priority."

Harry stared at her. "You are just…thank you." His fingers brushed the band of red and gold on her wrist.

"Are you worried about it?" Hermione asked. "I've been trying to talk to you all week but there's always someone else around and…well, everyone else is getting ready for the Weighing of the Wands and we're alone so…"

He had chosen the time for them to meet up precisely for that reason.

"Yeah," Harry answered her initial question without thinking about it; they'd been friends too long for him to think twice about confiding in her – he wanted to confide in her, "I guess I am worried about it." He pushed his glasses up his nose with his free hand. "It is going to be dangerous and just because I wanted to make Voldemort regret entering me by doing well doesn't mean that I think I'm actually going to do well. Although, I mean, maybe I think I'm going to be OK with the first task? If it is something to do with magical creatures like everyone thinks? Because I think I'm good with those and the study plan is catching me up with theory and Moody was brilliant about tutoring me in the spells you listed for me, but…" he sighed and met her warm gaze, "I usually have you and Ron with me, you know? Whenever I've gone off to do one of these insane things and…now it's just me."
"It was just you and Voldemort at the end of the traps, Harry," Hermione reminded him, "and just you with the basilisk."

"You were there for Sirius though." Harry reminded her.

"But you were the one who produced the patronus that saved us all from the Dementors." Hermione said quietly. "You're... you're brilliant at this type of stuff. Do you remember what I said to you the first time? You're a great wizard, Harry."

A flush of warmth rushed through and his gaze snagged on hers. It was a perfect moment and his gaze dropped to her lips. His heart pounded a little bit as he leaned in toward her and he could feel her shift, leaning towards him...

The door to the classroom flew open and Harry immediately turned defensively, letting go of Hermione as his wand was unleashed from its holster.

"Expelliarmus!" He yelled.

A blur of purple went sailing back through the doorway as a wand whipped across the air between to land in Harry's outstretched empty hand.

He and Hermione rushed to the door and took in the sight of their potential attacker lying on the floor of the corridor with a stunned expression.

Harry blanched.

"Professor Dumbledore!" gasped Hermione as she hurried forward to help their Headmaster, Harry following belatedly in her wake with the Professor's wand in his hand buzzing with power as his thumb drifted over the mark at the base.

"It's alright, Miss Granger," Dumbledore took her outstretched hand and levered himself off the floor, "my robes have cushioning charms and no harm was done." His rheumy eyes met Harry's. "An impressive disarming spell, Harry."

"I am sorry, sir." Harry said miserably. "It's just..."

"No, no," Dumbledore waved off the apology, "I understand you are in a state of constant vigilance!" His eyes twinkled as he brushed the dust off his bright purple robes. "And quite right too! My own fault for believing two students lurking in a classroom would have nefarious motivations. If I had known it was you and Miss Granger I would have continued onto the Great Hall for the Wand ceremony." His eyes flickered to the pink rose Hermione held.

"Your wand, Professor." Harry said hurriedly. He flipped the wand over and offered it to the Headmaster.

Dumbledore paused and his keen gaze found Harry's again, a question in the depths.

And it was then Harry felt a whisper of something – a call that resonated deep inside of him – the wand calling out to his blood – Peverell blood. He could sense the power of the wand, the connection with the family magic that bubbled up eagerly to encourage him to accept the wand that it had once made, and there was an echo from the cloak left lying in the classroom of recognition and welcome.
But it wasn’t the right time.

They had no idea still how the Hallows were supposed to work together and Harry couldn’t take the risk of owning a wand that was so powerful when there was the slightest chance Voldemort could get his hands on it.

Harry firmed his lips, ignored the whisper in his mind, and nodded briskly. He had a perfectly serviceable wand and the Elder wand was safest with Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore took his wand back and smiled somewhat sadly at it.

The nudge of something faded and Harry shrugged the feeling away as though trying to dislodge an itch.

Hermione threw Harry a curious look and he mouthed the word 'later' at her.

"Well, we should all be making our way to the Great Hall, I believe." Dumbledore said chirpily. "After all, you and I are participating in today's Ceremony, Harry."

More’s the pity, Harry thought, before he nodded his agreement and gestured back at the classroom. "I just have to pick up my cloak."

"Ah, then I shall leave you and Miss Granger to make your own way while I check that all is in order." Dumbledore sighed. "We had not planned for this to be in front of the whole school originally!"

He glided away and they watched him disappear around the corridor before looking at each other nervously.

Harry started to chuckle at the memory of Dumbledore sailing through the air. Hermione looked at him askance.

"It’s not funny, Harry. I can’t believe you disarmed Professor Dumbledore!" She said, folding her arms over her chest.

"It’s a little funny." Harry countered as he went back into the classroom and picked up the silvery material he’d left on the floor. There was no time to return it. "Dobby!"

Dobby popped in immediately. "You bes calling Dobby, Master Harry Potter, sir?"

"We have to get to the Wand ceremony," Harry explained, "can you take my cloak back to my room for me, please?"

"And my rose back to my dorm, please?" Hermione asked quickly. She smiled at Harry. "I don't want it getting damaged."

Dobby hopped happily taking both items. "Dobby will take care of all." He popped away again.

Harry held out his hand a little anxiously but Hermione simply rolled her eyes and took it with another shy smile. He was giddy as they walked to the Great Hall, discussing the history behind the ceremony that Hermione and her researchers had uncovered. By the time they entered the wide doors, Harry was reassured that it was a fairly straightforward examination of his wand without the possibility of any spirits manifesting or strange things happening.

"Harry!" Rita swooped on them as soon as he and Hermione crossed the threshold into the hall. Her
eyes glittered behind her oversized specs, arrowing in on their joined hands. "Is there something that you want to tell the readers of the Daily Prophet?"

"Yes," Sirius was suddenly beside Harry, his hand heavy on his shoulder, "he wants to tell you that he can't take part in conversations with the press without his guardian present, Rita."

Rita wasn't phased by the rebuke. "Lord Black," she said dryly, "what a surprise to see you here." She motioned at the other Champions already gathered up at the front of the hall. "I didn't realise that the families of the Champions were allowed to be present, or have they made a special exception for you?"

Harry kept his face impassive knowing Sirius was more than capable of handling the question with its nasty undertone.

"The other Champions are of age," Sirius pointed out, "and therefore don't require an adult to safeguard their interests; Harry is still a minor and therefore when appropriate will have a guardian present at official tournament meetings." He smiled sharply.

Rita gave a weak smile in response and made her way back to the other journalists.

"Ready, Harry?" Sirius asked him quietly.

Harry grimaced but nodded. He felt Hermione squeeze his fingers before letting go.

"It'll be fine, Harry." She promised and swiftly headed in the direction of the Gryffindor table to where an avid Lavender and Parvati seemed to be awaiting her, along with a smug looking Ron and Neville.

Harry was ushered forward by Sirius and he missed the dark looks of consternation and understanding from his stalkers; the disappointment that had Ginny lowering her head, hiding behind a fall of red hair. Instead, Harry fell into line beside Viktor who acknowledged him with a grim smile; Fleur bowed her golden head a touch, and Cedric did what Cedric had spent the previous week doing; he ignored Harry.

Harry huffed out a breath and breathed in slowly, refusing to allow himself to get frustrated in front of everyone.

"Ah, excellent!" Dumbledore spoke up loudly, silencing the Hall immediately. "Now that we are all gathered, we can begin!" His gaze swept around the room and the doors to the Great Hall banged shut as Hagrid closed them. "We had initially intended this to be a quiet affair, but with recent developments it was felt more appropriate to make this a public event for our three schools and, of course, the illustrious members of the press." He smiled benevolently to the right where Rita, Luna's father and Esmeralda Goose sat on a narrow bench. "So, the Weighing of the Wands Ceremony dates back quite a number of years and is where the Champions' wands are examined to ensure fairness. I am pleased to introduce Master Wand-maker Ollivander who will do the examinations."

The old wizard stepped forward and bowed to the politely applauding students. "Thank you. If I could see Mister Krum's wand first, please?"

Viktor stepped forward, resplendent in deep burgundy robes. He handed his wand to Ollivander briskly.

"A Gregorovitch." Ollivander lifted the wand examining it carefully. "Hornbeam and…dragon heartstring, ten and a quarter inches, thicker than I would have made it. Good condition, I see." He made a jabbing motion and a flock of birds erupted from the end of the wand and out of an open...
"Good, good. A fine wand, Mister Krum, and one most appropriate for a man with a penchant for the air."

The wand was handed back and Krum moved to the other side of Ollivander.

"Miss Delacour?" Ollivander waved her forward and took her proffered wand with a gallant bow. "Oh what a lovely wand!" He carefully lifted it to the light and made a gleeful sound under his breath. "Well, well. A Limone creation with rosewood and a Veela hair?"

"My Grandmother." Fleur confirmed, her accent heavy.

"Rather inflexible but…" Ollivander made the same jabbing motion as he had with Krum's and a shower of dragonflies emerged, flying over the crowd before disappearing. "Fire and air!" He said delightedly. "How remarkable but definitely appropriate for one of your beauty, young lady."

Fleur took her wand back with a pleased smile lifting her rosebud lips.

Harry tried not to fidget as Ollivander called for Cedric.

"Now this I recognise! My own creation!" Ollivander beamed at Cedric who beamed back. "Ash and the tail hair of a unicorn stallion. I remember it well!" He gave Cedric an approving glance. "You've taken excellent care of it, Mister Diggory."

Cedric continued beaming.

Ollivander made the jabbing motion for the third time and a single dove flew from the wand disappearing into the rafters of the Great Hall. "Ah, earth and air; a bird suggesting a pure heart and a desire for peace." His shrewd eyes met Cedric’s. "You would be wise to listen to its message."

Two slashes of red appeared across Cedric's cheeks and he swiftly took back the wand to make his way to the other Champions.

"Mister Potter."

Harry tried to ignore the churn of nerves that had settled heavily in his stomach. He tried to ignore the fact that everyone was looking at him and handed his wand over.

"Oh my," Ollivander said, "I remember this wand very well." His intent look fell upon Harry. "Holly and a phoenix feather. It has seen battle since we last met, Mister Potter."

It was all he could do to nod.

"I did say that you could accomplish great things with this wand." Ollivander said quietly. "And so you have."

Harry couldn’t quite manage a smile.

Ollivander frowned and he peered at the wand, darted a glance at Harry, and then one in the direction of Dumbledore. "Remarkable." He murmured before he jabbed the wand in a now familiar motion.

Fire shot out of the tip, forming a large blazing image of a phoenix in flight almost the height of the Great Hall. Harry's mouth fell open and he could hear gasps and shouts from the students and teachers. And as suddenly as it had appeared, the image disappeared leaving nothing but a trail of smoke.
"Fire and air symbolising rebirth, rising from the ashes." Ollivander blinked as he handed Harry his wand back. "You are a truly impressive wizard, Mister Potter. Great things indeed."

"Thank you?" Harry muttered uncertainly and quickly stepped over to the others.

"Are my fellow judges satisfied that the wands have been examined and cleared for use?" Dumbledore asked loudly before the quiet mutterings in the Hall could become actual babble.

Madame Maxime nodded with a large smile, Karkaroff gave a dismissive wave, and Ludo Bagman grinned broadly towards the press as he gave a thumbs-up gesture.

"Then the ceremony is over!" Dumbledore clapped his hands and dismissed the gathered students.

Harry searched out Hermione and they exchanged a quick smile before she left, flanked by Ron and Neville. Unfortunately Harry had to suffer through Bagman's insistence on a posed photo of all of the Champions before he finally got to leave with Sirius.

"So," Sirius sketched a privacy bubble as they walked to the tower, "I'm sure I don't really need to ask since you were holding hands with her and all but...how did it go?"

Harry smiled and knew he probably had a fairly sappy expression on his face but he didn't care. "She said yes!"

Sirius grinned at him. "Way to go, Harry!"

"And she understands about the date being delayed until after the first task." Harry added. "She was great about everything."

"I'm pleased for you, Harry." Sirius said warmly, slinging an arm around his shoulder.

"There was kind of a thing with Professor Dumbledore?" Harry hurried out the explanation of what had happened and by the end of it they were in their quarters and Sirius was howling with laughter.

It was good to see Sirius laughing for once. He hadn't done that enough recently, Harry mused, feeling guilty even though he knew it wasn't really his fault.

A knock had them both turning for the door. Sirius waved Harry back and went to answer it. Minerva and Ollivander were on the other side.

"My apologies, Sirius," Minerva said, "but Mister Ollivander was insistent on speaking with you and Mister Potter."

Harry's eyes widened and he could see Sirius morphing into his Lord Black persona as he considered the request and agreed to it, inviting Minerva and Ollivander into the room with an offer of refreshments.

Five minutes later, they were drinking tea, compliments of Dobby, and Ollivander's discreet suggestion of privacy had been dismissed with Sirius's confirmation that "Minnie had their complete confidence" to allow Minerva to stay.

Ollivander set his cup down. "You'll have to forgive me if I come directly to the point."

"Directness would be appreciated." Sirius countered, his expression guarded.

Harry found himself the object of Ollivander's unsettling stare once more.
"Mister Potter," Ollivander began, "am I right in assuming that you recently came into possession of the Headmaster's wand?"

Harry glanced at Minerva before he nodded. "I, um, accidentally disarmed him earlier today when he surprised me."

Minerva rolled her eyes, an exasperated breath escaping her, but she didn't rebuke him and Harry relaxed a touch.

"Hmmm," Ollivander's eyes sparkled briefly with amusement before sobering again, "do you remember that I once told you that the wand chooses the wizard, Mister Potter?"

Harry nodded, a sinking feeling in his gut at where the discussion was headed.

"The Headmaster's wand chose you when you proved your worth and disarmed him." Ollivander continued.

Sirius tensed beside him.

"I doubt that you could have failed to notice since the wand in question is powerful enough to make its choice known." Ollivander said quietly. "Yet somehow the wand remains with the Headmaster and you are facing a difficult tournament with a greatly inferior wand."

Harry bristled on behalf of his perfectly fine holly and phoenix wand.

"Wands don't change their allegiance that way." Minerva spoke up sharply.

"Ordinarily, no," Ollivander said with a slow smile, "but the Elder wand is no ordinary wand."

Everyone froze and Harry knew his own thoughts of should they deny it, should they admit they knew, were running through Sirius's head.

Sirius met Harry's eyes briefly before he sighed and acknowledged Ollivander's words with a tilt of his head.

Ollivander blinked. "You are all aware of the significance of the Headmaster's wand?"

"We are." Sirius replied.

The wand-maker looked shaken. "Then, you gave it back to the Headmaster knowing of its power?"

Harry shot a questioning look at Sirius for permission before he nodded. "The wand is safest with the Headmaster."

"Remarkable." Ollivander said, staring at Harry. "It was remarkable when I thought you had given up the wand without knowing but to give it up when you do know…even more remarkable. I assume you felt its pull?"

Harry settled for another nod, unwilling to explain the exact nature of the pull that he'd felt. There was a niggling feeling that he only had to focus and he would feel it again, its seductive whisper across his heart.

"I'm not sure I understand how the allegiance thing works," Harry admitted, vaguely remembering that Ollivander had said something in the memory he'd watched from Sirius's grandfather.

Ollivander smiled slightly patronisingly. "Wands choose the wizard because the magical element
within them resonates with the wizard's own magical energy, the wood acting as a grounding force to allow the transference back and forth. Family members usually have similar energy so it's not unusual for children to be able to use their parents' wands or some other relative's. Generally, it's unusual for an opponent and non-relative in a duel situation to be a better magical match for a wand to change its allegiance. It has happened but rarely."

And OK, Harry thought he got that.

"But the Elder wand doesn't work that way." Sirius stated.

"It is an unique wand without a core magical element, but a powerful wand that understands power." Ollivander expanded, with a gesture meant to convey the more the better. "And so, if it feels one wizard has more than another, say because it was taken in a disarming spell, it sides with that wizard and will not work for the one who holds it if he tries to use it against the wand's chosen master. It is said to be the reason why it always ends up with the victor of the duels it has participated in."

"So it has no true allegiance?" Minerva questioned, a worried frown creasing her forehead.

"In some tales of the wand, that is the theory. However, one origin story says the wand has no allegiance except to the blood that runs through it." Ollivander's gaze slid to Harry. "The blood of the Peverells – your bloodline."

Which would explain the pull Harry had felt.

"Now that it's found you, Mister Potter, I rather suspect the wand won't give its allegiance to anyone else." Ollivander finished.

So presumably it wouldn't give its allegiance to Voldemort, Harry mused; that was good news.

"But there's not really an issue with the Headmaster continuing to have the wand, is there?" Minerva asked anxiously.

"Oh, I dare say it will continue to work for the Headmaster if not as well as it has done, as well as his previous wand." Ollivander said brightly. "He is a powerful wizard in his own right." His gaze moved back to Harry. "If you feel the wand is safer with him and wish to use another, well, that is a remarkable choice and perhaps only one who has Peverell blood could make – to refuse the power the wand offers you. But I would caution you that you may need the wand, especially in these dangerous times."

Ollivander held up a hand before anyone could say anything.

"I see the signs and I know the one who wields the brother wand to your own rises again." He gestured. "I suspect he is behind your tournament entry."

Harry looked helplessly at Sirius.

"If Harry is to face Voldemort," Sirius began, "which believe me will only be happening over my dead body, but ignoring that, you truly believe Harry using the Elder wand is worth the risk of it falling into Voldemort's hand?"

"I understand the concern, but regardless that I rather think that the Elder wand wielded by a Peverell would be practically invincible," Ollivander replied smartly, "there is the pressing concern that Harry's own wand would be useless against its brother wand."

Sirius stiffened. "Explain."
"When two wands containing magical elements of the same creature are set in opposition, there is a battle for dominance that takes place between the wands," Ollivander said swiftly. "The wands are locked until the stronger overcomes the weaker. At that moment, priori incancatem occurs with the defeated wand spilling out its secrets. A normal duel is out of the question."

"I can't use my wand in a duel with Voldemort?" Harry checked, a sinking feeling in his stomach because he liked his wand – he loved his wand – he didn't want to have to use a different wand if he was fighting Voldemort.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't do much except…" Ollivander spread his hands in lieu of repeating himself.

"Great." Harry muttered.

Sirius reached over and clasped his shoulder briefly. "At least thanks to Mister Ollivander we know now." He turned to the wand-maker. "Thank you."

Ollivander waved away the gratitude. "There is one tale that if you truly need it, the Elder wand would come to its rightful master by calling it with a simple thought." He smiled. "If the Elder wand ever does come into your possession, Mister Potter, I would appreciate the opportunity to examine it."

Sirius and Minerva hustled Ollivander away in some gracious manner that didn't make it look like they were hustling him away, leaving Harry contemplating the information Ollivander had imparted.

"We can get you another wand." Sirius's voice wrenched Harry from the tumbling single thought of 'what now?'

"I like my wand." Harry sighed and flopped back against the sofa.

"There's always the Elder wand." Sirius said, sitting down beside him. "And frankly we always thought you might have to use it since its one of the three Hallows and if they are the power he knows not…"

"Yeah." Harry murmured. "It's just…every time something goes right, something else seems to go wrong."

Sirius patted his shoulder, understandingly. "My advice is to focus on the positive."

Hermione.

Harry started smiling as he remembered their conversation; how she'd said she liked him; her absolute confidence in him.

"And there we go." Sirius said amused. "I recall your Dad had the exact same sappy expression." He got up. "Well, my work here is done. I'm going to call Remus and update him on the ceremony and everything."

Harry pushed himself out of the sofa and made for his room. He had some reading to do on magical creatures and then…and then he had a date to plan.
It was rare for Hermione to miscalculate, but when Dobby popped in beside her and prevented her from touching the avalanche of mail just delivered to her by a flock of owls, she was prepared to admit that perhaps she had grossly underestimated the public interest in her relationship with Harry.

"You don't need to help, Dobby," Hermione said briskly, "I'll be fine." She ignored the doubt that crept into the back of her mind as she surveyed the stack of mail.

"Lord Black is ordering Dobby to be reviewing Master Harry Potter's Grangy's mail." Dobby replied with a firmness that took her aback.

Hermione conceded. Sirius was her magical guardian and if he really thought it was best…

Neville breathed a sigh of relief as the elf popped away with the mail. "Thank Merlin. He'll make sure it's safe and get the mail that you'll want to read to you."

She bit her lip. She hadn't considered that there was danger in the mail, but then she should have done considering some of the dark looks she had received since she and Harry had turned up to the wand ceremony holding hands. Some of those looks had turned even darker between the newspaper articles the day before outright declaring Hermione's status as Harry's first girlfriend and Harry quite happily walking to all their classes holding Hermione's hand.

A blush rose as she remembered her own delight in holding Harry's hand, but more, what it truly meant about how Harry felt about her.

"Merlin!" Ron muttered. "You're thinking about Harry again, aren't you? You get the same dippy look on your face every time."

Hermione turned to glare at him. "I do not have a dippy look!"

Ron pointed his knife at her. "Yes, you do." He grimaced. "Harry's just the same."

She pushed down the urge to argue, reminding herself that the change in the trio's dynamic was hardest on Ron and that she and Harry had promised to make it easy for him. Her eyes slid to Lavender who was staring across at Ron with her own dippy look. What they needed was some way of getting Ron together with Lavender, Hermione determined. That way Ron wouldn't feel left out.

"We should make a move or we'll be late for Potions." Hermione said out loud, not revealing her other motive for moving - her want to see Harry.

Ron grumbled but he pushed the last of the toast in his mouth, brushed the crumbs from the front of his school robes and gathered his bag.

It seemed to be a signal for the rest of the fourth year Gryffindors; every single one of them abandoned the breakfast table at the same time, falling into a loose huddle of students as they made their way out of the Great Hall.

Hermione's face lit up as she spotted Harry coming down the main staircase. He walked over and took her hand without any hint of self-consciousness, instead aiming a smile at Ron and Neville as he greeted them.
"Sirius said he's put a mail redirect on you for anyone but the House of Black and your parents," Harry said, shifting his satchel with his free hand, "and that if something does get through, you should call for Dobby to take care of it."

Hermione sighed. "A mail redirect? Does he really think it's necessary?"

Harry shrugged. "I have one."

Which meant yes.

"I didn't think people would be that interested," Hermione commented. "I guess I should have realised that our dating would get some publicity."

"Some?!" snorted Ron, drawing both of their attention. "The paper was full of 'The Boy Who Lived Finds First Love' yesterday. It was sickening."

"Skeeter." Harry muttered darkly.

"It wasn't just her," Neville reminded him, "that Goose woman had a paragraph about you and Hermione in her article too."

Harry pushed his glasses up his nose. "At least Luna's Dad focused on the tournament and the wand ceremony."

"Hmmm," Hermione said, remembering the article with a frown, "I'm not certain that I entirely agree with him about the symbolism and origins of the creatures that appeared from the wands during the tests."

"A load of old nonsense if you ask me." Ron agreed as they took the corridor into the dungeons. "Mind you, mate, that flaming phoenix thing was very impressive."

"It was the most powerful symbol of all of the Champions." Neville cheerfully chimed in.

"I liked the dragonflies." Lavender said behind them. "They were very pretty not like those birds from Viktor Krum's wand."

"They were hawks!" Ron said defensively. "They were brilliant." He motioned toward Harry. "I mean, not as brilliant as Harry's but pretty decent."

"There's a debate about whether the birds that appeared from Viktor's wand were hawks or sparrows." Dean commented loudly.

Ron bristled. "They were hawks."

Hermione shot him an amused look. "Does it matter?"

"Hawks are better than sparrows." Ron retorted.

"Symbolically that's true." Lavender said supportively.

"Thank you!" Ron declared.

Lavender blushed and Hermione resolved again to do something even if the thought of playing match-maker horrified her.

They all automatically slowed as they neared the Potions lab and its locked door, shifting seamlessly
into a line of waiting students.

Hermione did a tempus charm and frowned. "We're early."

"You're the one who hustled us out of breakfast." Ron reminded her, shuffling beside Harry. "I didn't even get a chance to read my letter from Charlie."

"Well, everyone was staring." Hermione admitted awkwardly.

She wasn't surprised when Harry squeezed her hand and gave a sympathetic grimace. He understood how disconcerting it was to be the focus of the whole school.

"It'll blow over." Neville predicted. "The first task is next week. Everyone will focus on that then."

"Nev's right," Ron said supportively by way of an apology, "you'll be old news in no time."

"Good grief," Draco's drawl travelled down the length of the corridor as the Slytherins stalked up from the dungeon end, "who knew Gryffindors could be this eager for Potions?"

"Morning, Draco." Harry said calmly. Hermione followed Harry and nodded a greeting at Theo as he came to stand beside Draco. The two were strangely becoming a bit of a double act although Draco's old cohorts of Crabbe and Goyle still tagged along like lost puppies.

"Mother said she'd see me at dinner on Friday?" Draco adjusted the cuff of his robes and Hermione marvelled at the flash of red and gold. A lot of the Slytherins wore Cedric's although some wore both.

"Yeah," Harry said, "Sirius is reinstituting the family dinners. Andy and Ted will be there too."

Hermione noticed the flash of discomfort that rippled through most of the waiting Slytherins and hid a smile.

Pansy suddenly appeared, pushing past Crabbe and Goyle in an attempt to wiggle into place beside Draco. "Am I late?" She said breathlessly.

"No," Draco sneered, "something you should have realised since we're all still stood outside of the lab, Parkinson."

The evident dislike didn't seem to phase Pansy who wrinkled her small upturned nose and shot a malevolent look in Hermione's direction. Hermione stiffened automatically in response.

"Rita Skeeter was interviewing me." Pansy gloated. "She wanted to know all about Granger."

All chatter in the corridor stopped abruptly.

Hermione tightened her grip on Harry as he drew away from the wall, his anger blazing out of his eyes, and gave a small shake of her head to try and prevent him from doing anything rash. He stopped as Draco shifted.

"Are you really that stupid?" Draco bit out.

Pansy tore her gaze away from Harry and looked wide-eyed at Draco's annoyed pointed features.

Hermione breathed an inward sigh of relief as Harry relaxed a touch seeing that Draco would deal with it.
"Draco…” Pansy gathered up the remnants of her courage and self-delusion and carried on. "You can't deny that you'll enjoy seeing the truth about Granger in tomorrow's paper!"

"I can deny it since your truth probably involves insulting Granger who is a member of the House of Black *as am I.*" Draco snarled.

"Well, at least we know who to point Lord Black at when he reads all about an unnamed source at Hogwarts." Theo slipped in slyly.

Pansy paled but she remained defiant. "I stand by what I said."

"Then you won't mind coming with me this lunchtime to meet with Lord Black and inform him of your indiscretion in relation to his ward, Miss Parkinson." Snape's smooth tone had them all jumping as they took in his looming presence.

How he had sneaked up on them all was a mystery but Hermione was pleased to see him despite the pounding of her heart at his surprise entry. His words sank in and she exchanged an incredulous look with Harry and Ron who both looked as shocked as she felt at Snape's rebuke of Pansy, a Slytherin.

"Professor Snape!" Pansy squeaked out. "Sir, I don't think…"

"That much is apparent, Miss Parkinson," Snape sneered fiercely, "and it is entirely unacceptable in a Slytherin. The punishment will stand.” His dark eyes roamed over the corridor and landed on Harry's hand holding Hermione's.

Hermione shifted nervously for some kind of derisive comment but Snape turned, unlocked the Potions lab with a wave of his wand, and stormed inside the room. The waiting students all hurried in after him and Harry let go of her hand as they took their usual places.

Hermione regretted the loss but she focused her mind on the potion and bundled her worries and delight about her relationship with Harry to the back of her mind.

Time moved slowly in the tense Potions lab with only the occasional sound of a beaker clinking against a cauldron or the grinding of ingredients. Snape stared impassively at the students from the front of the lab.

Hermione stirred her mixture clockwise three times and was satisfied when it turned a vibrant blue. It was almost ready for the pickled newts eyes and then…

Pansy screamed.

Hermione's head whipped round to look at the Slytherin girl's bench and went wide with horror at the pink bubbling cloud that streamed out of the cauldron and engulfed Pansy. If it came near to anyone else…

"Arrestus!" Harry snapped out.

The cauldron and pink cloud stopped as though someone had hit a pause button on a TV show. It was a potions time spell that the tutor they'd had in the Summer had taught them, Hermione realised absently as she breathed out in relief. Usually it was used to hold the potion at a perfect moment if there was a delay in getting an ingredient but it worked just as well as a stop-gap emergency measure.

Milicent, who had taken a large step back from her own cauldron, looked up at Harry, stunned. "Where's…where's your wand, Potter?"
A bright red Harry lowered his empty hand.

"Eyes back on your own potions!" Snape snapped, swooping over to banish the cauldron and dispel the cloud which released an unconscious Pansy in a thump to the floor. "Bulstrode, take Parkinson to the infirmary!"

Milicent's eyes flickered to Draco in front of her but he paid her no attention.

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she tuned out Snape's verbal disembowelling of Dean over his knife work. She could well believe that Draco was responsible. He'd thrown stuff into Harry's and Neville's cauldrons enough times for her to know he was capable of it. It was unlikely he'd done it as revenge for Pansy prattling to Skeeter though. Hermione figured he'd done it more out of his own irritation with his former sycophant.

She carefully added the pickled newt eyes, stirred five times anti-clockwise and sniffed at the smell of apples wafting up from the potion as it shifted from vibrant blue to green.

"Your time is up!" Snape stated brusquely. "Bottle your potions and submit them for marking!"

Hermione quickly ladled her potion into a vial already neatly labelled. She stoppered it and placed it carefully on Snape's bench, sneaking a look at Harry's potion (a slightly paler green than hers which meant he'd added just a tad too little of the newt eyes) and Ron's (a dark blue which meant he had been too slow at getting the newt eyes in and possibly had stirred too much before he'd added them).

The clean-up was perfunctory and within moments the Gryffindor and Slytherin fourth years were spilling out into the corridor and on their way to Runes. Hermione reached for Harry's hand again and they exchanged pleased glances.

She would, Hermione thought wistfully, be very open to doing more than holding hands. Her mind drifted back to The Moment (as she had labelled it in her own head) in the classroom when she had thought he was going to kiss her, when she had wanted him to kiss her and…and instead they'd been interrupted by the Headmaster. She tried not to blush again.

There really hadn't been an opportunity to kiss since.

Both she and Harry had spent the previous day surrounded by other people, namely Ron, and there had been no privacy to sneak a kiss. And Hermione hadn't wanted to sneak a kiss. She wanted her first kiss with anyone, let alone Harry, to be special. She thought Harry felt the same and that was why he hadn't pressed her or tried to get her alone beyond wanting to keep his promise to Ron to make things easy for him. She hoped he wanted to kiss her as much as she wanted to kiss him.

Runes was always enjoyable. The fourth years had tucked into the back in their own small group from the fifth years. Hermione took her usual seat by Daphne as Harry slid in beside Anthony.

"And Rita thought you're both joined at the hip." Daphne's amused whisper had Hermione smiling as they settled into the work.

The four of them chatted about their latest Runes assignment all the way to lunch where Hermione had to stop holding hands with Harry in order to eat but she took solace in the fact that Harry was actually at the meal. She understood Sirius's dictate that Harry have breakfast and dinner in their rooms but she missed him and his conversation. Neville and Ron slid into seats beside them with a thump.

"I tell you Trelawney gets more mental every lesson." Ron complained, reaching for the platter of battered fish.
Hermione gave him a disapproving frown for not choosing the healthier options. "What was she predicting now?"

"Probably my death still." Harry muttered beside her. He pushed a chip through a puddle of ketchup.

"No, she went dizzy over some incense thing she lit and started babbling about…" Ron paused in scooping another mountain of chips onto his plate. "What was she babbling about?"

Neville swallowed the forkful of shepherd's pie he'd picked up. "Something to do with bugs?"

"She's completely buggy if you ask me." Ron dived into his food with gusto.

Neville nodded. "She was very loopy today."

"I don't know how you stand that subject." Hermione admitted. "Mind you, Luna is very complimentary about Firenze."

"Centaurs are renowned for their divination prowess." Neville agreed. "I wish he was teaching us."

"Hmnfph." Ron waved his fork expressively.

They all stared at him.

He swallowed. "Me too."

"Where are Lavender and Parvati?" asked Hermione. The two girls loved Trelawney. She didn't think Lavender's crush on Ron would have prevented her from defending her favourite teacher.

"They stayed back to comfort Trelawney." Neville explained. He nudged Harry. "What are you doing this afternoon while we're in Charms?"

Harry grinned at him. "I'm going over to Hagrid's. He's giving me a special tutorial on magical creatures."

"Well, if you survive that, the first task will be a breeze." Neville said with an answering grin.

"Luckily he can't give you a practical in some of the more dangerous creatures." Hermione said with relief because as much as she loved Hagrid, Merlin knew he had a complete lack of clarity about the danger some of the creatures posed.

Harry waved a chip at her in agreement.

"What are you doing in Charms tonight with Professor Flitwick?" Hermione changed the subject, partially because she wanted Harry to have a lunch without talking about the tournament and partially because she was dying to know what his individual lessons were like.

"Advanced Summoning Charms." Harry said with a shrug. "We covered the basic theory with the power versus magical will essay, remember? And in the Summer I managed the basic charm which you guys are doing soon, so he thinks I'll understand enough to be able to do the practical."

"I wish we were doing advanced summoning charms." Hermione mused wistfully.

"We don't have enough power though for the more serious ones, do we?" Neville argued. "I mean, according to the theories that we had to read for that essay?"

"Exactly." Hermione nodded. "Our magical power isn't mature enough. Harry's an exception."
"That's me." Harry muttered. "Although the theory is that my power is still maturing."

"Don't take this the wrong way," Neville said, "but that's quite scary."

Hermione was about to say something reassuring when Ron groaned dramatically.

"This is a load of bollocks!" Ron said loudly.

The three of them turned to look at him.

He waved a stained piece of parchment at them. "Charlie's letter. It's complete bollocks. He goes on about how he's back in the country to work but can't say on what because it's all very secret and he'll see me on the twenty-fourth although he seems more worried about telling Harry." He slapped the letter down on the table and stared at Harry suddenly pale. "You don't think...maybe, maybe Charlie has a crush on you?"

Harry's eyes widened with alarm.

A suspicion gathered in Hermione's head and she grabbed the letter, sketching a privacy bubble around the four of them.

"Oy!" Ron spluttered.

"Ron," Hermione read out loud, "just wanted to tell you and Harry – Harry is underlined – that I was back for a while for work – work is also underlined. Can't say much more about it because of all the secrecy around this particular event but suffice to say I'll see you on the twenty-fourth. Don't forget to tell Harry. Charlie."

Harry's fork clanged as he dropped it on his plate and Hermione knew that he'd reached the same conclusion she had.

"Oh Merlin!" Ron lowered his head into his hands. "He does have a crush on Harry! As if it isn't bad enough Ginny being nuts about him!"

Neville choked on his shepherd's pie.

Hermione lowered the letter and looked at Ron pityingly. "Charlie doesn't have a crush on Harry."

"Hermione, I know Harry's your boyfriend now and you don't want to think it, but you can't deny that it looks bad." Ron said, raising his head to look at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and waved the letter at him. "He's trying to tell us something, you idiot!"

"What?" demanded Ron crossly, folding his arms over his chest and glaring at her.

"Dragons." Harry managed to get the word out past pale lips and Hermione couldn't blame him; it was utterly horrifying. "He's trying to tell us he'll be here for work on the twenty-fourth for the first task. It's dragons."

"Blimey." Ron said, going white under his freckles.

Neville pushed away the remainder of his lunch. "They wouldn't seriously think about using dragons, would they?"

"They've been used before." Hermione said with a lump in her throat, sliding her hand towards
Harry.

Harry tangled their fingers together on top of the table.

"Are you sure he just doesn't have a crush on Harry?" Ron asked pleadingly.

"I guess I know what Hagrid should test me on this afternoon then." Harry said, ignoring Ron.

Hermione frowned, because – yes, it was good in one way to know but if they knew… "Isn't this cheating?"

"It's not exactly against the rules." Harry said defensively. "The teachers and Headmasters can't tell the Champions the specifics of the tasks, but there's nothing that explicitly states that someone neutral can't find out and inform the Champions." He sighed. "I think Viktor knows?"

"You do?"

"He does?"

Ron and Neville spoke at the same time.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Actually, I think he was trying to give me the hint in our last Quidditch practice. He asked me if I'd ever seen a dragon before." He pulled a face that clearly said 'I'm an idiot.' "I thought he'd heard a rumour about that whole thing with Norbert so told him the story."

"I might have known Karkaroff would find a way around the rules." Ron snorted in disgust.

"It's not fair on Fleur or Cedric though, is it?" Hermione pointed out.

"That depends on how you view the competition." Neville said, recovering his appetite enough to reach for a slice of apple pie since the desserts had appeared. "You could take the view that information is intelligence, and an advantage."

Harry hummed. "I want a fair competition though and while I know Charlie dropping a big enough hint in a letter to Ron for me to get it isn't cheating per se…"

"It still feels like you got the information unfairly." Neville poured enough custard into his bowl to drown the pie.

"Maybe that's why Viktor tried to tell me too." Harry mused, untangling their hands as he helped himself to treacle tart. "Maybe he thought it wasn't entirely fair the way he found out and tried to tell the other Champions."

Hermione eschewed the desserts and picked up a bunch of grapes to snack on. "So what do you want to do?"

Harry sighed and swallowed some tart. "I think I'm going to talk to Viktor and see if he's actually told Fleur and Cedric already. If he has then…well, I don't need to do anything. But if he hasn't…" his lips firmed, "I'll tell them."

"I'm not sure Diggory will believe you." Ron said baldly, tucking into an enormous slice of cake.

"It doesn't matter if he does or he doesn't," Harry replied, "I'll know I did the right thing and tried to tell him."

Neville motioned with his spoon in agreement.
Hermione beamed her own approval at Harry. "So, I'll pull together everything about dragons and we'll go over it tonight after your lesson with Professor Flitwick?"

Harry agreed and changed the subject to Neville's on-going relationship with Hannah. Hermione couldn't blame him.

Dragons.

Who had thought that was a good idea, Hermione thought worriedly. Had they been part of the task before Voldemort had been given the chance to change the parameters or had he added them?

It was a thought that stayed with her after Harry had escorted her to Charms before leaving for his own lesson with Hagrid. It distracted her all through the lesson and it was a relief when the session ended. She had Arithmancy to get to and she waved a goodbye to Ron and Neville outside the classroom before heading in the opposite direction.

She'd barely got to the bottom of the staircase she needed when she heard the shout of a spell above her. She ducked but not quick enough and the spell caught her full in the face sending her sprawling backwards.

"Granger!" Daphne hurried over to her and helped her sit up as a small crowd gathered around.

"Did you see who did it?" Lisa Turpin asked.

"It came from above." Somebody else murmured. "I saw the spell light come down the stairs."

Hermione shook her head and went to answer but a strange sensation stopped her. Her hand flew to her mouth where her front teeth were growing rapidly like she was some kind of demented chipmunk. She looked at Daphne with horror.

"Infirmary." Daphne said briskly. "Come on." She pulled Hermione to her feet and supported her as her teeth continued to grow. She all but hustled Hermione into the ward and yelled for the nurse.

Hermione barely took in the sight of Pansy still out cold in one of the infirmary beds as Madame Pomfrey appeared from her office and pointed her wand straight at Hermione. Her teeth stopped growing and Hermione breathed out a small sigh of relief.

"Nasty spell that." Madame Pomfrey said. "But we'll have you fixed in a jiffy." She handed Hermione a mirror. "Just wave when you want me to stop."

Hermione saw her front teeth receding and she felt her chest seize at the realisation that she could fix her teeth. Ever since she'd grown her front teeth she'd always thought they were slightly over large despite her parents' assurance that they were fine. They weren't fine and Hermione couldn't resist the temptation to let Pomfrey continue a moment longer than she needed to, ensuring her teeth looked perfect.

"Good, good." Pomfrey did another diagnostic spell. "You've had a bit of a shock so you're excused from lessons for the rest of the day. Go back to your dorm and rest. I'll inform Professor McGonagall." She looked at Daphne suspiciously.

"Daphne wasn't responsible," Hermione said quickly, "she helped me."

"Ten points to Slytherin then." Madame Pomfrey said with a sniff. "Off you both go."

"Thank you." Hermione said to Daphne as they got out of the infirmary, but frowned when she fell
into step beside her. "You don't have to walk me to the tower, you're going to be late for Arithmancy as it is."

Daphne made a dismissive clucking sound. "Potter would have my head if you weren't escorted after being attacked."

"Oh Lord." Hermione murmured with dismay. Harry was going to go nuts and…and would he reconsider them going out? She hoped not. She really hoped not. Maybe she'd have to convince him she was fine being a target; that she'd known she'd be a target agreeing to go out with him. And there was no harm done – in fact her teeth looked better than ever.

They were barely half way there when Ron and Neville barrelled around the corner and almost ran into them.

"Hermione!" Ron threw himself at her and hugged her.

"Oomph!" Hermione patted his back awkwardly. "I'm fine, Ron."

Ron swiftly shifted back and nodded. "What happened? Katie Bell said you'd been attacked on the stairs and…"

"Teeth growing spell." Daphne interrupted him sharply. "Malicious and nasty but not dangerous. Pomfrey said she's to rest up."

Neville nodded at her. "You should get to class. We'll take her from here."

Daphne brushed her hair off her face and nodded at Hermione. "See me tomorrow for the homework assignment, Granger."

"Thanks again." Hermione said. She hated to admit it but she did feel safer as Ron and Neville flanked her, Ron taking her bag over her protests that she could carry it.

"Do you have any idea who did it?" Neville asked, his entire being radiating concern.

"No," Hermione sighed heavily, "I was at the foot of the stairs, I heard a yell," she paused considering her memory for a moment, "I think it was female? Then, the spell hit me in the face and that was that."

"Well, it's not like there's a shortage of suspects." Ron stated authoritatively. "Between the Slytherins who are trying to impress You-Know-Who, Diggory's supporters, and Harry's fangirls who probably hate you…" he made a flapping gesture, "who'd you pick first?"

Hermione grimaced but she knew he was right. She felt lighter as they got to the safety of the tower. She took back her book bag in the Common Room.

"Can you find Harry and tell him before he hears it from someone else?" She pleaded. "And tell him I'm fine and I'm not changing my mind about dating him."

Neville nodded. "I think he's still at Hagrid's."

"I'll check there," Ron suggested, pushing his sleeves up his arms, "you check his and Sirius's rooms. If Harry isn't there, you can always tell Sirius."

Neville agreed and Hermione made for her dorm as they clambered back out of the portrait hole. She hated to admit it but she was feeling a bit shaky and looking forward to curling up in bed with a book
for an hour before dinner to regain her equilibrium. She slowed as she entered the dorm at the tableau in front of her.

Lavender and Parvati sat on Hermione's bed, a teary Ginny between them.

"What's going on?" asked Hermione, a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Lavender looked up, her pretty face completely serious as she smoothed Ginny's hair away from her tear-stained and blotchy face. "Ginny has something to tell you."

And she so had the feeling that she didn't want to hear what Ginny had to say, Hermione thought with weary gloom.

"It wasn't me!" Ginny said immediately, swiping at her face.

But Ginny knew who it was, Hermione realised. She sat down and motioned at Ron's sister. "Start talking, Ginny."

o-O-o

19th November 1994

Cedric threw the newspaper across the dorm and buried his face in his hands.

He heard Mike (his closest friend and confidante) usher out the other three sixth year male Hufflepuffs and close the door. There was a rustle as Mike picked up the paper and read the offending article.

It was another piece by Skeeter about Potter, although most of it was about the attack on Hermione Granger on the Tuesday before which had led to Lydia Inglebee and Ginny Weasley being given a month's worth of detentions, and the expulsion of Jessica Philpott who had been the one to cast the spell injuring Granger. Skeeter was malicious, calling Potter and Granger's new relationship fragile while questioning why the House of Black had requested the full punishment under the new Hogwarts' Anti-Bullying policy when the damage to Granger wasn't permanent and had been easily fixed. Personally, Cedric believed that if he had been in Lord Black's shoes he would have done exactly the same. If people thought they could get away with shooting nasty spells at Potter or Granger... well, some idiots would do it. This way everyone knew that the House of Black wouldn't stand for any kind of attack.

Cedric sighed as he lowered his hands and flopped back on his bed. What had upset him was his view was diametrically the opposite to the view that his father had expressed to Skeeter and which she had included in the article as a quote from the distinguished father of the Hogwarts' Champion.

Would anyone blame him if he killed his Dad? Surely by now he had grounds for justifiable homicide.

Mike sighed heavily, dropped the paper and sat on the bed next to him, patting his knee in an absent-minded but comforting gesture. "You need to talk with your Dad, Ced."

"I've sent him three letters begging him to stop talking to the press," Cedric said tersely. He wafted his hand in the general direction of where Mike had thrown the paper. "You see how much notice he takes of me. He doesn't care how it makes me feel."

His father hadn't replied to any of the letters either. He hadn't written to Cedric since his first letter telling Cedric he was proud of him for being chosen, and instructing him to seek out information on
magical creatures such as dragons for the first task since the tournament always began with a task focused on them.

Cedric had ended up writing to his mother about his father's indiscreet public comments, and she had sent a disheartening reply back confirming that she had tried to talk to his father too, but that he was set on trying to get Cedric as much publicity as Potter; that it wasn't all about Cedric either because there was politics involved with the magical creature laws under review.

Cedric rubbed his head tiredly. He was damned fed up with being in the middle of his father's political machinations and trying to maintain some kind of neutrality in his dealings with Harry.

He liked Harry. There was something infinitesimally likeable about him. Harry had had no airs or graces when he'd just been 'The Boy Who Lived' and even after he'd found about being Lord Potter, while he'd acquired polish in some of his mannerisms, there were still no airs or graces in sight. And Merlin knew if anyone had earned the right to feel a touch superior with everything that had been said to have happened the last three years, it was Harry. It had felt right standing beside him on Halloween, supporting him. It had been clear that night that Harry had been scared at being entered into the tournament but he'd also been incredibly brave in accepting the binding in order to ensure the safety of the other Champions.

Cedric owed him.

And it felt wrong to drop his visible support and keep his silence because he didn't want to disagree with his father publicly, knew his father would be mad at him if he did disagree with him publicly.

Admittedly, Cedric acknowledged with a flush of shame, he had been annoyed the first day after the draw. The newspapers had focused so much on Harry's inclusion, it had been difficult not to feel slighted. He hadn't entered the competition for the publicity and glory but it was hard not to take offense at his being chosen as a Champion being treated like a footnote in the bigger story of Harry's inclusion. He'd even been proud on the second day when the paper had included a quote from his Dad saying the tournament wasn't about Harry but all the Champions. But after that…

He really didn't know why his Dad had gotten so mean in his commentary. It was one thing to point out there were other Champions, another thing entirely to suggest Harry was some kind of attention seeking nut job who wouldn't last a minute compared to the other Champions and specifically Cedric.

Cedric had been horrified. And then guilty that his own small irritation that the publicity focus was solely on Harry might have encouraged his Dad somehow. And then even more horrified when some of his supporters at Hogwarts had picked up on his Dad's comments and run with them, but stuck because how could he say that he disagreed with his Dad?

Oh, he had eventually requested that people stop bad mouthing Harry – and the discussion with Robert Ogden that had prompted his having to make that request was one of the more embarrassing moments Cedric had ever had – but he hadn't done anything else. He'd retreated, hoping that ignoring Harry would somehow make the whole problem go away.

But it hadn't and it wasn't going to go away.

"You need to do something, Ced, because you're coming off the bad guy here." Mike said quietly. "Potter's camp has been solid in supporting him but being real respectful to you, Krum and the French bird. The more your Dad denigrates him and you don't say anything…"

"I know!" Cedric cut in, lurching upwards. "I know, alright? But it's not that easy! I can't give
disagree with my Dad without it hurting him politically and ruining my relationship with him." He sighed heavily. "Bugger! I only entered to make him happy!"

He hadn't wanted to enter. He'd have preferred to have remained on the Quidditch team since he'd vaguely thought he'd try out for some teams after school. Being a Tri-Wizard Champion would open doors for him but not if he came across looking like a pillock.

Mike patted his shoulder awkwardly. "Look, I know it blows, but…you don't have to do an interview or something like that just…stop ignoring Potter. Go and talk with him. Tell him the truth that your Dad's views are his views and not yours. I'm sure he'll get it."

Cedric grimaced but he couldn't argue with the advice. He couldn't continue with his current 'try to ignore it and hope it all goes away' plan since it wasn't working. "You're not wrong."

Mike gestured at him. "You want some company?"

"No." Cedric clapped a hand over Mike's shoulder. "Thanks." He grabbed his broom and his outer cloak and was out of the Hufflepuff den before anyone could catch him. He made straight for the Quidditch pitch.

It was thankfully empty. The first three games had been played ahead of the tournament and the rest wouldn't get played until after the New Year. The weather was getting too bad for play – rain and wind making playing conditions dicey. It wasn't exactly good weather conditions for flying either. But there was a break in the rain and the wind was down to a brisk breeze.

Cedric mounted the broom and kicked off. A couple of circuits of the pitch had him warmed up and he started going through the Seeker drills that he'd always done, letting the familiarity of the shifts and turns, dips and dives blank his mind as he focused on nothing but the flight.

By the time an hour had passed, Cedric was feeling much better. His shoulders felt lighter; he could breathe. He drifted down to earth and landed with a sense of disappointment that he couldn't stay in the air.

Stupid tournament, Cedric thought morosely. He should spend the rest of the afternoon reading up on magical creatures since his and Mike's research had backed up his father's suggestion. He planned to spend the next day practicing any spells and he had plenty of volunteers for helping with that. Alright then, he determined; shower in the Prefects' Bath and then reading for the rest of the afternoon.

He grabbed his broom and started to make his way towards the castle.

"Psst!"

The sound had him whirling around to stare at what looked like empty space beside him. Suddenly the air rippled and Harry peeked out of an…an invisibility cloak!

Cedric's eyes widened.

Harry raised a finger to his lips and motioned at the Quidditch stands before covering up again. For a second, Cedric thought about going in the opposite direction but Harry had made an effort to seek him out and…and Cedric wasn't going to refuse the olive branch he should have made and offered himself. He walked over briskly, and was pleased when Harry uncovered a hand so he could follow it under the Ravenclaw stand and into the shadows. He watched as Harry whisked off the cloak.
"I'll put up a notice-me-not and a couple of other spells to encourage people to leave us alone, if that's OK with you?" Harry asked cautiously.

Cedric nodded.

Harry went to work and Cedric fidgeted while he absently noted that Harry's spell-work was quick, efficient and effective. But alone with Harry up close, he was reminded again of how young Harry was, and he started to feel like a heel all over again.

"Sorry about the subterfuge," Harry said, finally stopping and coming to stand in front of him, "but I've been trying to talk to you for a couple of days now and…and, well…you're rarely alone."

Cedric cleared his throat. "I should be the one apologising and the one seeking you out." He sighed. "My Dad is…" he struggled to find the words and in the end opted for the blunt truth, "I don't agree with him but he's my Dad."

There was a plea for understanding and Harry must have heard it because he nodded.

"You don't have to explain, Cedric," Harry said seriously, "I get it, and I know some of your Dad's game plan with the publicity has more to do with the political agenda than you and I competing in this tournament. Sirius understands that too."

Cedric pushed a hand through his hair.

"Look, I said I understand and I do." Harry fiddled with the edge of his cloak. "I even agree with your Dad kind of that it's not that fair on you when you were expecting the whole school to be behind you to have some of your support pointed in my direction instead." He pressed his lips together. "Sirius and I were talking the other day and…we talked about the fact that neither of us really considered just doing the minimum for the tournament and just letting you guys play for the win. But we both concluded that we can't for reasons why we decided to play to win in the first place which have nothing to do with you or the other Champions, and have everything to do with…"

"Beating the bad guys who entered you in the first place." Cedric said. "I read the interview you gave and I get it."

And hadn't Harry talked about his other competitors in glowing terms in that interview? Cedric felt a shiver of shame flow through him again and he adjusted his hold on his broom. "I do know it's not your fault that you're in this position." He said apologetically.

Harry flushed.

"And I'm really sorry about the badges." Cedric continued. "I had nothing to do with them but…they were out of line."

Harry's lips twisted. "Yeah, they were a bit much." He pushed his glasses back up his nose. "It'd be nice if you could tell your supporters that you want a fair competition and no name-calling or bashing or…"

"Dirty tactics." Cedric nodded slowly, because he could do that. "A fair game. I like that."

"Great," Harry smiled at him widely, "and speaking of which, it kind of brings me to what I wanted to talk to you about in the first place."

Cedric stilled. "Oh?"
"When I was at Quidditch practice with Viktor he asked me if I'd ever come across a dragon before," Harry explained, "and I thought he was asking me about something that...well, it doesn't matter, but I, um, didn't really pay attention to Viktor until a, um, source heavily hinted to me that the first task is going to be dragons."

Dragons.

And suddenly he could see the letter from his father with the hint about dragons written as though in capitals and red ink. His Dad had tried to tell him, Cedric realised, possibly because his Dad had to have been told about the importing of the dragons into the country as part of his job. He'd completely missed the clue, placing dragons as a minor possibility once he'd done his research on the tournament.

Cedric felt the need to sit down, his knees suddenly weak. He locked his knees to keep upright. "That's…"

"Insane." Harry finished with a nod. "I know. Anyway, I checked with Viktor and he admitted he was hinting to me because he'd found out from someone, and he has tried to get you alone to hint to you too but...like I said, it's been difficult, so I said I'd try and tell you too."

Cedric frowned. "Why?" The other two would have had a massive advantage if they'd kept the information to themselves.

Harry's cheeks went red. "Well, even though neither Viktor or I got told in a way that the rules don't allow...we both want a fair game." He gestured at Cedric. "And besides the tasks were made more dangerous because I was entered and if I can help keep everyone alive..."

That made sense, Cedric mused, taking in Harry's evident guilt about it despite it not being his fault. Crouch Junior had a lot to answer for.

"So Fleur knows?" asked Cedric. He got on well with the Veela from Beauxbatons. She'd come and sat next to him in the library on a couple of occasions and…and he suddenly realised why she'd so prominently placed a book on dragons down beside him the other day.

"Apparently she got Viktor's hint straight away." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Yeah," Cedric murmured, "I think she tried telling me too but I didn't take the hint." He decided not to say anything about his Dad; that situation was complicated enough without adding to it.

"At least you know now, right?" Harry said encouragingly.

"Right." Cedric agreed faintly, because it was better to know than to have been surprised with it on the day of the task. "Merlin! Dragons!"

Harry nodded sympathetically. He cast a look out toward the castle. "I should get back before Sirius starts to think I've been kidnapped or something."

Cedric took a deep breath. "Why don't we walk back together? Maybe it'll help squash some of the...you know."

Harry's face lit up and he hurriedly bundled his invisibility cloak to a pocket in his outer wear before he dismantled the spells keeping them hidden. "I watched you for a while flying," he admitted as they made their way out of the stands, "where did you learn those drills you did at the end?"

They talked Quidditch all the way back into the castle and Cedric tried not to feel self-conscious at
the attention they were drawing. He wasn't surprised to see Granger and Weasley waiting for Harry near to the main staircase.

"Hey, why don't you come and join Viktor and me tomorrow? I'll ask Fleur too." Harry invited as he got near to them. "We've got the pitch booked for eleven."

"Sounds good." Cedric said genuinely. "And Harry: thanks."

Harry waved and walked off to join his friend and brand new girlfriend. Cedric shook his head, ignored the staring of the other students and made for Hufflepuff with a spring in his step.

He had some reading to do on dragons.

o-O-o

20th November 1994

Remus dumped his case on the floor of the reception at Black Manor and rubbed the back of his neck tiredly as he wandered through to the library and ostensibly his and Penny's office.

"You look exhausted." Penny commented as he entered. "Sit! I'll go and make you some tea."

Remus frowned. "Where's Kreacher?"

"Out looking for the Crouch elf." Bill raised the book he held in greeting. He sat in one of the comfortable chairs tucked in front of Penny's desk. "Hi."

"Hi." Remus responded automatically and sighed when he realised his exchange with Bill had allowed Penny slip out to make tea.

Which he actually would appreciate so maybe he wouldn't complain but simply say a grateful thank you.

"I didn't realise you had another trip overseas planned." Bill said, lowering his book.

"Sirius sent me to Romania." Remus said succinctly. He grimaced and motioned weakly with his hand as he slumped into his own chair with a sigh. "Actually, I volunteered."

Bill's eyes brightened suddenly as he made the connection. "The dragon reserve where Charlie usually works? You were checking which dragons are missing."

"Got it in one." Remus said. "We didn't want to put Charlie in a difficult position by questioning him further. It was good of him to send a hint through Ron as it was."

"That's Charlie for you." Bill said with brotherly fondness. Charlie was brilliant about putting himself on the line like that. "So, any empty pens?"

"As far as I can make out from questioning the tour staff as we went round the different habitats, there are four types missing a dragon." Remus said with satisfaction. He'd had to be incredibly sneaky in his questioning but he hadn't been a Marauder for nothing. "A Chinese Fireball, a Hungarian Horntail, a Swedish Short Snout and a Welsh Green."

Bill blinked. "Buggeration. They're not exactly holding back on the danger then."

"The Horntail's the worst." Remus said thoughtfully. "It has a lot of extra issues given the spiked tail and just generally the temperament. The Chinese Fireball has a spiked necklace though which could
be bad… out of all of them I hope Harry faces the Welsh Green. It's a docile breed and fairly lethargic
in its movements." He grimaced. "Knowing Harry's luck, he'll probably get the Horntail."

Penny entered with a large tea-tray. "I brought some for you too, Bill."

"Thanks, Penny." Bill leaped up to help her clear a space on her desk.

Penny played Mum and poured the tea, adding milk and sugar to taste. She passed Remus his mug
straight away and he wrapped his hands around it with a sigh.

"Marry me, Penny." Remus joked.

Penny laughed. "You only want me for my tea-making abilities."

"That's not true!" Remus rejoined. "You're brilliant at indexing too!"

Penny laughed again but subsided with a heartfelt sigh. "I don't think I'll be marrying anyone any
time soon."

Bill winced and blew on his tea. "Percy will come round."

"He was fairly explicit in telling me we were over, Bill." Penny said sadly.

Remus sent Bill a look asking if that was true and Bill gave an awkward nod.

"I'm sorry, Penny," Remus said compassionately, "I didn't realise you'd broken up." Although he
wasn't surprised that Percy was pushing people away in the aftermath of what happened.

Penny nodded, pale but determined looking. "I haven't been telling anyone because I was getting
used to the idea and…" she tapped her mug and made a half-shrug, "I still thought I would be able to
convince him it was a mistake."

"It is a mistake." Bill said firmly. "He's making a lot of decisions now that he wouldn't make if he
was thinking straight."

"Maybe, but as my friend Julie said, maybe he does need the space to deal with what he's going
through." Penny replied just as firmly. "I would prefer to still be his girlfriend and be there to support
him but if he needs space… well, I'm going to give it to him."

There was a resoluteness to her tone that evidently warned Bill off arguing since the eldest Weasley
sibling nodded instead.

"Maybe space is what he needs." Bill sighed. "Merlin knows nothing else seems to be working."

"Sirius told me Percy resigned from the Ministry." Remus said slowly. He wasn't sure Sirius's plan of
employing Percy was a good one as well-intentioned as it was. He liked Percy but Percy needed to
gain some maturity and perhaps the lessons he was faced with learning in the fallout of Crouch
Junior's impersonation of Crouch Senior would help him to do that.

"Hatter accepted immediately." Bill said. "I think that was one of the things that has Percy so upset.
He worked hard in his job and he was good at it. He had a lot of plans and ambitions tied up with the
Ministry so his entire career plan has just combusted. It's a lot to take in."

And there was the obvious issue of Percy having to deal with the knowledge that he'd worked
alongside the enemy for so many months – had in fact helped the enemy.
"It doesn't sound like he's coping well." Remus murmured.

Bill sipped his drink. "He's pushing people away. He barely speaks to my Dad or me; hasn't sent a letter to Charlie or the twins or Ron or Ginny even after that mess with Jessica Philpott. He's in his room all day, crawls out for meals that Mum makes him, and that's it." He tipped his head in Penny's direction. "We were all disappointed when he told us he'd broken up with Penny but he won't talk about it."

"He's definitely hurting." Penny agreed with a soft sigh. "I think he's pushing people away because he blames himself for everyone getting hurt at the World Cup but…" she gave a helpless shrug. "It's hard to help someone who doesn't want to be helped."

It sounded like Percy was drowning in self-recrimination.

Remus nodded. He'd have to talk with Sirius and tell him the steward's assistant thing was a no-go until Percy got his act together himself. They wouldn't do him any favours rescuing him from his own mess.

"How was Romania?" asked Penny, changing the subject in an obvious way that indicated she'd had enough of talking about her ex-boyfriend.

Remus filled her in on his success. "I've already told Sirius the news over the mirror so he can help specialise Harry's preparation over the next couple of days; create a strategy for each dragon."

"Is he going to tell the other Champions about which types will be included in the task?" Penny asked.

"I don't know but I suspect Harry will tell them." Remus said.

Penny pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "Sirius mentioned that Harry was determined to make it a fair fight and I guess that means they all have the same information."

"I got the impression from talking to Harry that he wants to make sure that they all come out alive." Bill commented quietly. "He's aware that the tasks were made more dangerous by Voldemort because of him so…"

That sounded like Harry, Remus mused. He'd have to tell Sirius but he doubted that Sirius wasn't already aware. He was just very pleased that Sirius was on site for Harry. If Harry had had to go through the whole thing alone…he shuddered.

Thank Merlin Cedric Diggory had finally found some backbone and made a gesture of friendship towards Harry. Hopefully it would stop the worst of some of the comments that he'd had to suffer since his return to Hogwarts.

"You should have seen them this morning though, Remus. All four Champions had a practice Quidditch session." Bill commented wryly. "Totally confounded the press who ended up watching."

"Well, one of the aims of the competition is to promote intra-school relationships." Remus said dryly.

"That's what Fleur said when they got questioned."

Remus's eyes narrowed at the red slashes of colour across Bill's cheeks. "Fleur, huh?"

Penny smiled teasingly at Bill and Bill rolled his eyes.
"She's seventeen and still at school." Bill said. "But yes, she's a good looking girl and we've run across each other a few times since Halloween."

"Isn't she a Veela?" Remus asked out loud.

"Quarter, I think." Bill said casually as though to convey there was nothing unusual in his knowing such a specific piece of information.

"More likely she's tracking you down and bumping into you accidentally." Penny said dryly.

"Caro might have said the same thing." Bill muttered, hiding his face in his mug.

Remus took a gulp of his tea. "I thought you were still seeing Alicia?"

"I am," Bill said, "which is why there's nothing happening with Fleur, and even if I wasn't seeing Alicia, there wouldn't be anything happening with Fleur because she's too young for me."

Penny raised an eyebrow. "It sounds to me like she has a bit of a crush though."

"Well, if she tries anything more than 'bumping into me,' I'll let her down easy," Bill said with a touch of exasperation, "but in the meantime there's no harm."

"Talking of crushes..." Penny smirked and handed Remus a letter.

Remus took it gingerly since it was purple parchment. He grimaced as he opened the missive and then went bright red at the lewd suggestion written down.

"Wow," Bill said, "that must be some letter."

Remus carefully folded it.

Penny grinned at him. "Tonks was most insistent you receive it as soon as you got back."

"Bloody Padfoot!" Remus muttered and waved the letter. "This is his fault!"

They both looked at him questioningly.

"You both know Harry is now dating Hermione?" Remus began.

Bill raised his eyebrows. "I think the whole world knows Harry is dating Hermione, Remus, it's been front page news for the last week."

"Yes, well, at the family dinner, Andy took Harry's new romance to mean that it was time for Sirius to start considering his own love life." Remus explained. "Sirius, in an attempt to divert her match-making attention from himself, declared that I was looking for someone."

Penny burst into giggles.

Remus tried to glare at her and failed.

"Are you looking for someone?" asked Bill, amusement shining out of his freckled face.

Remus clutched his mug tighter. "No, not really? I just...I ran into an old flame when we first went to Paris and I might have, in a momentary moment of weakness, mentioned to Sirius that it would be nice to be with someone." Which it would.
"So Tonks…"

"Isn't serious." Remus stated firmly. She had teased him after the dinner and the letter was probably a continuation of that. "It's a joke." It had to be. There was no way a feisty young woman like Tonks would be interested in an old wolf like him.

"Are you sure?" Penny asked, wiping away tears of laughter. "Because I have to say, she looked pretty serious when she dropped the letter off." She waggled her eyebrows.

Remus blushed and cursed himself for blushing.

"Tonks is straight-forward. You should just ask her," Bill advised, draining his mug and setting it back on the tray.

"Even if she is serious," Remus countered, "she isn't someone I would date."

Bill and Penny both looked at him with varying expressions of surprise.

"Why ever not?" asked Penny finding her voice first.

"Tonks is great." Bill added, clearly gearing up to defend his friend.

"Yes, she is," Remus said quickly, "she's smart and funny and very charming in her own way," he continued, "but, setting aside that she's also a great deal younger than I am, she's also a member of the Ancient and Noble House that I work for which makes any relationship beyond friendship a tad inappropriate and risky."

Penny's confusion cleared. "I can understand that. If things go badly…I doubt Sirius would fire you or anything but it would make things awkward, wouldn't it?"

"I guess I understand that," Bill subsided back into his chair, "but I should warn you that Tonks isn't the type to give up all that easily."

"How's the search going at Hogwarts?" Remus asked, deciding a change of subject was definitely in order.

Bill sent him another amused look at his avoidance of talking more about Tonks. "Badly. We've covered a good part of the route we think Riddle must have taken to the Headmaster's office for his DADA interview but there's nothing so far." He grimaced. "Honestly, we could look for years and find nothing. Hogwarts is a strange building."

Remus sighed and rubbed his brow, considering the problem. "Maybe we should ask the portraits or the ghosts if they saw something or where they would hide something?"

"That's not a bad idea although I'm not sure how helpful it would be in truth. We could just end up expanding the possible list of places to search." Bill said, turning it over in his head. "At least it gives us a second plan of attack beyond widening the search pattern if we don't find anything on the route. I'll talk to Caro; see what she thinks." He sighed. "You heard Lawrence has been admitted to Saint Mungo's?"

Remus nodded sadly. The former member of the treasure team had been cursed when he'd put on the Gaunt ring trying to get to the Resurrection stone to speak with his dead daughter. He had been steadily declining in health ever since and nothing they had done with the exception of a potion Severus had created had helped. Eventually Lawrence had stopped taking the potion though, accepting his fate.
Remus let them lapse into silence as he savoured the tea and worried over how to tell Tonks to back off without it making things awkward.

"How's it going at the chateau?" Bill's question dragged Remus's attention back to the library.

"There are eleven werewolves there now." Remus said slowly, organising his thoughts. "Ten of them are from Fenrir's pack, mostly couples but two single male werewolves…and a non-pack werewolf who heard from one of the European packs that I was offering sanctuary."

"That's good, isn't it?" Penny said. "That word is getting out?"

"I don't know." Remus sighed heavily and tried to ignore the beginnings of a headache that always appeared when he thought about being an Alpha and forming a pack. It hadn't been in his plan. He didn't want a pack per se. He wanted the family he'd built with Sirius and Harry over the Summer. But he couldn't deny other werewolves a way out from Fenrir's distorted views of packdom, especially when it served to ensure Fenrir couldn't count on his pack to support Voldemort. Nor could Remus turn away someone like Clara.

Her story was very similar to Remus's – bitten as a child, raised by her parents, and educated by them with the hope she could still have a similar life to the one she would have had without lycanthropy, only for their dream to peter out under the reality of how hard it was for werewolves to find work in the wizarding world. Clara had gone to the continent to seek work. She'd been introduced to the packs but, just like Remus, fundamentally didn't agree that she should identify as a werewolf before she identified as a witch.

"I was a witch first and my parents raised me to be a witch." Clara had said as they'd talked the night she had arrived over a bottle of red wine and some crackers and cheese. "I don't deny the need to belong somewhere but I want…I want people who understand that being a werewolf is only part of who I am, not the sum of me."

It resonated deeply with Remus's own views. And perhaps, Remus mused, he could admit that the thirty-one year old redhead with the sweet smile and warm brown eyes was somewhat attractive. Which was another good reason to meet with Tonks and get things straightened out before she went overboard with her crush or joke…whichever it was that was motivating her pursuit of him.

He belatedly realised Penny and Bill were waiting for him to expand on his last statement.

"I never wanted to build a pack?" Remus offered. "And yet, here I am building a pack." He cast a longing look at the empty mug and Penny plucked it out of his hands to refill it. "I'm also concerned that once it's known, it's going to do damage for Sirius and Harry politically."

Penny poured more tea into his mug and handed it back to him. "Sirius has plans upon plans to deal with the news going public." She reminded him. "You shouldn't worry."

"And yet I do." Remus responded her with a quiet thank you for the second mug.

"Anyone else building a pack and I'd worry," Bill admitted, "but you're you so…that's something, isn't it? And maybe the way to look at it isn't that you're building a pack but creating a sanctuary for other werewolves to be able to live and work in relative peace with the aid of Wolfsbane to help them."

It was the picture Sirius was going to paint with the press eventually; Remus knew that. "It's just not a comfortable position for me." He sighed and took another sip of the too-strong tea. "I guess I should get used to it though. Emile was expecting another five to turn up this week."
"Are you going back out there?" Bill questioned, picking up the book he'd discarded.

"After the first task." Remus said decisively. He had to go back, welcome the newcomers and make sure they understood the rules. Besides, it would be nice to see Clara again, he thought wistfully. He set his tea down and reached for the stack of unopened correspondence on his desk.

Sirius was right in that it was becoming increasingly obvious he needed an assistant, Remus considered tiredly. He definitely needed someone even if it wasn't Percy. Keeping up with the Black and Potter estates and keeping control of the Malfoy finances was a full time job without the extra work of helping Harry with the tournament and establishing the werewolf sanctuary. Maybe the truth was that he didn't have time to have a love life.

And on that depressing note, Remus thought with rueful amusement, he should get back to work. He opened the first letter and smoothed it out.

POP!

Penny screamed as Remus shoved his chair back, his heart stampeding in his chest at the loud noise, his wand already in his hand as was Bill's as they stared at the sight in front of them.

Kreacher.

He was unconscious and he was wrapped around the body of another elf.
The atmosphere in the Hogwarts' infirmary was tense.

Sirius glanced around the gathered group; Remus and Bill stood by one bed, guarding the unconscious elf laid out on the blankets; Dumbledore, Moody and Snape hovered at the end of the beds. He, Harry and Dobby had gathered next to Kreacher's bed where Helen Jordan was conducting a health assessment.

Jordan stepped back from the infirmary bed and sighed, lowering her wand. "I'm not an expert on elves but he's severely exhausted as far as I can tell. He used a lot of his energy to get back to Black Manor and transporting another elf alongside himself."

Dobby tentatively reached out and touched Kreacher. He snatched his hand back and pulled at his ear. "Moved through wards meant to keep all but blood out. Used Winky bound to the blood to fool them."

"Well, that would do it." Jordan said dryly. "I think he'll recover in time."

Dobby nodded enthusiastically.

Sirius guessed that he was confirming Jordan was right.

The doctor walked around the bed and they followed her over to the second elf, a female elf who looked rather too thin and abused.

"She is being Winky." Dobby confirmed. "The Crouch elf."

"I can't believe your elf actually found her, Black." Moody said, his magical eye whirling.

"Kreacher is very resourceful." Sirius admitted, glancing back with no small amount of guilt at the unconscious form of the Black family elf.

Jordan pursed her lips and her wand weaved in a familiar pattern as she conducted the diagnostic. "Hmmm. It's not good news." She said. "I can't say for certain because she's an elf and the assessment is meant for someone human, but it's telling me that she's taken something like a Draught of the Living Death."

"Ah," Dumbledore's expectant face fell, "how unfortunate. We had hoped to be able to question her on the whereabouts of her master."

"You have to admire his smarts." Moody said. "Knew she was a weak point so he took her out of the equation."

"But didn't kill her because the bond provides him with protection from being found by other elves." Remus sighed and whirled away to stare out of the large infirmary windows.

Sirius wondered if the callous treatment of the elf wasn't pressing some of Remus's werewolf buttons. It wasn't as though werewolves were treated any better.

"Poor Winky." Harry murmured. His wide green eyes were moving over the elf's battered body.
Sirius put a hand on Harry's shoulder to comfort him – or maybe himself. He cleared his throat. "Remind me; there's no antidote to the Living Death, is there?"

Snape sneered at him as expected. "If that is what this is. There are a few other draughts that it could cause the same long term catatonic effect. The Dark Lord knows all of them."

"Can you…" Sirius flapped his hand in a motion that he hoped said 'find out which potion it was.'

"Perhaps." Snape said sounding bored. "I would need some of the elf's blood to test and isolate the potion's properties." He met Sirius's gaze derisively. "However, there is no antidote for any of the potential potions."

Sirius raised his own eyebrow. "Then, you'll have to create one, won't you, Snape."

Snape was too much of a Slytherin to gape at him but Remus's muffled snort by the window and Bill's choked cough expressed their view of his outrageous suggestion. And he knew it was outrageous but it was necessary. They needed the antidote and to talk with the elf.

"Just like that?" derided Snape, his voice shifting up two octaves in incredulity.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Sirius said, "you're a Potions Master, Snape, and as much as I think you're a crap teacher, I know just how skilled you are at creating potions. I know you're more than capable of creating an antidote."

"With what supplies?" demanded Snape. "Or are you expecting me to use the school's?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I'll supply you with whatever you need. Just make a list and give it to Remus."

Snape stared at him. "You're serious."

Sirius repressed the urge to be childish and make a name-related pun. "She could be the only way of finding out where Crouch Junior and the rest are hiding, so yes: I'm serious." He held Snape's gaze. "Deadly."

Snape gathered his robes around him. "Very well. I'll work on discovering what potion was used and creating an antidote."

Sirius nodded sharply in acknowledgement. He wasn't going to say thank you. He would rather walk over hot coals.

"Splendid!" Dumbledore clapped his hands and beamed at them both.

Merlin. Sirius repressed the urge to cover his face with his hands at Dumbledore's evident approval at him and Snape working together. He decided ignoring it was the better part of valour and headed back to the prone form of Kreacher.

For all of Kreacher's hard work since Sirius had become Lord Black, Sirius still harboured the memories of the cruelties Kreacher had perpetrated against Sirius as a child. Perhaps his mother had ordered it but Kreacher had been the one to execute the instructions whether denying him food or chaining him into the basement or…

Sirius shook the thought away. Sometimes he wondered if Lily and Hermione hadn't the right of it where elves were concerned. The bond between wizards and elves might keep the elves alive but it was too corruptible. His mother had used Kreacher as a weapon and so had Crouch with Winky –
and on the other side of the coin, both Dobby and Winky had been abused by their so-called masters.

The bond.

He never wanted to acknowledge that there was a bond between him and his elves. He wanted to think of himself as an enlightened employer of them rather than the slave master that held their magical leash. But there was a bond and he was a slave master – a master with responsibilities to his slaves.

Kreacher had been magically exhausted following Sirius's order.

Sirius cleared his throat and placed his hand with the House of Black ring on Kreacher's chest. "Familius magicus donum."

Silver light erupted beneath his hand and Kreacher's body lifted from the bed a little as he absorbed the magic of the House of Black. Sirius held the position until Kreacher began to stir. He took his hand away and waited. "A gift of magic?" Harry murmured beside him.

"Kreacher was injured in service to us." Sirius said quietly.

Kreacher's large eyes opened slowly and he breathed in deeply. His gaze flew to Sirius. "Lord Black." He attempted to sit up.

"Easy, Kreacher." Sirius motioned for him to remain lying down. "Rest. You depleted your magic quite badly retrieving Winky."

The elf shuddered. "She's being in the old London paupers' crypt, Lord Black, protected by old magic."

"How did you find her?" Moody asked bluntly.

Kreacher glared at him.

Sirius pinched the brow of his nose. "Answer Moody's question."

"I follows Winky's blood from Crouch house. Used it to enter bad wards." Kreacher wagged his ears. "Is hard sometimes to keep trail."

"Did the trail take you anywhere else?" Moody asked briskly.

Kreacher shook his head.

"I'll go tell the Rat Squad." Moody headed out of the infirmary.

It was probably too late to catch anyone there. No doubt the elf had been stowed there when the others had gone into hiding after the Crouch place had become untenable.

"You did good, Kreacher." Sirius said. "Go back to Black Manor and rest for the day. You can begin your usual duties again tomorrow."

Kreacher popped away.

"Thank you for releasing my patient." Jordan said dryly.
Sirius gave an embarrassed cough and shot Harry a betrayed look at his snort of laughter.

"What's going to happen to Winky?" Harry asked, gesturing back at the bed holding the battered elf.

"She will need to remain in close proximity to my work." Snape pointed out.

"I would suggest a small room for her here." Jordan sighed. "But neither Poppy nor I have the time to look after her and…"

"Dobby bes looking after Winky." Dobby offered immediately, daring a look at Harry, his ears drooping a little. "If Harry Potter is not minding Dobby looking after Winky."

"I think it's a great idea, Dobby." Harry said with a grin.

Dumbledore smiled benevolently. "Then it is agreed. Winky will stay in the infirmary and be looked after by Dobby while Severus attempts to heal her."

"It could take months." Snape warned.

"Then, we'd best let you get started." Sirius said, slinging an arm around Harry to direct him out of the infirmary. He jerked his head at the door, catching Remus's and Bill's eyes so they knew to follow them.

The walk to their rooms was quick but Sirius wasn't surprised to see Amelia and Rufus waiting for them by the portrait with Moody.

"You'd better come in." Sirius said giving into the inevitability.

He didn't object when Harry sat down with them to discuss the latest developments. He knew as much as he'd wanted to keep Harry away from everything, he had more right to be there than anyone.

"Moody's updated you?" Sirius checked.

Amelia nodded briskly from her place on one of the sofas; Rufus sat awkwardly beside her on one side, Moody on the other. Bill sat next to Harry on the other sofa, Remus perched on the arm. Sirius settled for standing in front of the fire.

"So we know Crouch went to London." Sirius summarised. "Is it possible that's where they're hiding out?"

"Anything is possible." Rufus shot back with an irritated scowl.

Amelia shot him a look that told him to behave. "London would be a good place for them to disappear into given it's one of the busiest wizarding places in Britain."

"And that's not counting muggle London which is a teeming metropolis." Remus added thoughtfully. "We could search London for years and not find them there."

"That's the truth of it." Moody agreed gruffly.

Rufus sighed heavily. "I'll have the Rat Squad check out the crypt tomorrow."

"I'll come along with them if it's OK." Sirius offered. "My animagus form is good at tracking."

"You were the best tracker the department had back in the war." Moody agreed.
"I'll come too? Sometimes the wolf picks up on scents." Remus offered with a mild mannered smile that said he was harmless really.

Rufus huffed out a breath but nodded. "Fine. You can come by the DMLE and meet up with Wood in the morning."

"You might need a curse-breaker." Bill piped up.

Rufus glowered at him.

"He's right." Amelia said, her tone rich with amusement. "Better Bill and Caro than someone who doesn't know the reason why we need to go poking in a crypt."

"I don't really have a choice, do I?" said Rufus with both busy eyebrows lowered.

"No." Amelia agreed cheerfully. "This is the best lead we have since the seaside cottage idea doesn't seem to be leading anywhere at all."

Rufus grimaced. "London isn't exactly much of a lead." He suddenly shifted to stare at Harry. "You're not coming, Potter."

Harry blinked at him in apparent confusion. "No, I kind of have school tomorrow. Although…" he looked at Sirius with a half-hopeful expression.

While Sirius might have let him sit in on the meeting, there was a line and Sirius was drawing it.

"You don't kind of have school tomorrow," Sirius replied firmly, "you do have school and you need to incorporate Remus's latest intelligence in your preparations for the first task on Wednesday."

Harry sighed dramatically and flopped back on the sofa.

"Besides," Sirius pointed out, "do you really want to go poking around a crypt? Dead bodies and bones and dirt and…"

"OK," Harry said hurriedly, raising his hands in surrender, "if you put it like that."

"That's the reason I like crypts." Bill declared with a grin.

"Good for you." Sirius said, amused as Harry's mock look of horror.

Rufus turned to Sirius. "Have to admit that it was a good idea sending your own elf after Crouch's. Shame she's out cold."

"Do you think Snape will be able to find an antidote for her?" Amelia asked.

Sirius shrugged. "I'm not his biggest fan but he is brilliant with potions."

"There was a reason why Voldemort held him in such high esteem despite his halfblood parentage." Remus said dryly. "If anyone can find an antidote, it's Severus."

"I don't disagree with either of you and you're both forgetting that the lad's got a point to prove," Moody said, "he'll create the antidote."

Amelia nodded slowly. "Good. If we can get to talk with the elf…"

"She won't tell us anything." Rufus said. "Her bond won't let her betray her master."
Sirius tapped the mantelpiece and said nothing. The spell his grandfather had taught him would work for a short time, he was certain of it.

Amelia got to her feet, prompting Rufus and Moody to do the same. "I'll see you at the Ministry tomorrow."

"I should get going too." Bill said once they'd left. "Oh hey." He nudged Harry's arm. "Thanks for talking with Ginny. I don't know what you said but apparently she's agreed to do the mind healing."

"You should thank Hermione," Harry replied. "She was the one who convinced me to talk to her." He pushed himself off the sofa. "She still hasn't convinced Ron."

The fallout of the attack on Hermione had been tremendous. All three had planned to prank Hermione because she was going out with Harry. Jessica had taken it a step further choosing a malicious spell rather than the paint that the girls had agreed upon. Both Ginny and Lydia, who had immediately ran to her brother to confess her part given the political implications, had been horrified by Jessica’s spell but couldn’t deny they’d planned the ambush together. They’d been lectured by the staff and their parents about their attitude regarding Harry and Hermione, and specifically about the stalking, which everyone admitted had they stepped in sooner might not have led to an attack. Since Jessica had been expelled, the other two girls had taken on board the seriousness of what had happened. However, Ron was giving his sister the cold-shoulder and silent treatment.

Bill winced visibly. "Don't remind me." He waved and departed.

"Moony," Harry asked, "which of the dragon types is the most dangerous?"

Remus startled as though he'd been thinking about something else entirely. "Hmmm? Oh, the Horntail is considered the most dangerous."

"Right," Harry said, "I'll look that one up first then, knowing my luck I'll be the one to get it." He wandered away to the stairs and left Remus staring bemusedly after him.

Remus turned to Sirius.

"He's not wrong," Sirius said, folding his arms across his chest.

But thankfully they knew what the dragon types were and that there were dragons. Hopefully it would be enough to keep Harry alive. That belief was with him the next morning when he met up with everyone else for the search of the pauper's crypt.

The Rat Squad was out in full and Shacklebolt and Tonks had been included since they were still leading the investigation into the missing pregnant Summers woman. With the inclusion of Remus, Bill and Caro, Sirius was reminded of the treasure hunt to find the ring. The conference room was packed. He felt a pang of loss that Harry was missing out but since he was also mostly relieved that Harry was missing out on digging through bones, he paid it no attention.

"Can we pretend for a moment that I'm in charge?" Rufus barked from the front.

Amelia raised an eyebrow from her place beside him but said nothing. It was very amusing how Rufus changed colours rapidly under her relentless stare though.

"Of this briefing." Rufus managed to get out after he'd turned purple.

Remus turned to Sirius with a look that Sirius hadn't seen since they'd both been at Hogwarts – mischievous and snickering; school boys making fun of a too fussy professor.
Sirius had to work hard to keep himself from giggling and he arranged his face into his best 'I'm listening' expression even though he wasn't because it wasn't like he didn't already know what was going to be said.

Tonks passed Sirius a note.

It was addressed to Remus. Sirius's eyebrows shot up. Really? He'd seen Tonks flirting with Remus at the family dinner after Sirius had pointed Andy at Remus's love life so she'd leave his alone but… really? There was a hell of an age difference and the whole awkwardness thing if romance didn't work out. Tonks wagged her eyebrows at Sirius meaningfully, turning them green then blue before they shifted back to her usual colour of pink. He guessed she was determined to follow through with her flirting and since Moony did need to get some fun in his life…

Sirius slid the folded piece of paper to his right and nudged Remus. Remus glanced at him and Sirius motioned with his eyes to the paper. Remus frowned. He shot a look at Tonks who was purposefully not looking at either of them. Remus glared at Sirius who raised both eyebrows because how was Tonks passing notes to Remus his fault? Well, beyond the whole throwing Remus at Andy and taking part in the passing of the notes thing.

Remus picked up the note, read it and turned an impressive shade of red.

Oh, Sirius was so going to tease him for that later.

"Does anyone have any questions?" asked Rufus loudly.

The room was silent.

"Director?" Rufus said politely.

Amelia shook her head. "I've nothing to add." Her gaze swept over the assembled team. "Except good luck."

Rufus banged his fist on the top of the desk and marched out of the room.

Wood, who had been placed nominally in charge of the search, got to his feet. "I'll organise our portkey. Everyone else get ready and meet back here in fifteen."

Sirius was ready and he knew Remus was too. They had both dressed for the occasion in black muggle jeans, black t-shirts and jackets that were warm but provided plenty of movement. Sirius didn't mind any of his outfit getting dirty or binned because he fully intended to bin every single piece of clothing after digging in bones. He put his feet on the table and leaned back in his chair to wait for the others to come back after changing out of their robes.

He hid his grin at Remus's embarrassment as Tonks swept past him with a bawdy wink.

"Don't laugh!" Remus remonstrated in a hiss. "You should see what she wrote." He pushed the piece of paper at Sirius.

"Size doesn't matter to a metamorphagus."

Sirius spluttered with laughter in the thankfully empty room.

"This is all your fault!" Remus said, hitting Sirius's arm.

"She's just having some fun with you, Moony." Sirius said soothingly. "Merlin knows you could use
some fun."

Remus gave him a disappointed look. "Apart from how awkward it would be if things didn't work out, she's too young, Sirius!"

"Yeah, I kind of figured those would be your objections." Sirius preened a little at getting that right.

"You can't think this is a good idea." Remus waved the paper at him.

Sirius sobered up a touch and sighed, letting go of his want to tease Moony. "On the one hand, I think you and Tonks dating is hilarious and a bad idea, you're right. But Tonks is...she's brilliant and you'd have fun with her. And I think you'd force her to grow up a bit and that's not a bad thing." He held up a hand when Remus went to argue. "But it's not really any of my business."

Remus regarded him thoughtfully. "That's actually a very mature response, Padfoot."

"I've grown as a person." Sirius deadpanned.

"You have."

He said it with enough sincerity that Sirius knew he meant it which caused a warm achy feeling in his chest because Sirius might have always yearned for Remus's approval after the thing with Snape, and it always felt good to get it.

Remus sighed and shifted position in the uncomfortable conference room chair. "I think I might like someone else?"

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Her name's Clara." Remus said. "She's one of the werewolves at the chateau. She's...we have a lot in common."

He schooled himself not to wince and swallowed the urge to press Remus for more details. "Well, if your interest is elsewhere, I'd tell Tonks before her pursuit gets...more direct and leaves her open to being embarrassed because she simply thinks you're playing hard to get."

"Right." Remus said. "You're right. I'll invite her out for coffee or lunch or something."

He looked terrified. Sirius patted him on the arm. "Good man."

There wasn't a chance to discuss it further as everyone piled back into the room and they took the portkey to the wizarding pauper's crypt.

They landed at the entranceway in a derelict cemetery on the East side of the River Thames. The white crumbling edifice that housed the steps down looked unsound. Two of the outside columns had crumbled, one was cracked. The stone door was wide open but cobwebs hung on the upper corners and over every surface of the bare inside. Whatever minimal decoration there had been, had long since eroded leaving an empty shell.

"Well, this isn't creepy." Tonks said brightly, breaking the silence.

"I've seen worse." Caro rejoined dryly.

Brooks cast a magical light ball into the air to illuminate the immediate area.

"Darren, Marina," Wood pointed at Cambridge and Ambrey, "you stay out here and keep watch.
Keith, if you run some traces out here; see if we can pick anything up."

Brooks nodded.

"Bill, Caro," Wood motioned to them, "you follow after me," he turned to Remus and Sirius, "then you guys."

"Kingsley, Tim; you have the rear." Wood motioned at Shacklebolt and Chambers. "Tonks, you stay with the civilians."

"Fine with me." Tonks said as she manoeuvred in between Sirius and Remus.

Sirius gave Remus a sympathetic look but he focused his attention on falling into line behind Bill and not falling down the worn stone steps that led down into the bowels of the crypt. Wood sent up light balls as they went so the dark oppressive tunnel was well lit.

It still raised Sirius's discomfort level, bringing back the tickle of the memories he associated with Azkaban. The dank and decaying smell in his nostrils didn't help either. He shivered under his heavy canvas jacket and gripped his wand a little tighter. He initiated some breathing exercises that he'd learned during his time at The Valley clinic, because keeping himself calm was a good thing, and he resisted the pull to fall into Padfoot where the worst of his memories would be dulled and fuzzy.

It was a long trip downwards and when the steps finished, the tunnel opened out into the burial crypt. It ran for miles under London, backed onto the muggle sewers at some point, the river in other places. There was just enough room width wise for three men to stand shoulder to shoulder but the ground beneath their feet was grimy and the walls were filled with bodies and bones. Small creatures scurried in the shadows.

"OK, so is it just me," Tonks said as they walked further into the innards of the crypt, "or is it much creepier down here than upstairs?"

"It's always creepier when there are rats." Caro agreed with evident distaste.

Wood slowed as the crypt branched off. He raised his wand. "Which way?"

Remus weaved his wand in an archaic motion but Sirius could see him surreptitiously sniffing. "There's evidence of new blood that way." He pointed to the left.

"Kingsley, how about you, Tonks and Caro check that out?" Wood pointed to the right. "Just in case."

Kingsley, Tonks and Caro acknowledged the order and moved off.

The rest of them headed down the left branch of the crypt. It felt like they had walked for miles when Remus spoke again, almost shocking Sirius who had fallen into the lull of the quiet.

Remus sniffed again. "There's blood ahead."

Sirius shook himself, pulling his mind back to the present. "Fresh?"

"Yes." Remus said.

Bill cast ahead and grabbed Wood's arm as he went to move forward. "There are blood wards just around the next bend. Serious blood wards and a trip alarm."

Wood frowned in the dim light. "Let's keep our wits about us then."
They inched forward carefully around the corner and peered down the long tunnel until disappeared into darkness.

"Stop!" Bill ordered. He cast carefully. "It's a tricky trip alarm. It's been set-up to trigger some kind of signal to someone when something magical passes through it." He pointed with his wand. "It covers the entire tunnel like a force-shield." He frowned and reached into his ubiquitous back-pack, bringing out a wooden object.

It looked like a hollowed out square cube, Sirius mused.

Bill placed it on the ground and with his fingers gently nudged it into the ward. "It's non-magical so it shouldn't trigger the ward. I've left this far end outside of the ward so…” He aimed carefully with his wand and non-verbally cast at the cube.

The spell hit the cube outside of the ward. It grew rapidly until it almost filled the tunnel providing a safe way through for them. Sirius clapped Bill on the back.

"Clever.” Remus remarked with relief.

"We should still proceed with caution," Bill said, although he flashed a smile at them both, "it's possible Kreacher already triggered the trip and we might have company."

Sirius considered the possibility and bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. "Let's hope so." He would love to get his hands on any of them – Peter, Crouch, Travers…

Wood shot him an exasperated look. "It'll be my arse on the line if you get injured."

"Don't worry," Remus said dryly, "Amelia knows what he's like."

Sirius harrumphed and froze at the sight of the wall coming up on his right. It was crumpled in the middle, debris falling into the tunnel along with a number of bones that were being chewed on by a couple of rats.

"Well, that's where all the blood is concentrated." Remus said, pointing towards it.

Bill took his time casting the diagnostics. "I have no idea how Kreacher survived busting through these blood wards except for the fact that he's an elf; they've been set-up to be deadly to wizards."

"Let's see if we can find a trail." Wood suggested.

Sirius nodded and raised his wand, beginning the tracking spells he had learned as a Hit Wizard.

Remus sniffed the air. "The scent of blood is overwhelming everything else but maybe I can track it if I get a good enough sniff." He wandered closer to the blood ward.

"Careful, Remus." Sirius cautioned him.

"It probably wouldn't kill me." Remus muttered, but he stayed back and Sirius counted it as a win.

He turned his attention back to the tracking spell and froze. There was a trace of recent magic; very recent magic; animagus magic.

Sirius cleared his throat carefully, his eyes seeking out the rats near the wall. One of them was almost right next to Bill; the other back with the bones close to Remus. He had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing correctly…
"Moony."

"Yes, Padfoot."

"Did you know that Ron discovered his animagus form?" Sirius asked casually, taking a step closer to Wood where he had an open shot of the rat by Bill's foot.

Remus froze, his eyes darting to Sirius's with the right question, and Sirius nodded almost imperceptibly.

Bill turned to look at them both quizzically.

"Nope, can't say I did." Remus stretched as though he was completely relaxed, his keen gaze taking in the position of the rats. He took a step back to give himself a clearer shot of the one close to him.

With practiced ease both of them spun in unison and yelled the spell to force an animagus back into human form.

The rat by Bill quickly formed into the visible shape of Peter Pettigrew.

But Peter was quick, already firing his wand at the ceiling and bringing a deluge of debris down that cut Remus and Bill off from Wood and Sirius who both had to take cover or get hit with the falling ceiling.

Sirius threw a cutting hex at him through the cloud of dirt and Peter squeaked as he threw himself sideways to avoid it but he couldn't quite escape it and it impacted his shoulder. He threw another expulso at them. Wood dived to one side, throwing up a shield in front of him, and Sirius dived to the other. The expulso ricocheted off the shield and into the wall behind Wood, causing it to fall and knock him on the head. He slumped to the ground.

Sirius coughed and cast another cutting hex.

Peter squeaked again, created a thick bank of fog even as he changed back into Wormtail, the hex flying over his head. He scuttled away into the dense grey mist.

Sirius cast a glance at Wood, and despite his want to chase after Peter, hurried over to check on him. "Wood?" He felt for a pulse and found one.

Wood coughed weakly and stirred at Sirius's touch, his eyes blinking open.

"Are you…?" Sirius asked quickly.

"Fine," Wood clutched at his bleeding head and motioned down the tunnel, "go!"

Sirius changed into Padfoot and scented the rat – there was a blood trail. Padfoot gave a howl of rage and Sirius fought hard to keep control of his form as he began the chase. Peter must have changed back, Sirius thought as he bounded down the tunnel. He would have caught up with a rat before now whereas Peter in human form could have gotten a good head start. He thanked Merlin that his animagus form had good night vision; the dark of the tunnel was oppressive.

He skidded to a halt at a junction; left or right…

He sniffed the ground anxiously and found a smear of blood to the left…but his nose pointed him right and he took off again.

The flash of a spell sailed through the air and Sirius leaped to avoid it, twisting to land on the wall
with his back paws to rebound off it, adrenaline surging through him.

Peter was close!

Padfoot skidded around another corner and Sirius ducked hurriedly as another spell flew towards him. He snarled at the sight of Peter stood in front of a dead end; the lower two thirds a wall, the upper third iron bars covered with a metal mesh and the shimmer of the magical barrier that prevented magic from seeping through into the muggle world. The sound of rushing water beyond gave away that they'd reached the muggle sewer system; the glimmer of a shaft of sunlight flowed over the bars.

Sirius lowered his head and growled, preparing to pounce.

Peter changed rapidly…

Sirius jumped…

And Wormtail disappeared into a small hole at the foot of the wall.

Sirius just avoided crashing into it and he shifted back to human form, hitting the wall with his fist as he glared through the bars and mesh at the sight of Peter changing from his rat form to stare back at him safely on the other side, sunlight from a drain high above gilding his dirty form. Neither of them could cast anything because of the magical barrier.

For a long tense moment their gaze held.

Peter turned away…

"James loved you, Peter!" Sirius yelled. "How could you do that to him?!" He had loved Peter too. The betrayal cut deep and painful.

Peter's shoulders slumped as he stopped but he didn't look back over his shoulder at Sirius. "I told you the truth in the Shack, Sirius. I was scared."

The quiet rush of the sewer water almost made him inaudible but Sirius heard him.

Sirius placed a hand on one of the bars and levered himself up against the wall. "We were all scared, Peter. It's no excuse."

Peter laughed humourlessly. "You think I don't know that?" He shook his head. "It's too late now anyway. I made my choice."

"It's not too late." Sirius said immediately. "You don't have to do this, Peter! Do you…do you remember when Harry was born? Do you remember what we promised James, Peter? All of us standing around the crib the night they brought him home?"

They'd promised to protect Harry; all of them, every single one of the Marauders.

"The Dark Lord will kill him no matter what we do." Peter said eventually. He raised a hand to his hurt shoulder and winced as his hand came back bloody.

"No, he won't." Sirius argued fiercely. "Not if you do what you promised James in the first place and protect his son." He gave a harsh bark of laughter. "Harry saved your life in the Shack, Peter. You owe him."

"So that means I have to die for him?" Peter finally looked back over at Sirius. His round face was
streaked with grime, his thinning hair askew. "I'm not you, Sirius! I'm not brave enough to put myself between the Dark Lord and a boy...a boy I don't even know."

Sirius banged his hand on the bar as Peter went to leave again. "That's a lie!" He shouted. "You know Harry, Peter! You know him because you watched him for almost three years as Ron Weasley's rat! You know he's good and kind and brilliant!" He searched desperately for an argument that would convince Peter to give himself up, hating that he couldn't just stun him. "He's defeated your Dark Lord three times in the time you've known him! He defeated him at eleven and he defeated a shade of him at twelve. Your Dark Lord fears him!"

"You might be right about that." He said tiredly.

"You know Harry can defeat him if you stop bloody helping him then!" Sirius said sharply. Come on, Wormy, Sirius thought; come on!

Peter faced him again and smiled sadly. "I've made my choice, Sirius." He straightened, catching and holding Sirius's furious glare. "I am the Dark Lord's willing servant, Sirius, just as Harry is his unwilling enemy." He touched his shoulder again, his voice dropping to a murmur that Sirius struggled to hear. "It will all be decided one way or another on the eve of the Summer solstice."

And Peter shifted into Wormtail before Sirius could do more than gape at him, scuttling away and out of sight.

Sirius slammed his hand against the bar once more and slumped against the wall. So close...he'd been so close...

"Padfoot!" Remus's worried yell shattered the silence.

Sirius gathered his composure. "Over here!"

Remus rounded the corner, wand out, covered in dust and the dark shadow of a graze on his cheek. Sirius straightened and pushed off the wall to go and check on him.

"Peter?"

"The rat went through a hole in the wall." Sirius grumbled as he grasped Remus's chin and tutted loudly at the injury. "You alright, Moony? And the others?"

"I took a bump to the head when the ceiling came down, but I'm fine. Bill's just a bit scratched up. We managed a bit of transfiguration work to get through the rubble. Wood's conscious but dizzy." Remus dismissed his concern. "You?"

His body ached; bruises and bumps and scratches making themselves known with the confrontation over and the absence of the adrenaline that had masked them during.

"I need a drink." Sirius said bluntly.

"Let's get back then. Caro, Tonks and Shacklebolt found the pregnant Summers woman in the other tunnel." Remus said. "It looks like they dosed her with whatever they dosed the elf with. Caro's trying to dismantle the blood ward to get her out."

Sirius brightened. That was good news. He cast a look back towards the muggle sewer.

"Merlin, Moony, I think I almost had him. He..." the words Peter had uttered before he'd ran off echoed in Sirius's head, "I think Peter's tried to help us."
Remus's mouth fell open. He shook himself. "What!?"

"I'll tell you all about it." Sirius promised, patting Remus's shoulder. "After I've had that drink."

o-O-o

24th November 1994

Harry was going to throw up.

He stared at his pale image in the bathroom mirror and swallowed hard.

He shouldn't have had lunch although he wasn't entirely certain that the two slices of bread and butter he'd managed to bolt down counted enough to warrant being called lunch.

"Harry?" Sirius knocked softly on the doorjamb and caught Harry's panicked eyes in the mirror. He immediately moved into the bathroom, resting his hands on Harry's shoulders and squeezing gently.

"I'm going to throw up and embarrass myself." Harry muttered. He tried another deep breath and let Sirius's warm hand on his back soothe him.

Sirius stayed silent as Harry got his nerves under control. He didn't try to give him meaningless reassurances or platitudes. They both knew Harry had to go and face a dragon; had to go and compete; had to make it look like he wasn't scared because to do less would be to give Voldemort the win.

Harry turned away from the mirror and leaned back against the sink as he lifted his glasses momentarily to rub his eyes. He dragged a hand through his already ruffled hair. "How long do we have before I have to go to the tent?"

"We need to leave in the next fifteen minutes." Sirius sat down on the edge of the bath. "Your friends are waiting for you downstairs. They want to walk out with you."

Harry nodded. They'd discussed it that morning during History of Magic. He was slightly wary of walking out holding Hermione's hand but the media storm about their relationship had died down with the escalation of excitement ahead of the first task. He worried someone would try something but Hermione was adamant that she wasn't letting Jessica's horrible attack on her interfere with them, and Harry knew Sirius intended escorting her to the stands.

He smoothed a hand over the thick robe he wore over thick canvas trousers and a black top. The robe was made of muggle fire-resistant material – even the crests on the front – and would hopefully keep him safe. He knew Sirius had commissioned it as soon as they'd become aware that he'd face a dragon. His boots were combat boots that Sirius had bought specially for him.

"You look good." Sirius said.

"I wish I could wear my invisibility cloak." Harry confessed with chagrin. The rules were clear that the Champions could only begin the task with one magical item; their wand.

Sirius hummed. "You have your plans sorted?"

They'd sketched out ways to deal with each dragon and Harry had to admit that it was good to have the knowledge in his mind before racing off to do battle. It felt unusual but good. Still, a part of him was waiting for the other shoe to drop because they really had no idea what the task entailed beyond facing a dragon.
"I'm set." Harry took a deep breath and pushed off the sink. He held a hand out for Sirius who raised an eyebrow at him.

"I'm not that decrepit." Sirius declared but he took the hand.

Harry gave an indistinct murmur. It hadn't quite escaped his notice that Sirius had come back bruised after his escapade into the crypt in London. It also hadn't escaped his notice that the physical wounds weren't as bad as the emotional. Sirius had told him about the conversation with Peter and it would take a long time before Harry would be able to shake the memory of how much pain had shimmered in Sirius's eyes. He was also shocked that Peter might have been trying to help them with the whole hinting about the ritual.

Peter aside, the trip to the crypt had led to the team saving Cindy Summers. She was still pregnant if in the same drugged coma as Winky. The theory was that Voldemort had her stashed away as a spare for the amniotic fluid. Snape had started working on identifying what potion had been used but the general consensus from everyone was that it was going to take time.

The other general consensus was that Voldemort and company were likely in London somewhere. That sent a shiver down Harry's spine. The thought that they were that close to so many people… Voldemort could do a lot of damage.

Still, Moody had been absolutely terrifying about security for the first task which Harry appreciated. The grounds were being patrolled by Aurors; the public was allowed nowhere near to the school, only to the stands and a large refreshment tent set up by the Lake, and then only if they had a named ticket. The school itself was on lockdown with all access restricted through the main doors. The likelihood of Voldemort gaining entry was miniscule.

Harry took another deep breath as he reached the bottom of the stairs and opened his arms for Hermione to hug him. He spent a good minute just appreciating the feel of her holding him just as tightly as he was holding her before they both inched away, hands sliding into a familiar hold.

They'd agreed to wait for their first date for their kiss.

It was something that Harry swung from thinking was a good idea (he did want it to be special and memorable for the right reasons) to thinking it was a bad idea (mostly because he was worried he was going to screw up and he just wanted to get it over and done with, and partly because he wanted to kiss Hermione).

"You look good." Neville offered by way of greeting.

"Very scary." Ron said.

"I don't think the dragon is going to be scared." Harry replied.

Sirius adjusted his own smart black robes and gestured for them to start moving. "We're going to be late if we don't get going."

They trooped out of the quarters and down the stairs, through the corridors and through the main entrance out into the cold wintery day.

It was sunny; a blue almost cloudless sky stretched overhead with the thin November sunshine lighting everything up brightly but doing nothing to counter the chill.

Harry ignored the flash of a camera and focused on striding purposefully towards the contestants' tent. He glanced over at the stands filled with the rest of the school and the public; at the arena that
had been created in front of the Lake, the dragon pens backing onto the Forbidden Forest where they had been hidden for days. He caught sight of the judge's platform set to the side with the best view.

"Harry!" Bagman grinned at him with evident relief. "Good! We have all of our contestants."

Harry waved at Viktor, Fleur and Cedric gathered in a small semi-circle in front of Bagman.

Bagman registered that Harry wasn't alone and gave a false wince. "Lord Black, I'm afraid you and the students will have to go to the stands now."

Sirius gave a nod of acknowledgement. Regardless of Harry's minor status he wasn't allowed to be in a position to give Harry advice on the task once it was revealed. Harry didn't protest the brief hug Sirius pulled him into, and a hundred things crowded at the back of his throat.

"Good luck." Sirius said softly. "Do your best but I want you back alive, so unnecessary risks, OK?"

Harry couldn't speak for the lump in his throat and settled for nodding.

Hermione sprang forward when Sirius released him. She gave him another lightening hug. "Don't forget; you're a great wizard." She whispered in his ear.

Ron and Neville settled for manly handshakes and pats on the back along with their expressed wishes of good luck, and within moments Harry found himself standing alone. He shifted around Bagman to stand beside Viktor.

"Right!" Bagman clapped his hands and grinned at them. "The first task is difficult but I'm sure you'll all do well." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a cloth bag. "In here I have four small figurines of the creatures you'll be facing. You'll each go in turn and draw a figurine out of the bag and then I'll fill you in on the rest."

He shoved the bag towards Viktor.

"Harry should go first." Viktor said firmly. "He is youngest."

"I agree." Fleur said in heavily accented French.

"Me too." Cedric hurriedly said.

Bagman's face fell. "Unfortunately, that's not possible. We have to go in the order the Goblet drew your names."

"It's fine." Harry said quickly. "I don't mind."

Viktor gave a harrumph of disapproval at the decision, but reached into the bag. He pulled out the small figurine of the Welsh Green. Harry fought to keep the disappointment off his face because he'd wanted the Welsh Green. It was by far the most placid of the dragons.

Fleur was next and her hand opened to reveal the Hungarian Horntail. A small frown marred her face and Harry couldn't blame her for her consternation. The Horntail was considered to be the most dangerous.

Cedric's face showed his relief at not getting the Horntail as he reached into the bag and drew out a tiny Swedish Short-Snout.

Harry took the last figurine of the Chinese Fireball. It was the second most dangerous of the dragon types but the one best suited to his strengths. Red-scaled, lean and with a ferocious flame, it was
deadly on the ground but had problems flying with its wings mainly for show. It was the one most closely related to a serpent compared to the other dragons who fell more into the lizard family as distant cousins.

Bagman ignored the lack of shock and horror, or maybe he put their lack of reaction down to deep shock. Harry shook himself as Bagman cleared his throat.

"So, the first task will be to get past the dragon and steal as many of the eggs in the nests they are protecting, moving them to another location within the arena. Contestants will be scored on ingenuity, spell-work and the number of eggs successfully collected. The more eggs you get the more clues you will receive for the next task."

Harry stared at Bagman, unsure that he had heard correctly.

"You vant us to steal the eggs of a movver dragon?" Viktor asked incredulous.

"Eet is barbaric!" Fleur tossed her blonde hair back as she glowered at Bagman.

"Want is not the right word." Bagman said, losing some of his false bonhomie. "This is the task that we've been given to do."

Right, thought Harry sourly; this was the task Voldemort had set so of course it was barbaric and cruel.

"You'll each receive one hour to complete the task. Viktor will go first, and then Fleur, Cedric, and of course, Harry, last but by no means least." Bagman recovered enough to smile at them all. "You cannot watch the others before you, you cannot confer on the task, and you will need to remain in the tent until I come for you. There is a magical barrier above the arena which will prevent anyone in the stands from helping you. Any questions?"

They all shook their heads. Harry's heart was sinking; he had to wait three hours?!

"Well," Bagman pointed towards the tent flap, "Viktor, shall we?"

Viktor straightened his shoulders, a grim expression on his face as he strode out. Bagman sauntered out in his wake.

Fleur made for the wooden chairs that had been set out at the back of the tent. "Mon Dieu!"

"You can say that again." Cedric said, wandering over to sit beside her.

Harry followed him for want of a better plan and sat on the other side of Fleur. "What are we supposed to do while we wait?"

"That's a good question." Cedric said. "They could have provided a deck of cards or something."

"Perhaps we are meant to spend the time devising our strategy?" Fleur mused, flipping her hair back.

"It doesn't seem fair to you and Viktor if that's the case," Cedric said, "you'd get a lot less time to plan than Harry or me."

Fleur gave a Gallic shrug. "I do not want to talk about eet. Let us talk of somezing else." She rapped her fingers on her thigh and shifted her gaze to Harry. "You know Beel?"

"Beel?" Harry repeated before sorting out the accent in his head. "Oh, you mean Bill." He got a sinking sensation. "Uh, yes? He's Ron's brother and he's in service to the House of Potter."
"He is..." Fleur sighed in a dramatic heartfelt way that had Harry seeking Cedric's gaze frantically only to get a 'I know it's horrifying' look back. "wonderful. Non?"

"Non, I mean, yes." Harry stumbled over his reply and nudged his glasses back up his nose. "Uh, he has a girlfriend?"

Fleur frowned heavily, her eyes giving away her evident disappointment at the news. "The woman who works with him 'ere?"

"No, that's Caro; she's just his work partner." Harry explained. "His girlfriend is Alicia Doge. They've been going out a while."

"Eet is a shame." Fleur sighed again. "I was so sure. He 'ardly felt the effect of my allure."

"Is that important to a Veela?" Cedric asked, curiosity getting the best of him.

"Oui," Fleur said dramatically, "eet is important to know if your lover loves you and is not enthralled, non? That eet is real."

Harry understood her point. He had rigidly stuck to his belief that it was important for his girlfriend to like him as Harry rather than as the Boy Who Lived or Lord Potter or whatever title they were sticking him with that week. He was so glad he had Hermione.

"Yeah," Cedric sighed, "sometimes I wonder if Cho only likes me as a boyfriend since I became a Champion. Our practice date was a bit awkward."

Harry cast about desperately for another subject. "Why don't we play I Spy?"

"I Spy?" Fleur perked up with interest. "I have never played eet it before."

Teaching wizards how to play the muggle game of I Spy kept them busy until Bagman returned to collect Fleur for her turn. Cedric and Harry wished her luck before retreating back to their chairs awkwardly.

Cedric cleared his throat. "What do you think about the news that Richard Gosforth is retiring from international Quidditch?"

Harry sent him a grateful look and they discussed Quidditch until Cedric begged off to think about his strategy until Bagman turned up for him.

It wasn't long before Harry was alone. He wondered how the others had fared. He felt cut off from the real world in the bubble of the contestants' tent. He didn't know if the others had managed to get any eggs, if they'd gotten hurt, or how well they'd scored.

Maybe that was a good thing, Harry considered thoughtfully. He should concentrate on his own performance and not worry about theirs. He turned over the strategy he'd worked out for the Chinese Fireball in his head.

Flying had been a central component. He'd figured he could summon his Firebolt and take to the air to get past the dragon. It was still a possibility but grabbing an egg from a nest would be tricky, then there was manoeuvring on the broom carrying a dragon's egg with an angry dragon trying to get to him. He knew his flying skills were good but Chinese Fireballs had a hell of a flame and they were smart and clever.

His back-up plan was weather related. The Chinese Fireball liked the heat and hated the cold. It was
a good day for his back-up plan. There was already a chill in the air; he could work on that. If he made the Fireball cold and lethargic, he could disable it.

He bit his lip. What if he injured her giving her hypothermia? What if she died?

No…he wouldn't let that happen, but a dragon was too dangerous to leave capable of thinking and moving for his task.

There had to be a better way.

Bagman entered the tent and Harry's heart seized for a moment in his chest. Had it already been an hour?

"Your turn now, Harry?" Bagman said. "You, uh, you do have a plan?"

Harry looked at him guardedly. "Of course, Mister Bagman."

"Splendid!" Bagman beamed, his toothpaste smile even whiter up close. "Just through here…" They went through a long canvas tunnel and out onto a platform overlooking the arena.

And suddenly, the noise was deafening.

The arena was a square shape, not unlike a Quidditch pitch, but there was a pit below in the middle which had been transformed with grey rock and boulders to create a forbidding environment, like the sharp jagged landscape that Harry had once seen in a photo of a volcano. A large gate on the opposite side gave away the method of how they got the dragon into the pit. The Chinese Fireball was already present on the right of the arena under the Hogwarts' stand, chained but sinuously curled around its rocky nest filled with four crimson gold-speckled eggs. It was snarling at the noise, protective of its young.

Harry gulped down air and looked up instead into the stands.

He caught sight of the Gryffindors, ranged together with banners of support for him – but there were other signs in the other Houses; one prominent in Slytherin that Harry knew belonged to Theo and the Slytherins allied to the House of Black, another in Hufflepuff where Susan and Hannah stood, and one that glittered in Ravenclaw that belonged to Luna. The banners were duplicated in the public stands that curved behind him. There was a VIP box and he identified Cornelius and Arthur before he tore his gaze away.

He took a calming breath as he realised Bagman was doing a formal announcement, explaining he had to get the eggs over to an area marked by a small flag on the left under the Champions' stand which included the remaining visiting students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.

He searched out the faces he wanted to see: Sirius, gazing at him fiercely from the Champions box in the public stands, Remus beside him looking worried, Hermione between them with Ron and Neville close to the railing by Remus. His friends spotted him looking and waved to him, clapping and cheering. Sirius placed both hands on the railing, leaning forward, and across the distance of the arena their eyes met.

Something inside Harry eased and he gave a slow nod to Sirius.

He was ready.

"Enter the arena, Harry Potter! Your time starts now!" Bagman announced.
Harry walked slowly to the small gate that stood between him and the pit. He opened it and followed the rocky path down until he was stood in a crevice that looked out at the arena.

The issue of the eggs complicated things, Harry mused. He considered simply making his way out to the flag and summoning the eggs – the advanced charm Flitwick had taught him would work but… he would have to catch the eggs without breaking them and he didn't trust that the dragon wouldn't charge him down if he tried such an approach. No, he was better sticking with his original idea; disable the dragon and then he would worry about the eggs.

He changed position, easing out from behind the wall and the dragon immediately swivelled to stare in Harry's direction; the ruff of golden spikes erect as she sensed danger.

Harry pointed his wand skyward and opened up his full power. "Frigus Ventus!"

For a second, nothing happened but then…

A freezing wind erupted from his wand in a gust that pushed him backwards into the hard rock. He put his free hand out to steady himself and forced his hand to direct his wand where he wanted it; in the direction of the dragon.

The Fireball gave a tremendous roar as the cold hit her. She shook herself as she uncurled, lowered her head and shot out an enormous stream of fire that dispersed the wind.

Harry dodged back.

His heart was pounding.

It wasn't working. He had to be closer. Harry's eyes searched out the rock around him. He tucked his wand into its holster and grabbed hold of a protruding edge, levering himself upwards. He focused on climbing, hand hold followed by foothold, followed by hand hold. Below the dragon paced, occasionally trying to get to him with her flame but Harry was climbing out of reach.

He got to the top of the rock formation and ran lightly along the surface until he was almost near to the edge nearest the dragon. He flattened himself as a blast of fire shot over his head. He peered over into the pit.

The dragon was on her feet in front of him.

All he had to do was jump down and he would be right in front of her. The only problem was that it was quite a jump, the rock was just as hard below him, and it wasn't like the dragon wasn't going to notice him jumping. He'd be toast before he hit the ground.

He needed a distraction.

Harry chewed on his lip as he considered his options. He aimed his wand towards the other side of the pit. "Animatus!" The boulders there rolled together and formed a creature that looked a little like a giant dog. It crept near to the other side of the eggs. Harry immediately pointed his wand back at his throat. "Sonorus!" He cleared his throat. "Keep the dragon occupied!" He commanded.

The rock-dog immediately lumbered to do Harry's bidding and the dragon turned around to meet the new threat.

Harry cancelled the sonorus with an absent-minded thought and directed his wand at the ground below, casting a cushioning spell non-verbally. He didn't want to alert the Fireball to what he was doing. He checked on the dragon and the rock-dog. They were dancing around each other but the
dragon remained with its back to Harry. Harry quickly wriggled forward, clutched at the edge of the rock and tried to lower himself down slowly until he was hanging by his fingertips to the rock, his face smushed into the shale.

He let go.

The rock he fell onto was soft like grass and Harry had taken greater falls in Quidditch. He rolled as he landed and came up on his feet just in time to see the dragon burn the rock-dog to dust. He cancelled the cushioning charm on the ground; he needed a solid surface.

Harry took a deep breath, centred himself and pointed his wand again. "Frigus Maximus!" He yelled.

The startled dragon whirled around in a shimmer of red and opened her mouth, roaring with anger as she received the full blast of Harry's spell in her face; a stream of white light pouring forth from the holly wand.

The dragon backed away a step, spreading her small wings to protect her eggs from the cold. She opened her mouth and a stream of fire poured out to push the spell away.

Red met white in the centre of the confrontation.

Harry skidded back a few feet but he kept his balance. He gritted his teeth and locked his arm; pushing with all his magical power.

Slowly, slowly, his magic overcame the dragon's fire.

Inch by inch, the white light of the spell gained ground over the fire.

With a sudden rush, his magic extinguished the dragon's fire and swiftly enveloped the Fireball in a white light. The dragon gave a mournful cry and staggered under the cold blanketing her everywhere, as ice formed over her scales, zig-zagging across her skin in a crazy crystalline fashion. She took a halting side-step and collapsed, unconscious with a thump.

Harry sucked in a needed breath and slowly lowered his aching arm, his eyes never left the dragon. She was down and she wasn't getting up.

He became dimly aware of the crowds' cheers around him but blanked them out to focus on his task, walking on unsteady legs to the nest of dragon eggs. He continued to give the Fireball a wide berth as he climbed up the rock and got a good look at the eggs.

The rock was warm beneath them, Harry realised. He shrugged out of his robe, placing it on the ground and quickly spelling a warming charm on it. He carefully levitated the eggs and bundled them up so they were protected by the folds of the robe from knocking into each other.

He cast a quick look at the dragon. She was beginning to stir. Maybe he could apparate…but no; Harry dismissed the idea swiftly. Sirius had taught him the theory of how to do so in an emergency but Harry wasn't all that well practiced and he would probably break the eggs if he attempted it. He was going to have to do it the hard way.

He hurriedly levitated the robe and its precious contents and began to run over the rocky ground, slipping and sliding with his cargo floating safely behind him. He reached the flag and set the robe down gently, breathing heavily, a stitch in his side from his frantic run. He heated the rock up beneath him and levitated the eggs out of his robe until they were safely arranged.

"Will you look at that?" Bagman's voice boomed out over the arena. "Our youngest competitor has
completed the task successfully with all eggs intact! Well done, Harry!"

And suddenly he could hear everything over the beat of his heart and his every breath. The noise was deafening; a cheering wall of applause and whistles.

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Sirius gave a relieved sigh and clapped enthusiastically as Harry lifted a hand to wave weakly at the astounded crowd.

It was over.

Thank Merlin.

Remus gripped Sirius's shoulders from behind him. "He was brilliant, Sirius. Really brilliant."

Sirius wasn't going to argue. Harry had been brilliant, although he had almost given Sirius a heart attack when he'd jumped down behind the dragon. He'd been so close to it!

Around him the rest of the House of Black celebrated. Hermione, Ron and Neville were spinning each other around, jumping up and down with excitement. Andromeda had her face still buried in Ted's shoulder. The Malfoys had settled for polite clapping but Sirius caught Lucius sending a smug smirk in the direction of Amos Diggory.

Sirius kept his own gaze on his son. He watched as Harry picked up his robe and started back towards the path up to the contestants' gate.

And Sirius finally started to relax. The Fireball was still down; all Harry had to do was to leave.

"I've never seen such a masterful display of raw power." Ted murmured.

Sirius grinned and turned to reply.

A ferocious roar ripped through the noise of the crowd, silencing everyone and freezing Harry mid-step in the middle of the arena.

Sirius looked hurriedly towards the Fireball but it was only just stirring.

Another roar filled the air. The large gate to the dragons' pens shook under a huge thump and then splintered into bits as it gave under the weight of an enraged dragon.

The Hungarian Horntail stalked into the arena, her green scales glimmering in the weak sunlight, her spikes sharp and glittering.

The Horntail was loose!

And Harry was right in front of it.

Pandemonium spread over the watching crowd as panic took hold; shrieks and shouts echoed around the arena.

"HARRY!" Sirius screamed. He raised his wand to fire at the Horntail.

Remus grabbed him roughly. "You can't help him! The magical barrier won't let anything through!"

Sirius's heart leaped into his throat as Harry began to run for the path and safety, only to have to dive
to the side as a long stream of fire erupted from the dragon. Hermione screamed beside Sirius, her hands flying up to cover her face. He only breathed out as Harry threw himself behind a large boulder.

"I have to help him!" Sirius declared, turning for the exit. He could get into the arena through the contestants' gate.

"I'm coming with you!" Remus said hurriedly.

"Me too!" Ron said, determination written all over his pale freckled face.

Andromeda caught hold of Ron and moved to block Hermione and Neville. "You kids are staying here."

Sirius didn't wait to see if she was successful, just trusted that she would take care of keeping the kids out of danger. He ran from the box, Remus at his heels.

Harry needed him.
Harry's heart thundered in his chest and his breath rasped sharply in his throat as he tried to make himself smaller behind the boulder he'd managed to find for cover.

He peeked out.

The Horntail was stomping further into the arena. She was furious, her viciously spiked tail lashing out.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm.

The eggs!

He threw his arm out, wand in his hand, and cast a shield hurriedly over them just as the tail came down with a crash.

Harry breathed out in relief as the tail lifted to reveal the intact eggs. His shield had worked.

On the other side of the arena, the Fireball roared, recognising the new threat to her eggs. She caught the Horntail's attention. Another fierce cry rang out, this time directed at the Fireball as the Horntail challenged her. The Fireball answered it furiously, getting to her feet and shaking off the remnants of ice clinging to her scales. The Horntail lowered her head and attacked.

Harry looked around anxiously, assessing the situation breathlessly. He was stuck. There was open ground between him, the dragons and his path out of the arena. They might be distracted while they were fighting but he wasn't certain he wanted to take the risk of them both spotting him and deciding to gang up on him instead of battling each other. But there was the problem of what was going to happen once the battle was over.

There was better cover behind the flag where the flat of the rock sheared away providing a roof of sorts to a dip below. If he could get there…

He checked on the dragons.

The Fireball was at a disadvantage, chained and befuddled from the cold spell Harry had used, but she was lithe and using her greater manoeuvrability to avoid the worst of the Horntail's swipes and hits. She was also using the former nest as cover occasionally, picking up shards and loose rock to throw at the Horntail in between sending jets of fierce fire towards the other dragon. The Horntail lashed out with one wing and the Fireball in avoiding it ran straight into the Horntail's tail. She flew backwards, her chain breaking with a snap as she landed on her side with a massive smack on the nest.

She didn't get up.

The Horntail roared her victory.

Harry's eyes fell on his robe lying on the ground. He wet his lips, a plan forming in his head. He mouthed the spell quietly; the robe rose from the ground as though pulled by invisible ropes to spin in mid-air. Another spell had it growing rapidly spreading out to provide a wide curtain between him and the Horntail.

He ran.
He was almost at the eggs when the sound of ripping fabric had him glancing behind to see the Horn tail rending the robe to pieces with its claws. She tossed the remains to the side as she stormed forward and Harry knew he didn’t have time to get under cover.

He threw up a shield as the Horntail slapped a massive foreleg down on him. He blinked as the foot stopped bare inches from his body. He rolled out as the dragon lifted her leg again and hurriedly threw up another shield as the leg came down again; the tail landing close enough to the side of him that the rock beneath shook. He absently noticed the Fireball regaining her feet on the other side of the arena.

He was reminded how the Fireball had used the rocks around to pound on the Horntail and he pointed his wand at the wall of rock behind and with a rushed spell lobbed a chunk of rock at the Horntail.

The jagged boulder of black granite hit the Horntail in the face, whipping her head back painfully, and she yowled in pain.

Harry scrabbled backwards, careful of the eggs close behind him. He flicked his wand and sent another barrage of rocks and debris at the Horntail.

The Horntail batted them away though. She snarled through the green blood dripping down her face where Harry had wounded her and lashed out with her right wing, Harry could see the tail already in motion to hit him if he darted out of the way of the wing. And if he moved, the eggs were going to be smashed. He hastily threw up another shield, barely aware that it shimmered with gold and silver.

The wing descended…

The Horntail's mouth opened to deliver a devastating blast…

"Arrestus!" Harry pointed his wand and pushed the rest of his power into the spell.

The Horntail froze.

And a rock smashed down on the Horntail's head; once, twice, three times.

The Horntail crumpled into a bloody heap, its head caved in.

The Fireball stood behind it, the large rock clutched in one claw. She dropped it and the broken chain around its leg scraped along the ground.

For a terrifying second, the Fireball bristled, the golden spikes around its head erect. Harry kept still, his heart stampeding in his heart; he couldn't breathe, didn't dare.

And their eyes met.

There was pain in the Fireball's gaze and something else; an intelligence that seemed to judge Harry in every way.

Harry swallowed hard, desperately trying to think of anything that would work. The image of Merlin talking to the dragons in the play he had seen over the Summer flashed through his head and Harry latched onto it. "Please…" he whispered, unaware the word had hissed out in Parseltongue.

The dragon cocked her head.

"Please." Harry whispered again. "Let me go. Your eggs are safe. I protected them and I would
never hurt them, I promise."

Her green-slitted eyes shifted to the intact eggs. She sniffed at her young. Slowly, the Fireball's ruff sank back to lie flat. She gave a snort and sank back on her haunches.

Harry moved slowly, not entirely sure she wouldn't attack him still despite apparently doing what he had asked. He carefully got to his feet and sidled away. The Fireball didn't look at him; she crept into the space Harry had vacated and curled protectively around her eggs. Harry stumbled around the massive body of the Horntail, hurrying as fast as he could to the path. He fell a couple of times, his legs shaky and weak, but he scrambled back up each time.

At the gate, he wasn't surprised to see Sirius on the other side waiting for him, Remus not far behind. Sirius opened the small wooden door and Harry all but fell against him.

Sirius clutched Harry tightly to him. Harry tucked his head against Sirius and breathed.

He was safe.

Bagman was announcing something.

Harry didn't care. He tightened his grip on Sirius, his scratched-up hands fisting in the material of Sirius's robes. He felt Sirius rub his back, small circles of warmth as Harry shook. There was another hand on his shoulder providing a comforting grounding anchor; Remus.

"Come on, Pronglet." Sirius said quietly. "Let's get you to the infirmary tent."

He didn't release his hold on Harry though, and Harry figured Padfoot was waiting on him to move. He slowly convinced his fingers to let go, one at a time. He pushed weakly on Sirius's chest and Sirius helped steady him as he got upright.

Sirius slid an arm around his waist. "Do you think you can walk?"

Harry nodded quickly but Remus moved to his other side and braced between the two of them he found it wasn't a lie. He could walk although their progress was slow.

Everything hurt.

His arms ached; his hands stung where they were scraped; his legs were sore from the climb and the fall and the stumbles.

Madame Pomfrey met them at the flap of tent. "Goodness, look at you! I'm afraid you're stuck with me; Doctor Jordan is out at the dragon pens healing the injured from that dangerous Horntail." She sniffed. "Dragons! What were they thinking?!"

She chivvied them towards a bed and Harry climbed up and endured the diagnostics with a pained grimace as Sirius hovered beside him; Remus at the end of the bed.

He glanced around. Fleur was curled up in another bed at the far side of the tent; her shoulder was heavily bandaged. An attractive older woman with blonde hair, a distinguished looking man, and a young girl who looked like a miniature Fleur were gathered around her. Her family, Harry guessed.

"What happened to Fleur?" he asked worriedly. She'd faced the Horntail.

"When they were bringing the Horntail into the arena, one of the eggs was dropped and destroyed." Remus explained. "The Horntail was enraged before Miss Delacour even entered the arena." He
sighed. "She actually did very well. She hit it with a strong sleep spell, had a similar idea to you with the robe to carry the eggs only...the Horntail woke up before she got more than a few steps away from the original nest. It attacked her and the rest of its eggs were destroyed."

"They had to send half a dozen dragon handlers in to subdue it and get Miss Delacour out." Sirius added. "How the hell did it get free to go on the rampage?"

"A good question." Remus stated dryly.

There was the sound of running feet and Cedric and Viktor both entered. Viktor looked unharmed beyond a strapped-up wrist but Cedric was covered in pink burns paste all over one side of his face.

Pomfrey tutted loudly. "What did I tell you about leaving the tent, Mister Diggory?" She pointed at the bed between Harry and Fleur.

"I snuck out to watch you." Cedric said to Harry as he hurried to sit where she was pointing. "You were just..."

"Incredible." Viktor said gruffly. "Your strategy was excellent."

Harry shrugged despite the praise making him smile. "How did you both go?"

Viktor frowned heavily. "I used Conjunctivitis Curse but I was only able to get two eggs as the dragon destroyed the others when she staggered into them."

The curse caused great pain in the eyes and Harry tried not to let his disapproval at deliberately hurting the dragon and causing her to hurt her own eggs show. It could be argued that he had hurt the Fireball just as much, freezing her half to death.

"What about you, Cedric?" Harry asked.

Cedric gave a pained smile. "I summoned my broomstick to fly around it. I managed to get one egg but...it caught me full blast with fire on the second run and that was me out of it." He winced and rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm going to need a new broom too. Mine's ash now."

Harry grimaced. He remembered how he'd felt when the Whomping Willow had battered his first broomstick. It had been a loss. He loved his current broomstick though, mostly because it was his first ever present from Sirius. He was suddenly very glad he had decided not to fly.

"You are in lead." Viktor said disgruntled.

"The judges awarded you thirty-five points and you got tens from Bagman and Professor Dumbledore." Cedric expanded. "Madame Maxime gave you a nine and Karkaroff gave you a six."

"Karkaroff is blatantly biased." Remus said with an apologetic look at Viktor. "He gave Cedric three points and Fleur a zero."

Viktor nodded in agreement though. "I did not deserve nine."

"What are your overall scores?" asked Harry as Pomfrey started to wave her wand over his hands, healing up the scratches.

"Fleur has sixteen. Maxime gave her a six, Dumbledore a five and Bagman another five, and you know Karkaroff's score." Cedric recited. "I had all sevens except for Karkaroff so I'm on twenty-four."
"I have thirty-three." Viktor said brusquely.

It was a high score but Harry appreciated that Viktor's competitiveness demanded perfection and he hadn't attained it. Harry squirmed under Pomfrey's fussing over the bruises on his legs.

Remus patted Harry on the shoulder. "I'm going to tell everyone you're fine. I'll see you in your rooms later for the celebration."

Sirius caught hold of Remus before he left. "Find Moody and ask what the hell went down with that Horntail, will you?"

"Definitely." Remus answered.

Harry felt some of the strain ease out of his arms and shoulders as Pomfrey healed them.

"We're done here, Lord Potter. You're free to leave but I highly recommend not using your magic for a day and resting." Pomfrey said. She bustled into the back of the tent which was cordoned off.

Harry slid off the bed and he was pleased that his legs held up better than they had when they'd come out of the arena.

"Ah, there you all are!" Bagman grinned and gave them a brief round of applause that drew disapproving looks from the Delacours. Harry didn't blame them.

"Fantastic performances today, boys!" Bagman said brightly. "Really, really fantastic start to the competition."

Harry, Cedric and Viktor all exchanged a disbelieving look.

"Now, clues for the next task!" Bagman continued chirpily, paying them little attention. He raised a black velvet bag and delved inside. "This one is for you, Cedric. One clue for one egg." He handed Cedric a small golden egg.

It reminded Harry of the small Cadbury Crème eggs that Dudley always scoffed at Easter.

Bagman rooted around the bag again and handed Viktor a larger egg about the size of a normal chocolate Easter egg. Dudley usually had several whereas Harry had never received one from the Dursleys. "Two clues for you, Viktor."

"And for you, Harry," Bagman reached into the bag and improbably brought out a large gold egg, "you get all four clues." He straightened. "Now, you're not allowed to confer or share clues before the next task which will be held on February twenty-fourth!" He gave another smarmy smile and left.

"I should go back to ship." Viktor bowed at Cedric and Harry, departing briskly with no other fanfare.

Cedric sighed and subsided onto the bed. Harry wondered where his parents were; he knew if he was as injured as Cedric Sirius would be hovering...just like he was hovering right at that moment.

"You going to be OK here, Ced?" Harry asked, holding tightly to his egg as Sirius wrapped an arm around him. He wanted to protest but he knew Sirius probably needed the reassurance that Harry was OK.

"Yeah, I only have to stay another hour." Cedric confirmed. "Then I'll be all fixed. No scars which will be good because I think Cho would probably dump me if I had scars, and she definitely
wouldn’t go to the Yule Ball with me.”

Harry froze. "Yule Ball? What Yule Ball?"

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"I can't dance!" Harry declared, looking more panicked than he had facing off against a dragon with nothing more than his wand. "I'm terrible! Ask Andy!"

Sirius made a comforting cluck as he directed Harry up a flight of stairs towards the tower. Harry had apparently missed everything Bagman had announced including the news that there was an official tournament ball. He understood some of Harry's consternation; there hadn't been time in Harry's etiquette lessons for polishing Harry's dancing skills that much was true.

"We can teach you enough to get by over the next couple of weeks. It'll be fine." He gave a comforting squeeze since he'd wrapped his arm around his son on leaving the infirmary tent and hadn't let go as they walked back through the school to their quarters. "At least you don't have to worry about who to ask."

"Oh Merlin!" Harry clapped one hand to his forehead almost dropping his egg. "I have to ask Hermione!"

"Well, I assume you want to ask her…" Sirius murmured, wondering why Harry was so bothered about it.

"Of course I want to ask her but…” Harry sighed wearily. "We're going on our first date on Saturday and I spent a really, really long time coming up with something special. Now, I have to figure out something for asking her to the ball too! And then there's…"

He went so violently red that Sirius worried it was a reaction to the dragon fight for a moment before Harry mumbled something about kissing. And yeah, Sirius wasn't touching that subject with a ten foot pole unless Harry specifically asked for advice.

"Look," Sirius said firmly, "you've had a busy day," understatement of the century, "we have quarters full of your friends waiting to congratulate you for successfully completing the task and, you know, not dying with the whole thing with the Horntail so…” he made a vague gesture, "worry about this tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." Harry nodded briskly. "Right."

They were almost at the portrait. Sirius gave the password and it swung open, the babble from the waiting group of friends and family. He gave Harry a nudge forward and followed him.

There was an immediate outbreak of applause, whistling and cheering at Harry's entry. Sirius plucked the egg out of Harry's hands as Hermione rushed over and hugged Harry hard enough that Sirius was pleased that Pomfrey had seen to Harry's bruises before he'd seen her.

"Oh God, Harry, that was the most terrifying thing I've ever seen!" Hermione said, low enough that her voice didn't carry to the rest of the room, but Sirius was close enough to catch it as he safely placed the egg on the table.

Harry patted her back consolingly. "The basilisk was worse."

His matter-of-fact tone brought Hermione back to herself and she moved back to consider him with
an arched eyebrow.

"The basilisk bit me," Harry pointed out, "I almost died."

"The Horntail did kind of stomp on you, mate." Ron piped up, moving forward to slap Harry on the shoulder.

"Shield." Harry replied. "I had a shield. I was fine." But there was a flush of red on his neck that gave away his own fear that he might not have survived.

Or maybe Sirius was projecting.

"You were brilliant with the Fireball." Neville beamed at him.

Harry grinned back at him. "How much did you win in Blaise's pool?"

"Lots." Neville said cheerfully.

"Gambling is wrong." Hermione said sternly. "It can lead to all kinds of trouble just look at the twins."

Sirius wondered whether he should investigate as Ron shushed her and darted a quick look around as though to check his mother wasn't present. Sirius cleared his throat and slipped in between the chattering teenagers to gather Harry up.

"Come on." Sirius said cheerfully. "There are others here who want to say hello."

Andromeda approached first as protocol dictated, sweeping Harry out of Sirius's loose hold and into a hug of her own. "You were very smart with the Fireball and frankly I couldn't watch after the Horntail almost roasted you." She leaned back and brushed a hand over the grime on his face. "You need a bath then bed. You're exhausted."

"Madame Pomfrey said no magic for the rest of the day." Harry said.

"And I suggest you don't do anything tomorrow either." Sirius said. "Give your core time to recover." He glanced around. "Where's Ted?"

"There was a report of injured from the Horntail getting loose?" Andromeda said. "He's gone to help."

Sirius surreptitiously inched closer as the Malfoys stood.

Narcissa gave Harry a light hug and kissed his forehead. "You did well, Harry. I was most impressed."

"Your performance was most satisfactory." Lucius didn't try to offer Harry his hand or approach him.

There was a frisson of tension remained between Harry and Lucius. Both appreciated the need to tolerate each other but neither would ever like the other. Sirius wasn't too bothered by that since he didn't think Lucius liked him much and he definitely didn't like Lucius either.

Harry smiled humourlessly back at Lucius. "Perhaps I'm finally living up to my reputation."

Lucius's eyes glittered. "Perhaps." He stroked a hand over the top of his cane. "I expect to have some interesting conversations over the next few days."
Which was good.

If they could convince more of Voldemort's supporters to abandon him because Harry was showing them the power of the opposition, it would be less for them to face in a final showdown.

Harry nodded. "I hope so."

"Oh, I think there'll be a number of interesting conversations with that display of heroics you just performed, Potter." Draco offered his hand to Harry who rolled his eyes and shook it with appropriate seriousness. "Do we know how the Horntail got free to turn up and try to kill you?"

Most of the room looked interested in the answer and Sirius jumped in.

"Remus has gone to investigate." Sirius said.

Narcissa placed a hand on her son's shoulder. "If you'll excuse us; Sirius, Harry. We're going to walk Draco back to Slytherin and take our leave."

Draco pulled a face but nodded. "I should get back and confirm you're still alive."

Sirius's lips twitched as Draco's dry tone. "Your service to the House of Black is appreciated, Draco." He kept his tone light but sincere, and watched as Draco's face lit up with the praise. Apparently it was also enough to warrant an actual real smile from Narcissa. Lucius's suspicious gaze (as though he was wondering about Sirius's motives in praising his son) simply made Sirius's day.

"I should go too." Andromeda said, pulling on her outer robe. "Let Harry get some rest."

Almost immediately Harry's friends surged forward again as Sirius walked the Tonks' and the Malfoys out with a brief confirmation that Friday's family dinner was still on.

By the time he walked back to the main sitting area, the four kids had sprawled into one of the sofas and had started rehashing the entire first task. Dobby was busily providing refreshments.

Sirius snagged a cup of hot chocolate from the elf and took up a watchful pose in front of the fire.

"Krum was brilliant!" Ron enthused.

Hermione shook her head. "He was cruel. The Conjunctivitis Curse is one of the most painful curses!"

"I'm not sure I can throw stones seeing as I froze mine half to death." Harry muttered, wrapping his hands around his mug.

"Poor Fleur!" Hermione said. "She was doing really well too for a while but the sleep spell just wasn't strong enough."

"Cedric did well until the dragon set his broom alight." Neville said diplomatically.

Ron poked Harry. "I thought you were going to summon your broom too, mate?"

"We worked so hard on that plan too." Hermione sighed, folding her arms, obviously waiting for an explanation.

"When they said we had to get the eggs it didn't seem practical." Harry explained. "I fumble the Quaffle enough if I have to carry it in practice and that's with the spell that makes it sticky, I wasn't
going to risk eggs."

Hermione sniffed. "Well, you're very lucky magical fire doesn't work the same way as a real fire which uses air as fuel."

"Weird." Ron commented.

"It's also a conjured wind so it doesn't have the same properties." Harry said simply.

Hermione's face brightened. "Where did you learn that spell anyway?"

"Professor Flitwick assigned me an essay on weather charms." Harry began to explain.

Sirius propped an elbow up on the mantelpiece and watched Harry, alive and well if exhausted and dirty, chatter with his friends.

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"Stay still!"

The strident tone of the healer had Remus changing directions. He halted his search for Moody and made his way to Doctor Jordan. She and Ted Tonks were surrounded by injured dragon handlers. Most of them looked to have minor injuries, scrapes and burns, but there was a covered body a few feet away by the remains of the gate to the arena. The horror of losing one of their own told on the faces of the waiting men and women.

"Can I help?" Remus asked.

Jordan didn't look up but continued working. "That's OK, Mister Lupin. Healer Tonks and I have it under control."

Ted looked over briefly but only acknowledged Remus with a brief grim nod before turning back to his patient.

Remus decided not to argue. The Healers maybe needed to heal the ones they could after losing a patient. He continued on his way.

He caught sight of the Fireball, drugged and unconscious, being levitated into its pen by a team of dragon handlers. The Weasley hair was like a banner. Remus was pleased to see that Charlie was fine. He was about to move away when Charlie saw him and motioned for him to wait. Remus raised a hand in acknowledgement and folded his arms as he watched them manoeuvring the dragon. He shook his head in renewed amazement that Harry had gone up against it one on one.

It was a few minutes later that Charlie wandered over to him. He looked exhausted.

"Remus," Charlie greeted him with a handshake, "how is Harry?"

"Battered and bruised," Remus said, "but otherwise good." Better off than the dragon handlers Remus had seen waiting for treatment.

Charlie winced as though he'd read Remus's mind anyway. "The Fireball team were impressed with him especially when he protected the eggs."

"I couldn't believe the Fireball just let him go in the end." Remus admitted.

Charlie tilted his to the side, his eyes darting back to the pen. "They're very intelligent creatures
despite their reputation of being dumb animals. The Fireball is one of the oldest species. The theory Karl, the team leader, has is that the dragon recognised Harry was protecting the eggs and so wasn't a threat." He gave a small sigh. "Tarkin thought Harry talked her into it since it looked like he said something to her but that's probably wishful thinking. I think all of us dragon handlers wish we could talk to them!"

"The Fireball recognising Harry wasn't a threat seems a reasonable theory to me." Remus said. "I was actually looking for Moody to see if he had found out how the Horntail got loose."

"We'd all like to know." Charlie sighed and shook his head. "It's the craziest thing." He motioned at Remus. "The Horntail team is the most experienced. There is no way they made some kind of mistake."

"Did you know the handler who died?" Remus asked compassionately.

Charlie nodded. "The Reserve is a small place, you know." His face crumpled briefly before he wrestled his grief back. "It's hit us all pretty hard."

Remus made a comforting noise. "I should get on and find Moody."

Charlie pointed to the next pen. "He's in the Horntail's pen with the guys from the Magical Forensic team."

"Thanks."

"No problem," Charlie took a step away, "hey, I was wondering if you can send Mum a patronus, let her know I'm fine?"

Remus could only imagine Molly's reaction if she heard one of the handlers had died and she didn't know Charlie was fine. He cast his patronus and sent it off with Charlie's message.

They headed in different directions and Remus spotted the Horntail's pen immediately. The metal railing and gate were melted in some places, mangled in others. Severus stood by the remains of the entrance and straightened at Remus's approach.

"Lupin." Severus drawled. "This area is off limits."

Before Remus could reply, Moody's gruff voice drifted over the railing. "Let him in Snape."

Severus glowered at Remus but stood aside.

"Thank you, Severus." Remus said politely. He had drawn level with the Potions Professor when Severus cleared his throat.

"I trust Potter is in one piece?" Severus asked casually as though the answer didn't matter to him.

"Poppy healed the bumps and bruises he got." Remus confirmed since he knew Severus was concerned. "He just needs rest."

"He performed adequately." Severus sniffed.

Remus smiled. "High praise from you indeed, Severus." He hesitated a moment. "Any luck with Winky or Summers yet?"

Severus stared down his nose at him. "I believe I will know in three weeks which potion was used. Beyond that..."
"It takes time." Remus nodded. "I'll remind Sirius when he gets too impatient."

"You will be reminding him frequently then," Severus said dryly, "to date, he has contacted me daily for an update."

Remus sighed. Only Sirius… "I'll see what I can do." He promised Severus and finally walked past the railing and into the pen properly.

Moody waved to him from the back of the large pen. Remus spotted Bertie and Caro beside him and a large steel pin that was driven into the ground.

Caro straightened as he approached. "Sirius send you to find out what happened?"

Remus nodded. "Although I am curious to know the answer to that myself." He gestured towards the pin. "What have you found?"

"It's what we haven't found that's the key." Bertie pointed at the empty ground. "No chain."

"There's a faint residue of a banishment charm." Caro chimed in, wiping away the sweat from her brow. "I think it was likely timed to coincide with Harry's attempt at the task."

"The feed was drugged too." Bertie said grimly. "Someone intended for the Horntail to be enraged."

Moody harrumphed. "They couldn't anticipate the eggs getting broken and the Horntail going feral anyway."

"She probably only attacked Miss Delacour in the manner she did because she was under the influence of drugs. It was likely the reason why she didn't stay under the sleep spell either." Bertie sighed. He looked his age for once; tired and weary. "I have to go make a report to Cornelius and Amelia. Whoever did this was responsible for the death of a dragon handler and attempting to kill Harry." He motioned to Caro. "Keep looking for clues. Maybe our culprit dropped something." He sighed. "I'll check in with Bill. He was going to check out the arena."

Caro thinned her lips but applied herself to the task.

Remus grimaced and rubbed his brow. It was no more than they suspected but he wasn't looking forward to breaking the news to Sirius.

"How did they get back here?" Remus asked Moody as they walked back to the mangled gate.

Moody frowned. "Nobody got back here during the last few days. I'd say whoever it was did the damage while the dragons were still being kept in the Forbidden Forest." He huffed impatiently. "The Reserve took responsibility for guard duty then along with a couple of Aurors they accepted for show mostly. I bet Amelia's going to string up her guys' guts for garters."

"It is certain then?" Severus said as they reached him. "It was sabotage."

"Certain as eggs." Moody said with dark humour.

Severus seemed to fall into quiet contemplation as they walked back towards the school, taking it slowly to account for Moody's leg.

"I believe we should consider the possibility that Potter was meant to draw the Horntail in the competition and therefore the preparations were made to make his task a true fight for his life." Severus broke the silence as they approached the tournament tents.
Remus breathed in sharply. "That's not a bad theory. Someone should round up the draw tokens – whatever was used, and examine them."

Moody stopped and pointed at the contestants' tent up ahead of them. "Let's take a gander then, lads."

The tent was empty and devoid of anything but a long table and some flimsy wooden chairs.

Severus sniffed. "There." He pointed at a side table where all four miniature dragons lay still.

Moody huffed and cast a standard detection spell. "Nothing."

"Maybe they couldn't get access to the tokens and that part of the plan failed." Remus suggested. "Otherwise why bother? They couldn't guarantee that the Horntail would enter the arena and kill Harry. It could have just rampaged around the dragon pens."

"Can't argue with that, and either way, I thought Riddle wanted the lad alive at the end of this." Moody said, gathering up the tokens into a bag for evidence anyway.

"He will likely have someone else designated as an alternative for the ritual; one of the other contestants perhaps or the Headmaster or Black." Severus stated matter-of-factly. "But there are two possibilities for him making the task more difficult for Potter: firstly, that he wishes to demonstrate why Potter was able to defeat him as a child in order to underline his anticipated final victory over Potter."

"Strategically that would make sense." Moody agreed grumpily. "It'd scare off any pretenders. Look, see how powerful this lad is, he can defeat dragons but he can't defeat me...so why would anyone else think they can?"

"Well, that's horrifyingly logical." Remus muttered as they left the tent.

"Secondly, this could be a mis-step on the part of Crouch Junior or whichever of his retinue he sent to interfere." Severus said. "Perhaps the order was to make the task more difficult for Potter and the extent was misjudged."

"And that's horrifying in an entirely different way." Remus noted with a sigh. What was worse that Voldemort had set out to make the task truly life-threatening or that his minion had made it so accidentally?

They all paused at the front steps where Hagrid was weeping into a large handkerchief.

"I have to report to Dumbledore." Moody said swiftly and departed much quicker than Remus had considered possible with Moody's bad leg.

"And I should check on the Blood Revelation potion I am brewing." Severus followed after Moody leaving Remus alone with Hagrid.

Cowards, thought Remus with some amusement.

"You alright there, Hagrid?" Remus asked gently, moving to sit beside the half-giant.

Hagrid blew his nose into his handkerchief and shook his head, his bushy beard quivering. "She was a wonderful dragon."

Ah, Hagrid was mourning the loss of the creature. Remus didn't remonstrate him for focusing on the
dragon and not the dragon handler who'd lost his life. He knew Hagrid probably mourned both but creatures had been Hagrid's friends and companions long before any wizards were kind to him.

"She was my fav'rite when I went to look in on 'em in the Forest." More tears threatened. "Such beautiful green scales and yellow spikes!"

Remus frowned. "The dragon handlers let you visit?"

"Me an' most of the other professors who knew." Hagrid sniffled.

"Hagrid," Remus asked urgently, "who else visited the dragons that you know about?"

"Well, now," Hagrid frowned in concentration, "there was Olympe, uh, Madame Maxime…" he blushed a violent red, "we might 'ave been walking in the same direction like."

"And?" prompted Remus, deciding to ignore the hint about Hagrid's love life which was more than he had ever wanted to know about Hagrid's love life.

"Um, Pomona and Poppy," Hagrid hummed, "Minnie, Aurora and Septima…oh, and I think I caught sight of a couple of the Durmstrang lads takin' a look. They scarpered pretty quick when they caught sight o' me."

Remus's brow furrowed in thought. It was unlikely that any of the teachers were suspect but a couple of students…no, teenage boys were not capable of such sabotage; banishing with a timing element was advanced magic – and he should know the amount of times the Marauders had tried it on the chairs of various Professors. But if Crouch Junior and Peter or Travers had polyjuiced as a couple of teenage lads and put on Durmstrang uniforms would anyone know they weren't from the school…? That was a possibility.

Hagrid suddenly focused on Remus. "'ow's 'arry?"

"Tired but fine." Remus patted the large man's shoulder. "I should get back to him and Sirius." He headed briskly up the steps and into the castle.

Remus passed by the Fat Lady's portrait and the sounds of a party drifted out. The Gryffindors were clearly celebrating the win. Hopefully Harry was there with them. He bounded into the House of Black's temporary quarters and frowned at the absence of anyone in the main living area before striding across to the study.

Sirius was exactly where Remus expected him to be; sat at his desk. He was also staring at the blank piece of parchment in front of him as though it held the answers to the universe.

"Padfoot?" Remus cleared his throat, knocking loudly on the open door.

Sirius's head jerked up and he waved Remus in.

Remus closed the door behind him. "Harry at the Gryffindor party?"

"Bed." Sirius said. "He started yawning half-way through his cup of chocolate and made the decision himself to go. Hermione, Ron and Neville said they'd represent him at the party." He gesticulated impatiently. "Well?"

Remus slumped into a nearby chair and filled Sirius in on the various evidence and theories.

Sirius collapsed back in his chair and glared at the ceiling once Remus was done. "Never mind
Harry, I'm not sure I'm going to survive this tournament, Moony."

There wasn't anything Remus could say to comfort his friend.

"I thought it was bad enough seeing his memories," Sirius continued. "Because seeing them reminded me that because I was stupid and in Azkaban I hadn't been there for him when he was faced with Voldemort again and a bloody basilisk and I had failed Harry and failed James…"

"Padfoot," Remus said softly, his heart tearing because he felt for Sirius but also felt the same guilt only he had no excuse. He should have been at King's Cross waiting for Harry on the first day of his first year…he should have tracked down Harry's primary school and checked on him personally…

"And now," Sirius said as though he hadn't heard Remus, "now I am in his life and how much use was I today? None. I still couldn't bloody help him!" He raised a hand and massaged his brow.

"Sirius," Remus sighed, "you have helped him." He caught Sirius's eye to prevent him replying. "Can you imagine what this tournament would have been like if you hadn't done everything in your power to adopt Harry this Summer? If you'd still been on the run?"

Sirius was quiet.

"He would have had none of the political alliances supporting him; none of the emotional comfort of having you, someone who loves him, present – because while I know you would have done what you could to be close by, you couldn't have been here in the school with him. There wouldn't have been the security around the tournament that there is now and he would have been more at risk." Remus felt his own stomach churn at the image he was drawing. "And Harry himself…his power would have been restricted, he would still be taking a half-hearted approach to studying and he certainly wouldn't have had the spell knowledge he needed to face a dragon."

Sirius lurched out of his chair and paced over to the window at the far side of the room.

"Just because a magical barrier stood between you jumping in front of a dragon for him," Remus said, his throat tight with emotion as he got to his feet and followed after Sirius, "do not ever say you are useless or haven't helped him. Do. Not."

It was enough to break the last of Sirius's defences; his head bowed and his shoulders shook. Remus gathered up his friend and hugged him tightly. Sirius needed the release of tension a good crying jag would give him; he'd almost seen his son trampled to death by a dragon, had watched his son face off against another in a task that had sent one of the Champions out of the arena on a stretcher. It was no wonder Sirius was a mess. Remus was half-tempted to join in; his tears scoured the back of his throat and pushed at the back of his eyes but Sirius needed him to be the strong one.

"Sorry," mumbled Sirius eventually, "I know I shouldn't let it all get to me but…"

"You're allowed to let it get to you occasionally, Padfoot." Remus chided him gently, letting Sirius pull away to blow his nose and mop at his face.

"Just not in public where Crouch Junior will see me though," Sirius grimaced, wafting his handkerchief in the direction of the outside. "Otherwise he'd know his plan to make my life hell was working."

"Focus on the positive, Sirius," Remus advised. "Harry is doing what he set out to do. He completely owned the actual task. He was totally brilliant and he's in the lead. He's on course to win it."

Sirius nodded briskly. "You're right." He took a deep breath and banished the handkerchief. "I think
I might turn in early myself."

"Probably a good thing." Remus said mildly.

Sirius gestured back towards the door. "You should go and tell Moody and Albus about the visitors in the Forbidden Forest and the possibility of Crouch and accomplice moonlighting as Durmstrang kids. We should check the map daily; make sure everyone is who they're supposed to be."

Remus nodded. "You'll be alright?"

"I'll be alright." Sirius confirmed. "Thanks, Moony."

"Any time, Padfoot." Remus made for the door and glanced back only to find Sirius in his Grim form huddled up to the window and staring out into the twilight. He hesitated, wondering if he should stay anyway, but in the end the knowledge that he had vital intelligence to impart to others made him leave.

He paused in the living room and Dobby popped immediately.

"Dobby takes care of Harry Potter and Harry Potter's Paddy." Dobby reassured him. "You bes not worrying."

Easier said than done but Remus appreciated the sentiment. He left his loved ones in Dobby's capable hands and went in search of Moody.

o-O-o

25th November 1994

**HARRY POTTER, DRAGON LORD! By Rita Skeeter**

In a remarkable display of power, Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, demonstrated how to tame a dragon. The last Champion to face the first task of the tournament, Harry found himself up against a Chinese Fireball – one of the most dangerous species of dragon, famed for their intelligence and agility. Harry's athleticism saw him climb across the cliffy rocks used in the arena before dropping down behind the Fireball to take it by surprise with a magical ice-cold wind. With the dragon down, Harry was able to carry away the four eggs with aplomb, securing himself first place in the tournament!

But that was not the end of Harry's dragon-taming escapade. The Hungarian Horntail which had put paid to French contestant, Fleur Delacour's hopes of completing the task, went feral. Having escaped from its dragon pen, it stampeded into the arena just as Harry was leaving and attacked! In an impressive display Harry teamed up with his former opponent of the Fireball to protect the dragon eggs and overcome the Horntail!

It was a riveting and breath-taking to see our young hero fight so heroically!

Mister Bagman, the tournament's official Ministry representative, confirmed that investigations by the Department of Mysteries and the DMLE were underway to find out how the Horntail got loose. This lapse in security may be down to the Romanian Reserve dragon team who had responsibility for the upkeep of the dragons during the tournament.

Amos Diggory, father of third placed Champion, Cedric Diggory, commented that the tasks and events with the Horntail demonstrated the need for strong magical creature controls and questioned once again the Wizengamot's review of the Magical Creature Laws.
"Well, well, well," the Dark Lord murmured softly, tapping the newspaper and sending the dragon in the picture on the front page cowering in terror behind the pictorial form of Potter who glared out at the Dark Lord, "it seems Harry avoided your trap, Bartemius." There was a tense note in the Dark Lord's voice that noted his dissatisfaction.

Peter hid his smile as Barty bowed his head in dejected submission and slumped to kneel beside the chair where the infant Dark Lord sat boosted up with a cushion at the dining table.

"I have failed you, Father." Barty said miserably.

Peter tried not to look pleased as he placed the Dark Lord's potion in front of him next to the paper and eased himself down into the seat opposite, his shoulder aching from where Sirius had cut him. The Dark Lord hadn't offered to heal him and Peter had had to make do himself.

"You have done well." The Dark Lord's young hand reached out and stroked Barty's hair. "It was most unfortunate he did not face the Horntail in the task itself but his escape from its rampage has proven he is worthy to be my chosen enemy."

"Why didn't he face the Horntail?" asked Peter carefully. If the Dark Lord was not displeased with Barty then Peter would have to watch his tone.

"According to Karkaroff, Dumbledore created the tokens on the morning of the tournament and kept them with him until he gave them to Bagman for the draw." Barty explained tersely. "There was no opportunity to manipulate them."

"Hmmm," the Dark Lord chuckled, "perhaps the old fool is finally gaining some sense." He turned back to the paper. "And what of your host? Is Igor causing you and Dennis any trouble?"

"He's too scared of you to cause trouble, Father." Barty smirked. "He does our bidding like the snivelling yellow-bellied coward is he."

Peter felt a momentary pang of sympathy for Karkaroff for having to put up with Barty's and Dennis's bullying. Still, he'd never liked the guy and he'd sold out the Dark Lord. Karkaroff had to believe that helping them was his only way of having a chance to live. Of course, what Karkaroff didn't know was that the Dark Lord had already promised Dennis would have the honour of killing Karkaroff after the end of the tournament, when they no longer needed him and the Durmstrang ship to hide within and thus have revenge for Karkaroff sending his father to jail.

He did think it was an ingenious way for the two of them to hide-out at Hogwarts without anyone being any the wiser. The ship was considered Bulgarian territory and none of their enemies could risk going onto the ship without causing a diplomatic incident. Barty had thought of it, of course. It had been relatively easy for the Dark Lord to task a newly freed Dennis Travers with the task of going to Durmstrang in a polyjuiced disguise and threatening Karkaroff into obedience. They had been lucky that the checks for identity were all done within Hogwarts castle and no-one questioned whether there was anybody left on the ship. Dumbledore trusted that his peers had only brought those they had admitted to bringing.

Fool.

It was a small crack in Moody's security net but it was a crack Barty had been quick to take advantage of and take advantage of it they had.

Barty and Dennis had been able to access the dragon pens in relative anonymity pretending to be two of the Durmstrang students. They had successfully sabotaged the feed and the Horntail's chain. It
was just the final part for Harry to get the Horntail in the draw that hadn't gone to plan.

Not that the failure seemed to matter to the Dark Lord, Peter thought sourly, careful to keep his eyes lowered to the table so his Master couldn't read his mind.

"Excellent." The Dark Lord drank down his potion. "We have made a successful start to our campaign." He tapped the newspaper again. "But perhaps we shall call this a draw as Potter survived without major injury."

Barty lowered his head again.

"Do not worry, Bartemius." The Dark Lord soothed him like a small child. "Potter will be defeated in good time." He smiled evilly – an incongruous sight on the features of the toddler he inhabited. "And in the meantime we can have some more fun with him. The second task will come soon enough and perhaps..." he gestured at the small sentence announcing a Yule Ball was to be held at Hogwarts as part of the tournament's events. "We should think of something for Yule...a Christmas present."

Barty's face brightened with malevolent glee.

Peter kept his expression as impassive as he could. He was rapidly coming to the conclusion that Barty wasn't altogether sane. But then how could he be, reasoned Peter. Barty had been locked up in a basement by his own father for over ten years. Peter felt his own existence as the family rat of the Weasleys was infinitely preferable in comparison.

"May I..." Barty began eagerly.

"Yes, you may think of something." The Dark Lord acquiesced. "But do not use Fenrir. I have given him another mission."

Barty frowned heavily. "I would have been happy to have assisted you, Father."

"You must always choose the right tool for the right job, Bartemius." The Dark Lord said firmly. "Fenrir is imminently suited for the task of menacing Potter's supporters such as the Weasleys and undermining his political base and agenda, especially as Potter is so focused on being kind to the werewolves. Fenrir is a blunt instrument but he will be effective."

"I understand, Father." Barty said quickly. "And you are right; I will learn to choose the right tool for the right task."

Tools, Peter thought derisively. That was how they were all seen, even Barty himself.

"So, Potter," the Dark Lord murmured down to the picture of Harry, "our war continues and we have won some battles and lost some on either side."

"Father?" Barty asked tentatively.

The Dark Lord's eyes slid to Barty and gazed at him sternly. "Why don't you list our battles so far, Bartemius?"

"The first task was one battle and you declared a draw there." Barty immediately replied, his elegant fingers wriggling in the air. "The second...was getting Harry into the tournament which we won although they tried to claim a victory in defeat."

"Excellent." The Dark Lord said.
Barty regained some confidence with the praise. "We liberated Travers but they foiled our attempt to grab Potter at the World Cup."

"And they have also recently found your elf and the Summers woman." The Dark Lord said quietly.

Barty's face was priceless.

Peter hid his own glee at the shock that radiated through Barty's handsome features. The Dark Lord had been furious when Peter had arrived back from the crypt with the news that he had barely escaped since the location had been found by the Aurors. Peter had kept his head filled with his battle with Sirius and subsequent panicked run from Sirius's Grim form to hide his remarks to his old friend.

He still felt a thrill about what he'd done. He suspected Sirius already knew about the ritual and therefore he didn't believe that he'd betrayed the Dark Lord at all. And he was still committed to being the Dark Lord's servant; believed that in the final showdown the Dark Lord with his years of experience, and guarded against the ancient magic Lily had invoked, would prevail against Harry. But maybe there was the possibility that Harry would pull another rabbit out of his hat and Peter hoped he had done enough to make Sirius hesitate about killing him next time their paths crossed.

"When…" Barty began.

"Last week." The Dark Lord said mildly. "I am surprised that you didn't feel the breach in your blood wards." There was a question in the statement of why Barty hadn't felt it. They'd only been alerted because of the trip alarms that the Dark Lord had insisted be placed around the crypt.

"The spell did call for the blood of a Head of House and as I've had some problems with the inheritance ritual," Barty hurried out as an excuse, "perhaps the wards did not work as they were meant to as I am not the recognised Head of House yet."

"Learn from your mistake, Bartemius." The Dark Lord said. "Your inattentiveness has caused us to lose our spare amniotic fluid for the ritual potion, my willing servant as Peter was almost caught, and our enemy now has your elf in their grasp."

"Winky will not betray me." Barty said firmly. "She loves her bond too much."

"The Blacks were purported to have a spell that would override the ownership of an elf for a short time." The Dark Lord informed him mildly. "I once heard Bella speak of it. I do not doubt the new Lord Black will know of it."

Barty bowed his head again.

"Do not fret, Bartemius." The Dark Lord reached out and stroked Barty's hair. The gesture turned Peter's stomach. "Your Draught of the Sleeping Beauty was perfect and there is no antidote." His young twisted features turned contemplative. "Although Severus might find one at Albus's behest, of course."

That was a possibility. Snape had been a pain back at Hogwarts but he had been a pain with a rare talent. If anyone could find an antidote it was probably Snape, Peter thought with faint alarm.

"Maybe it's time for us to bring Severus into our confidence." The Dark Lord mused out loud. "It would be good to have an actual Potions Master complete the ritual potion."

Barty frowned, clearly unhappy at the idea of anyone else finding favour with the Dark Lord. "Father?"
"Tools, Bartemius," the Dark Lord reminded him, "and Severus is a wonderfully sharp implement when he's used correctly."

"He betrayed you!" Barty spluttered.

"No," the Dark Lord's red eyes glittered, "Severus has always been mine. It was I who placed him within Albus Dumbledore's circle and he who first informed me of the threat posed by Potter. I do not doubt that he continues to serve me, remaining close to the Potter boy and Dumbledore to ensure I have the best of intelligence. I saw for myself how much he despises the boy when I occupied Quirrell. I do not believe he realised that I was behind Quirrell's machinations."

Peter rather doubted that the Dark Lord was right about Snape's loyalty. Snape had loved Lily once and he wasn't completely certain that Snape hadn't known that the Dark Lord occupied Quirrell when he'd kept getting in between the Dark Lord and the Philosopher's Stone. He kept his thoughts to himself though.

"Yes," the Dark Lord mused again, "it is perhaps time to bring Severus into the circle."

"How will I approach him?" Barty asked somewhat sulkily.

"Knowing Severus, he will approach you through Karkaroff soon enough." The Dark Lord said, amused. "I look forward to your Yule present, Barty. I have forgiven you your mistakes to date but another failure may not go unpunished, my Heir."

"Yes, Father." Barty replied straight away.

The Dark Lord waved a tiny hand at Peter. "I am ready to retire."

Peter hurried to see to his Master, keeping his own mind busy with the details of ensuring the bed was turned down and the pillows comfortably positioned before he left the Dark Lord in the care of the snake. Peter reluctantly returned to the small living room.

Barty had gotten up off the floor and was sprawled on the sofa.

Peter ignored him and slid into his seat at the dining table, pulling the paper toward him to reread it once more.

"Do you believe him about Snape?" asked Barty into the stretching silence.

"If the Dark Lord says he is to be trusted, he is to be trusted." Peter replied evenly. "I don't question the Dark Lord." It made him the perfect choice as the willing servant, Peter thought to himself. The right tool for the right job; the Dark Lord had chosen correctly after all.

"What about if it protects him?" quibbled Barty, lurching to his feet and pacing back and forth.

Peter flipped the page. "Even then."

"I don't trust Snape." Barty growled. "He's in too deep with Dumbledore."

"That was his mission." Peter pointed out dryly. "He was meant to get in deep with Dumbledore so he could report to the Dark Lord with confidence." He lifted a shoulder. "I would say he was certainly more committed to the cause than you back in the day. After all, you only took the Mark because Rabastan asked you to, didn't you?"

Barty waved away Peter's remarks about his own loyalty. "And now?" He zeroed in on the opening
Peter had left. "Do you say he's as committed as me now?"

"I doubt any of us are as committed as you now." Peter said dryly. Or needed committing, he mused silently, as Barty began laughing, bending double in his hysteria.

"You're funny, Pettigrew." He straightened eventually and wiped his eyes. "And about Snape?"

"If the Dark Lord believes he belongs to the Dark Lord then I'm certain that he has his reasons." Peter prevaricated.

"But?" pressed Barty, his eyes narrowing on Peter expectantly.

"But I know Snape loved Lily Potter at one point." Peter said succinctly. "Whether the fact that the Dark Lord killed her has changed anything for Snape...well, only he knows for certain." He raised a hand. "On the other hand, Snape hated James and Sirius with a vengeance. He hates Harry now; that much I know. The boys used to complain enough about his unfair treatment of him when I was living as the Weasleys' pet rat. Can I see him truly on the side which is now being led by Sirius Black and a Potter who looks like James?" He shrugged again.

Barty considered Peter's words and frowned heavily. "Thanks, Peter." He sighed and dropped back onto the sofa. "I need a good idea for Yule."

"Don't look at me." Peter said dismissively. "I'm crap at coming up with Christmas presents."

"I'd like another go at the Weasleys but if Fenrir has been given them..." Barty sighed. "Perhaps Potter's brand new girl friend? She's a muggleborn, isn't she? And it would be such a heartbreaking blow for our young hero." He pouted. "But that seems so cliché."

Peter kept his own counsel and tried not to think about anything but lunch.
Ensuring Pronglet Survives:8

Sirius settled into the comfy armchair Albus had conjured and relaxed a little in the safety of Albus's office. He took a sip of his coffee and gazed around at the War Council. It seemed like years had passed since their first meeting. Cornelius was chatting away with Amelia and Bertie across from Sirius and Albus had left the power position behind his desk to sit with them as peers. They all had come a long way in a short space of time; had forged a good working relationship to band against the return of Voldemort. It was no wonder that two of their invited guests of Moody and Snape were viewing them with open suspicion, and even Remus viewed them with an air of bewilderment. It gave Sirius a surprising amount of satisfaction.

"Perhaps we should begin." Sirius said, cutting through the chatter with quiet forcefulness. He motioned with his cup. "First on the agenda is the tournament."

Albus perked up immediately, obviously pleased that after having no clear role on the council, he had something that was mostly his to represent.

"I think we're all aware of the results of the first task," Albus began, adjusting his orange and yellow striped robes, "Harry was successful in completing the task and leads the tournament." He heaved what was for Albus a heavy sigh. "Unfortunately there was an attempt to sabotage the tournament." He motioned at Moody.

"After investigation," Moody nodded toward Bertie and Amelia, "we've established that the Horntail was drugged with a stimulant to increase its aggression, probably over a couple of days. The chain securing the Horntail was charmed to banish during Potter's task. Which leads to a number of questions." His magical eye swivelled. "Firstly, what was the goal?"

"We've concluded the likely aim was to increase the difficulty level of Harry's task." Bertie chimed in. "I believe that the ritual is at the root of it. Riddle has to ensure that Harry is in genuine fear of his life and not immured to the danger because it is a task within the tournament. The other possible motivation that has been suggested is that Riddle wants Harry to be shown as powerful so when he defeats him, no-one else will dare stand against him. Both may have played a part here."

"Either suits Tom's agenda, I fear," Albus sighed. "If Harry dies attempting a task, Voldemort could claim he defeated him that way. If he survives he is primed for the ritual, and, yes; if Harry were to die at Tom's hand after his impressive displays in the tournament, it would crush any opposition Tom might face."

"I believe that too." Cornelius piped up.

"I think we all know it." Amelia said brusquely. "He's the banner we're fighting behind. If he falls..."

"Perhaps," Sirius said mildly, "for the sake of what remains of my sanity we could all stop talking about what might happen if Harry..." his throat closed up on the word as though his body would not physically declare the possibility of Harry dying. He made a vague wave instead.

"Apologies, Sirius," said Albus kindly.

Sirius pointed at Moody. "Right, we've covered the why, but personally I'm more interested in the how."

Moody looked at him approvingly. "Trained you well, Black." He jerked his thumb in the direction of Remus. "From Remus's chat with Hagrid we know security was compromised during the period
the dragons were hidden in the Forest ahead of the tournament.”

Amelia shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable. "I'm sorry to say that the Aurors on duty assisting the team from the dragon reserve were lax in their attention by allowing visitors." Her lips formed a grim line. "They have been reprimanded." She gestured. "Upon pressing them for information they were able to provide a complete list of all the visitors to the dragons in the Forest."

"Now here's where it gets interesting," Moody said with worrying enthusiasm, "apart from a host of teachers who should have known better, the Aurors noted a couple of boys from Durmstrang hanging about which corroborates Hagrid's information."

"We're also certain that the boys were the culprits as all the teachers when questioned confessed their foray to see the dragons and agreed to an identity check there and then." Amelia slid in.

Moody huffed. "Thing is we don't think these boys are boys."

"The Aurors have failed to identify them from the immigration passports of the students we have here." Amelia said.

"It's brilliant in its simplicity." Albus noted seriously. "We see the uniform, recognise that the individual is a student and we rarely think any more about them."

"Especially students you don't teach yourself." Moody made an unhappy noise. "Have to confess I'd have a hard time identifying the foreign lot beyond the two Champions."

"The question is," Remus said, "do we think Crouch Junior and company have used Durmstrang uniforms because it's expedient, or because of another reason."

"Such as getting help from their former cohort, Karkaroff." Moody growled. "I know what I think."

"I think we all know what you think, Alastor." Amelia said, some amusement creeping back into her voice. "The problem is that we don't have proof of their point of entry."

Remus frowned. "Surely we can eliminate the Forest itself. The dragons were hidden between the Centaurs and the Acromantulas. It would be madness to apparate into either territory."

"That's my view," Moody said, "however Amelia is right that we don't know for certain that's not what happened."

"Which means we don't have grounds to request a search of the Durmstrang ship or to take Karkaroff in for formal questioning." Amelia stressed.

"And not that we could demand such actions without going through proper diplomatic channels." Cornelius hastened to add.

Sirius was prepared to accept that since the Durmstrang ship was officially Bulgarian territory. Any presumptive arrogance on the part of the British government and it could take until the end of the tournament before they were allowed near it.

"I approached Igor myself," Albus said, "using the pretext of suggesting it was one of the actual Durmstrang students visiting the dragons." He shook his head, his long beard trailing. "Alas, he gave nothing away if he is involved."

Sirius glanced at Snape.
"Karkaroff and I have avoided each other." Snape bit out tersely.

Which was to be expected. They were both former Death Eaters, disgraced. Normally they would do their best to ignore the association.

Sirius turned it over in his head. Would Karkaroff be suspicious if Snape did approach him? He looked at Snape who sneered at him. Sirius ignored him.

"Wouldn't it make sense for you as a spy to try and find out if Karkaroff has heard from Voldemort?" Sirius asked pointedly. "You are supposed to be playing for his side as far as he's concerned."

Snape stiffened. "If you are inferring for one second that my loyalty is in question..."

Sirius cut him off with an impatient gesture. "Don't be stupid, Snape. I know where your loyalty lies and I know it isn't with Voldemort since you want to kill him as much as I do."

There was a fleeting look of surprise on Snape's face before it smoothed into a thoughtful expression. "I could try," he eventually said.

"If Igor is involved in some way," Albus said, with a disapproving look in Sirius's direction, "you may draw Tom's attention."

Snape bowed his head in acknowledgement. "I am certain I could convince him of my continued value as his spy within your ranks, Headmaster."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "And within Sirius's ranks? Do you honestly think that he will believe you have managed to ingratiate yourself with Sirius, with the known animosity between the two of you?"

"He will believe that I am attempting to place myself usefully for him at great expense to my own pride, and that Black continues to distrust me," Snape said dryly, "but that I look forward to the day when he might reward me with the honour of killing Black to make up for my having to have anything to do with Black at all."

Sirius laughed because he knew it would work. Not to mention that on some level Snape probably did want to kill him.

"And all this presupposes Karkaroff is helping Riddle." Amelia pointed out.

Bertie chuckled at Moody's grumpy expression. "I wouldn't bet against Alastor in this instance."

Moody harrumphed. "I'll be increasing the patrols by the ship in any case." He sighed. "We've also had an unknown animagus register on the wards but...the first sign of them was the day of the task so could have been anyone including someone authorised to attend."

"Is it possible that Crouch Junior is an unregistered animagus?" Amelia asked.

"He did not have such a skill when he was at Hogwarts." Albus said.

Remus frowned. "But he could have learned to become an animagus between leaving Hogwarts and being imprisoned in Azkaban."

"If he did, then why didn't he use his form to escape his father?" Sirius asked pointedly. "Fair enough he might have been confused all of the time but...as an animagus I have to say that it's unlikely it would never have entered his head to change form even if it was to escape the immediate
horror of his captivity."

From the varying expressions of pity to horror on the faces around him, Sirius realised he might have given his own past away with his words.

"It's all speculation." Moody snorted, yanking everyone's attention back on track. "We'll keep an eye on the wards for any other instances."

Sirius noticed Remus had his 'I have a thought but need to think about it more' face. He left him alone. "So that's what we're left with: tightening security and maintaining vigilance."

"Our next task is February." Albus said. "It gives us plenty of time to prepare."

"But there is the Yule Ball." Amelia said. "If I were Riddle I would be tempted to do something."

Albus sighed. "Yes, Tom always did have a flare for dramatics."

"Moving on then," Sirius nodded toward Cornelius.

Cornelius puffed up proudly. "Harry's outstanding performance against the dragon has led to some of those we are seeking alliances with on the neutral side to reconsider their reluctance to ally with us." Hesquirmed with glee. "Sirius and I have received a number of invitations since the first task which we will follow up." He made a small gesture with his cup. "Possibly we will be unable to convert them into reality before the December Wizengamot, but it may still benefit us in validating the report from the Committee looking into the magical creature laws."

"Lucius reports a similar state of reconsideration among the pureblood houses." Sirius said. "Even if nothing comes of it immediately, it may hamper Wenlock's opposition."

"Excellent news." Albus beamed at them and Cornelius soaked up the approval like a sponge.

"We've got some good news too since we found the missing pregnant woman." Amelia said. "However she is in the same state as the Crouch elf and so we're waiting on a revival potion."

Sirius glanced at Snape.

"With the blood from the woman I have narrowed it to two possible potions that were used." Snape informed them briskly. "I am now waiting on a Blood Revelation potion to brew for the next set of tests."

"You should come work for me when this is all over." Bertie said, sipping his drink, "we could use someone with your skills in potions."

Sirius noticed how stunned and hopeful Snape looked in the brief second before he controlled his reaction. He wondered if it had once been a dream of Snape's to work for the DOM before he'd succumbed to the lure of the Death Eaters. He had never really considered that Snape would have had dreams, wants, hopes when they had both been school boys at odds with one another. He had been too immersed in his own troubles to view Snape as anything other than a nemesis rather than a boy like himself. Was it a sign of maturity that he finally saw Snape as a human being with all of the flaws and dreams being human entailed?

That was a scary thought.

Sirius mentally shook away his entire train of thought as Amelia continued confirming that they believed Voldemort and Peter at least to be in London.
"Do we think Pettigrew's sudden decision to provide information sincere?" Amelia asked bluntly.

Sirius frowned as he and Remus glanced toward each other, confirming their shared thought of 'not bloody likely.'

"Peter's probably hedging his bets." Remus said diplomatically.

"Trying to cover his arse." Sirius muttered with disgust.

"Perhaps he is truly regretful." Albus's tone was softly chiding.

"He is trying to ensure that I won't just kill him." Sirius corrected sharply. "I don't doubt any information he provides may be useful but let's not kid ourselves that he's doing it for any other reason than because he wants to save himself."

"So we can't count on him fully changing sides and telling us where he is." Amelia cut in before Albus could wax lyrical about redemption and second chances.

"Not until it's beyond question which side will win." Remus confirmed.

Sirius motioned at Bertie who grimaced around a mouthful of tea.

He swallowed hastily. "My news isn't so good. The Treasure Hunt is on-going. We haven't had any luck locating the remaining item so far." He sighed. "Our search continues." He gestured at Remus. "Bill mentioned that you'd suggested talking to the ghosts and portraits?"

Remus nodded. "It was just a thought. They might have seen Riddle hide it."

Albus made a sudden noise of exclamation. "Of course! We should talk to the Ravenclaw ghost!"

They all looked at him with varying expressions of quizzical bewilderment.

"The Ravenclaw ghost is the daughter of Rowena Ravenclaw." Albus explained, as though they all should have known.

"You couldn't have mentioned this earlier?" Bertie sighed.

Albus appeared suitably recalcitrant. "Alas, it did not occur to me."

"Don't the ghosts have to answer any questions you ask?" Remus asked.

"Not exactly. The ghosts know they are allowed to remain at Hogwarts at the Headmaster's pleasure, therefore they are honour bound to answer any questions." Albus explained.

"But they can choose not to." Bertie said, nodding understandingly. "Still it might be wise to have you with us when we question her."

Albus agreed readily and the War Council was done for another day.

Sirius wandered back to his rooms, a quiet and contemplative Remus beside him. They entered to find Harry immersed in homework at the dining table. They slid into seats, Sirius taking the chair next to Harry while Remus sat opposite.

Harry raised his head briefly. "How did it go?"

"Pretty much confirmed what we already knew." Sirius said and went over the main points for his
"If it's official that the Horntail was sabotaged," Harry said with a deep frown, "that means Fleur was unfairly challenged during the task."

"I'm not sure it changed the outcome by much." Remus said. "Her sleep spell just wasn't strong enough."

"But she might have been able to save one of the eggs," Harry argued, "or avoided getting hurt."

Sirius felt a rush of pride. Harry had such a good heart. "I'll raise it with Albus." He promised.

Harry smiled at him.

Sirius turned to Remus. "And you," he wagged a finger at him, "what have you been thinking about?"

Remus gave a sheepish sigh. "I was wondering whether it would be appropriate to make some discreet personal enquiries to see if Minister Oblansk would give us permission to search the Durmstrang ship."

"You mean avoid the official channels and request it as a favour?" Sirius asked marvelling at Remus's lateral thinking. It might work. "You and Bogdan did get on well at the World Cup."

"We'd still have to be cautious about how we asked and probably bring Cornelius in to give us cover if it went pear-shaped." Remus cautioned.

"It's a good idea." Sirius said.

"It's a brilliant idea!" Harry added enthusiastically. "I can also ask Viktor to watch for anything suspicious on the ship. I mean," he said swiftly seeing the objection Sirius was going to make, "not to go looking but just if anything looks odd to let us know."

Sirius hummed as he considered the idea. Viktor seemed on the level but it was risky trusting him. However it was a good suggestion.

"Maybe you should bring all the Champions in on the news of the sabotage." Sirius began. "Ask them all to keep a look out. We honestly don't know for certain that Junior is working with Karkaroff and is hiding on the ship. They might wear different uniforms next time."

Harry nodded. "I'll talk with them at Quidditch practice."

"And I'll send word to speak with Bogdan via Tomas when I'm next in France." Remus said.

"Is that before or after your date with Tonks?" asked Harry slyly.

"It is not a date!" Remus immediately denied. "We're going for a friendly drink so I can inform Tonks my interest is elsewhere."

"Really?" Harry's eyebrows shot skyward as though in surprise although Sirius knew he was well aware of Remus's interest in a female werewolf back at the chateau since Sirius had informed Harry himself.

Remus hurriedly got to his feet. "I should go. Lots to do." He was barely out of the door before both Harry and Sirius dissolved into laughter.
26th November 1994

Remus tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for Tonks to arrive. He really wasn't looking forward to the next hour. He liked Tonks and he didn't want to make things awkward with her. But he couldn't allow her to continue to send him suggestive messages when he wasn't interested in her romantically; when he was looking forward to returning to France and seeing Clara again.

The floo chimed and Tonks walked out with her usual sassy confidence. She was wearing muggle clothing; blue jeans, a t-shirt proclaiming her love for an obscure muggle rock band, boots and a thick leather jacket. Her hair was a bright pink matching the colour of her top.

"You're looking good, Remus." Tonks winked.

Remus raised an eyebrow. He had also dressed in muggle wear of black jeans, an old flannel shirt in a washed out green, boots and a short woollen black jacket.

"Shall we?" Remus motioned at the floo.

They made their way to The Leaky Cauldron. Remus found them a quiet corner and bought them two pints of ale.

"Tonks," he began, "these notes that you've been sending me..."

"Got your attention, didn't it?" Tonks said, grinning. "You're a hard man to pin down."

"Then, you're serious?" Remus questioned, a tad stunned that she hadn't immediately laughed it off and admitted it was all a joke.

Tonks lowered her drink and regarded him with a slight frown. "You thought I was making fun of you?"

"The thought had crossed my mind." Remus said mildly. It had happened once before with a witch at school.

"Then let me assure you," Tonks said, "I'm very serious. I was made up when Sirius mentioned at dinner that you were looking for a relationship." Her grey eyes shone with nothing but sincerity which made Remus's heart sink as he considered what he had to tell her.

Remus shifted in his seat. "The thing is that when Sirius used me as a way of diverting attention from his own lack of a love life, he wasn't aware that I was already interested in someone." He fidgeted with his glass as comprehension filled Tonks' face.

"Ah," she winced in a dramatic fashion, "and I'm guessing it isn't me that's caught your eye?"

"I'm afraid not, Tonks." Remus agreed gently.

"Bugger." Tonks said, slumping back in her chair, amusement beginning to overtake the embarrassment of the moment. "And I thought I was so clever getting in before anyone else."

Remus blushed.

She sipped her ale and eyed him speculatively. "Well, I guess I shall have to settle for being your best girl buddy."
Remus almost spit out his mouthful of ale. "Sorry?"

"You know," Tonks grinned, "the girl buddy you talk to when you need advice about girls and fashion and," she made a circular gesture with one hand, "things you don't want to talk about with a bloke."

"Oh, you mean a girl buddy." Remus said teasingly. "Yeah, it's been a while since I've had one of those." Sadness coloured the last of his words despite his intention to keep it light.

"Lily?" Tonks inquired gently.

Remus nodded. "She kind of adopted all of the Marauders when she married James."

"I think I met her?" Tonks said. "Sirius brought her by with James when I was little. I remember thinking she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I insisted on my hair being her colour for days after."

"You met her quite a few times I think." Remus said. "You'd be too young to remember. Sirius tried to stay in touch as much as he could with your mother, and, of course, it was rare to find Sirius without James even after James's marriage."

"Did you mind?" Tonks asked with genuine interest.

"Sometimes," Remus admitted, "mostly when James would take Sirius's side in something, not because it was right but because it was Sirius." He frowned. "I never realised back then how much Sirius did the same for James. They were closer than brothers but then they were friends from the first whereas it took a little time for the four of us as a group to properly gel."

Tonks took a gulp of her drink. "It's weird. Whenever I think about you guys at school, I always just assume that you came fully formed as Marauders. Sirius used to tell me stories when he visited when I was a kid." She peeked at him over her glass. "That's partially why I had such a crush on you. He made you all sound so cool."

Remus chuckled. "Our being friends didn't happen overnight." He shrugged. "I think Peter and I assumed Sirius and James had been friends for years; they just had that vibe from the get-go despite only meeting on the train." He sipped his ale. "Neither of us wanted to intrude so we ended up hanging around each other by default. It wasn't until...Peter and I got cornered by a group of older Slytherins near the library. We were outnumbered but suddenly James and Sirius were there, and the four of us made short work of the six of them. That was when we all started to hang around together."

"That sounds like Sirius." Tonks said. "Taking on Slytherins and fighting."

"He has a surprisingly good heart." Remus said defensively although her tone was fond and teasing rather than critical. He raised his half empty glass. "Most people miss that."

"I don't think anyone can deny it with everything he's done for Harry." Tonks said, motioning with her glass.

Remus shrugged. "You'd be surprised. There are still some who focus on his name and the reputation of his family. I've heard people say he took Harry to gain power, to increase his political base; not because he truly loves him."

Tonks nodded slowly. "I can relate on the family front." She tipped her glass in Remus's direction. "I get comments occasionally, and I'm not even a Black by name."
Remus tilted his head in her direction. "You did inherit the eyes."

Tonks grimaced. "I look like my Aunt Bella naturally. So you can understand why I morph into looking more like the Tonks side."

"Your mother doesn't mind?" Remus asked.

"I think she understands." Tonks said. "She's always been supportive. I had a pretty tough time at school until I settled on a base form."

Remus could guess at what kind of issues Tonks had faced especially with teenage boys and girls; the boys would be crude and the girls jealous.

Tonks smiled suddenly. "You don't have to look so fierce on my behalf, Remus. Any hurt was long healed and I did have a few good friends."

Remus huffed out an amused sigh. He set his glass down, slightly surprised to find it empty.

Tonks nodded at it, draining her own. "My round. You can tell me all about the lady who beat me to you."

Remus didn't have time to protest; she was gone with the empty glasses. He relaxed in his chair, relieved the discussion had gone so well, and credited Tonks for her graciousness in the face of his rejection.

A sudden movement yanked his attention from his thoughts as Sian slid into the chair Tonks had vacated. She looked grim.

"Sian, what's wrong?" Remus asked urgently, knowing it had to be bad for her to approach him so publicly.

"Fenrir came back to the pack yesterday." Sian said. "He asked for volunteers to complete a mission for the Dark Lord."

Remus glanced around anxiously. "We need to find somewhere more private."

He stood up and herded her in front of him to the bar where Tonks was waiting to be served. He tapped Tonks on the shoulder. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of Sian.

"I leave you alone for a minute and you find another girl?" She teased.

Remus flushed but focused on the immediate issue. "Tonks, Sian's an old friend. Would you be OK if we got the next round at your place?" He hoped his pleading expression was enough to make her comply without any other kind of explanation.

Her grey eyes so like Sirius's narrowed but she pushed away from the bar with a shrug. "Sure. Shall we use the floo?"

It took little more than a few minutes for them to travel to Tonks' small flat. She locked down the floo and smiled ruefully as she picked up some scattered clothing.

"Sorry for the mess," Tonks grinned suddenly, "I wasn't expecting to get this lucky on a first date."

Remus rolled his eyes at her.

"Remus..." Sian started to protest, bristling at the implication that Remus had revealed her to nothing
more than a casual romantic interest.

"Introductions," he declared quickly, "Tonks, this is Sian, a member of Fenrir's pack. She has information."

He was relieved to see Tonks sobered, assuming a demeanour more in keeping with her job as an Auror.

"And Sian, this is Tonks, otherwise known as Sirius's cousin, and she's also an Auror."

Sian subsided, perching on a chair, her dark hair falling over her face.

Tonks sat down opposite her, a pile of clothing in her arms. "What can you tell us?"

"Fenrir called a pack meeting yesterday." Sian said tersely. "He said the Dark Lord had given the pack a mission and asked for volunteers."

Remus frowned. "What was the mission?"

"The usual; frightening the Dark Lord's enemies, harassment, that kind of thing." Sian raised a hand to her brow and rubbed it. Remus was suddenly aware of how weary she looked. "He mentioned the Potter alliance and someone called Dirk Cresswell?"

"Isn't Cresswell heading up the Committee reviewing the magical creature laws?" Tonks asked Remus.

He nodded, leaning back against the breakfast bar that separated Tonks' tiny living area from an equally tiny kitchenette. "Doesn't Fenrir understand that attacking the people supporting positive laws for werewolves is counterproductive?"

"You know Fenrir," Sian said bluntly, "all he wants is the blood and the fight. He doesn't actually care that he might be undermining any chance of werewolves getting fair treatment. Someone did question him during the meeting and he blustered how under the Dark Lord we wouldn't have any kind of restrictions – which is a load of bullshit because some of us remember that all Voldemort wants to do is put a leash on us until he wants someone bitten or intimidated."

"But?" asked Tonks.

"But some of the younger ones fell for it." Sian grimaced. "They're sore about the laws and think the whole review is a front for coming up with even worse restrictions."

"Fabulous." Remus pinched the bridge of his nose. Fenrir had volunteers to menace the Potter alliance and Cresswell; it was definitely bad news.

"Were you able to get any other details?" Tonks pressed, and Remus was glad she was there and still thinking strategically because he was just a mass of boiling emotions. "Timing? Sequence of targets?"

"The first target is just before the Wizengamot session on the seventh of December." Sian said. "He didn't say about the others and he didn't say who in particular would be targeted. I can't go back, Remus." She said, turning to him. "Alan, the one who questioned him, was killed this morning and it was probably for questioning him. Fenrir's suspicious about me as it is; he knows I've never liked his leadership."

"We can floo to Auror headquarters," Tonks said soothingly, "you'll need to make a formal report
and we'll give you a safe house."

"What about the chateau?" asked Sian. "Why can't I go there like the others?"

Remus nodded at Tonks. "Surely she'll be safe there?"

Tonks frowned. "Honestly, I don't think Director Bones will let her leave until the attacks are done and even then…she should officially be in protective custody as an informant and witness."

Sian grimaced and shook her head. "I can't be in custody, Remus." She glanced up at him. "Please."

He sighed. Sian had acted at great personal risk to bring them the information. "If Amelia and Sirius agree, you can stay with me. Hopefully that will be an acceptable compromise?"

Sian's relief was so obviously evident that Remus didn't automatically regret giving into her plea.

"You'll still have to make a formal report." Tonks said firmly. She stood up and chucked her armful of clothing back on the sofa. "Why don't you go into the kitchen and get something to drink? I'll floo call the Director and see whether she wants us to come in or we can do it here."

Remus led Sian around the breakfast bar and into the small space. "What would you like?"

"Water will do." Sian said. She thrust a hand toward the living area where Tonks' quiet murmur could be heard. "Your girlfriend?"

"Not that it's any of your business but she's just a friend." Remus corrected briskly.

Sian breathed out audibly. "Sorry, I was…I was just concerned that I might have intruded on your date or caused problems by staying with you."

It was a thought, Remus considered with chagrin. Tonks was just a friend regardless of her proclaimed interest but how was Clara going to react to his suddenly getting a house-guest in the form of an attractive woman? He would just have to cross that bridge when he came to it, Remus decided; it was still very early days with Clara anyway – he hadn't even declared his interest in her to Clara herself.

Tonks popped up in front of the breakfast bar. "The Director says I can take the formal report here but she's sending Kingsley to support me. She's also going to alert Sirius so I figure we'll wait until they arrive before we set-up."

Sian pulled at her top. "Do you have somewhere I can freshen up, please?"

"'Course." Tonks gestured at her. "Let me show you the bathroom."

Sian followed her out of the living area and Remus took the opportunity of a moment alone to gather his composure. He didn't have long as Tonks returned almost immediately.

"You look like you need something stronger than tea. There's some Scotch in the cupboard." Tonks offered brightly. "I keep it for my Dad."

Remus sighed but opened up the door she was pointing at.

"So," Tonks said, resting a hip against the bar and gazing at him speculatively, "is she…"

"No," Remus said hastily, "definitely; no." He brought down the scotch and Tonks reached over to the sink to pass him a clean glass. He poured himself a generous measure. "Sian and I were friends
when I was spying back in 'eighty-'eighty-one. There's no interest on either side."

Tonks cast a look toward the bathroom. "I don't know, I think there might be interest on her side, Remus." She smiled self-deprecatingly. "Maybe because I'm interested myself, I can recognise it in her."

The floo chimed and Remus had the absent thought that he'd been saved by the bell.

"I'd best get that." Tonks said cheerfully and departed.

Remus was left behind, speechless. Sian? There was no way and...it wasn't worth thinking about! Tonks was wrong: she had to be! He felt a guilty twinge again about Tonks herself but pushed it away forcefully. Tonks was young and beautiful; she'd find someone for herself soon enough – someone better than an old wolf like Remus. He was interested in Clara – Clara who didn't know he was interested in her and who might not be interested in him.

He wondered again how his life had suddenly gotten so romantically complicated just as Sian re-entered and smiled at him nervously, and Tonks gestured over the breakfast bar for them to join her in the living area.

Maybe Padfoot had the right idea, Remus thought with dark humour; maybe it was simpler to focus on Harry and forget all about other entanglements. Remus downed his scotch; he had a feeling was going to need it.

o-O-o

Harry had timed his date with Hermione for when everyone else would be at lunch. He entered the Gryffindor Common Room with a spring in his step and was thrilled to find Hermione waiting for him on their usual sofa, dressed in casual clothes of jeans and a warm-looking lavender jumper. She'd done something to her hair again, leaving it pinned back behind her ears with two silver clasps on either side. For the first time he could remember she was wearing lip gloss; it made her lips shine and thoughts of what would hopefully be their first kiss later that day zipped through Harry's thoughts.

"Hey." Harry smiled at her, set down the picnic basket he was carrying and offered her another rose; a red one in full bloom with bright green leaves. "You look great."

Hermione took the rose and smelled its fragrance. "Thank you, and so do you." Her eyes swept over him and Harry was conscious of his own jeans and green cable-knit jumper.

"When are you expected back?" Harry questioned.

"Before dinner. Ron said he'd sound an alarm if I was any later." Hermione gave a rueful smile. "I think he enjoyed setting me a curfew far too much but I guess it's better to be safe. You?"

"Sirius said he'd come looking for me around sixish if I hadn't surfaced by then." Harry said happily. "So we have all afternoon." He brandished the invisibility cloak. "We should go before someone comes back."

Hermione nodded and Harry tucked the cloak around the two of them. The days when the cloak would have comfortably covered Harry, Hermione and Ron were long gone. Even with just the two of them it was close quarters, but Harry didn't mind and he didn't think Hermione did either. He hunched down to grab the basket of food and straightened the cloak one last time. They walked out of the portrait and Harry directed Hermione through the school to the seventh floor.
"Where are we going?" hissed Hermione.

"It's a surprise," Harry said, "Dobby found this great room – and well, you'll see." He grinned at her. They paused in front of a portrait of Barnabas the Barmy and Harry checked the Marauders’ map to ensure there was no-one around before he carefully took off the cloak, motioning for Hermione to stand to the side. He paced up and down three times in front of what looked like an empty wall. On the completion of the third pacing, a door suddenly appeared.

Harry opened it and ushered Hermione through and closed the door behind them.

It was the platform at King's Cross with the Hogwarts Express standing ready for a journey.

"Oh my God!" Hermione stared back at the wall with the door, at the train, at the door and shook her head. "What is this place?"

"Dobby said the elves call it the Room of Requirement." Harry said succinctly, packing away the cloak. "You think up what you want outside the door, pace back and forth with that in your mind, and..." he gestured around what looked like the train platform, "and it creates it for you." He absently minded rubbed at the thin line of his scar, a niggling itch teasing at him.

"This is just..." Hermione shook her head again. "How does it do it? Where does it get all these things?"

"I think some of it is an illusion?" Harry pointed at the far distance and the view down the tracks. "And you can't take things out that are created here; I tried that and it doesn't work. Food doesn't just appear either although the elves can bring some.

"So maybe a temporary conjuring charm of some kind?" Hermione said with wonder.

Harry shrugged. He had less interest in knowing how the room worked; he was just pleased it did. "Come on. I thought we'd have lunch on the train?" he hesitated suddenly, "if that's OK with you?"

Hermione smiled at him, reassuringly. "More than OK." Her eyes met his with understanding. "We first met on the train, didn't we? So it's kind of appropriate we have our first date there."

He was thrilled she'd gotten his thinking on the venue and offered her his hand to help her up the step and into the carriage. It was identical to the one that he'd occupied on his first train journey except there was no Ron or luggage cluttering the space.

Harry set the picnic basket on the floor and took out a blanket for the floor. Hermione helped him spread it on the floor and then they began to unload the food. He'd asked Dobby to pack Hermione's favourites and so he wasn't surprised to find a healthy option of a chicken salad accompanied with fresh warm bread rolls tucked within the spacious inside. There were slices of apple pie for dessert and Dobby had included a sparkling grape juice that looked like wine but wasn't. He poured them both a glass as Hermione served the food. They finished and sat cross-legged next to each other, using the seats in the carriage as back-rests.

Harry raised his glass. "To our first date." He said, a little nervous all over again.

"To our first date." Hermione parroted, smiling.

They gently touched their glasses together and took a sip. They shifted to eat and for a while sat in a companionable silence.

Hermione chuckled suddenly. He looked over at her questioningly.
"I was just thinking that I'm so nervous and how stupid that is since it's you and me, and we know each other." Hermione explained with chagrin.

He grinned at her sheepishly. "I know; me too."

Hermione assumed a determined look that Harry knew all too well. "So we should stop being nervous and just enjoy the time together."

Harry readily agreed. He hadn't been able to spend a great deal of time alone with Hermione with his new living accommodations, and while he didn't regret living with Sirius at Hogwarts, it did cut down on his time with his friends.

She gestured at him with a fork. "How are you getting on with the clues in the egg?"

Harry winced. "It was a poem written in Mermish. Thankfully, Remus knows the language."

Hermione raised her eyebrows, waving her fork enthusiastically to encourage him to continue as she had a mouthful of food.

"Water, water, everywhere; of your prized possession take great care; for prisoners rarely work together; and time will not last forever." Harry recited from memory.

Hermione grimaced. "That's the clues?"

"At least I have the whole thing." Harry pointed out. "Cedric only has the one line and the judges just agreed that because of the Horntail being sabotaged, Fleur will get that one too. Viktor has two lines." He swallowed some chicken. "I think the task is going to either be on the top of the lake or under it."

"Water, water, everywhere..." Hermione nodded briskly. "That makes sense." She scooped up some coleslaw. "It sounds like they're going to make you rescue your prized possession. The second task is typically about retrieving something."

"Which is weird," Harry said, "because I'd notice if any of my stuff went missing – and I'm really not attached to very much." There was the photo album of his parents, his invisibility cloak and his Firebolt. Everything else was, in Harry's opinion, expendable.

"Maybe," Hermione began hesitantly, "maybe they mean a person? They've used human hostages in three previous tournaments."

Harry felt his stutter in his chest. It was his worst nightmare; someone else in danger because of him.

"It might not be!" Hermione hastened to comfort him. It's just the third line about prisoners suggests that someone will be a prisoner and the options are the Champions or someone else so..."

"No, you're probably right." Harry said somewhat sourly. "But how would they choose someone?" He set his lunch aside and picked up his drink. "I mean, I have a few people who I, uh, care about."

"When the tasks have called for a participant to be associated with the Champion in the past," Hermione said, "the tournament judges enter a list of possibilities into the Goblet and the Goblet chooses."

"Great," Harry sighed, "because that's completely fool-proof." He adjusted his glasses. "I guess from the last line there'll be a time limit which you know makes me think what happens to the someone or something if you don't achieve rescuing it – them – in time?"
"Good question." Hermione said, putting her own plate aside and picking up her drink. "If it was the tasks as they were previously designed I'm pretty sure that it wouldn't be bad. I can't see Professor Dumbledore or Madame Maxime allowing a lethal consequence."

"But all bets are off since Voldemort rewrote the tasks." Harry sighed and drank some of his juice. He felt his mood darkening and shoved his impending brooding away to focus on his date. "And I think we should stop talking about the tournament."

"Probably that's a good idea." Hermione admitted. "So what would you like to talk about?"

"Well, dating is supposed to be about getting to know each other better, right?" Harry warmed to his suggestion immediately. "How about we ask each other questions? I'm sure there's loads of stuff we don't know about each other?"

Hermione nodded happily. "Shall we have dessert too?"

There were a few minutes of organising themselves and the plates of warm apple pie, (Harry dolloped a lump of cream on top but Hermione kept hers plain), before they resettled into their previous positions, slightly turned towards one another.

"So you can go first?" Harry offered, licking his spoon.

Hermione pressed her lips together thoughtfully. "What's your happiest memory before Hogwarts?"

Harry frowned. He didn't have a lot of happy memories before Hogwarts because of the Dursleys. But he did have a couple and he picked the one he liked best.

"Probably my first day at infants." Harry said. "I can remember the classroom seemed huge and we had these round tables where we sat. I was so pleased when Dudley went off to the purple table on the other side of the room, and I was on the blue. And the whole day just was great. Dudley had temper tantrums and kept getting hauled to sit in the corner to think about his actions while I was able to colour and do my writing and…it was great that first day."

It had gone pear-shaped within a few weeks – as soon as Dudley found friends and Harry in his shyness struggled; as Dudley found ways to torment Harry at school; when Petunia hadn't been interested in anything Harry did at school, any of his achievements or the pictures he drew.

"What about you?" asked Harry. "What's your happiest memory before Hogwarts?"

"Well, my first day of school is probably up there too." Hermione said with a rueful smile. She nudged his shoulder with hers. "You could act shocked."

"I am," teased Harry, "I'm very shocked."

"But," Hermione stressed, "I guess my happiest memories are of the Summers we used to spend at Gran's in Dorset. We used to have afternoon tea with scones and read books in the evening. It was great. She died when I was nine."

Harry nudged her gently with his knee. "Do you have aunts and uncles?"

Hermione shook her head and pushed her plate away. "My Dad did have a brother but he died in the Falklands War and, well, we don't really talk about him. Mum was an only child. They were aiming for two children but I was a difficult birth and so they settled for me." She bit her lip. "I kind of envy Ron sometimes having so many siblings but then…I think it would drive me mad."
"Me too." Harry admitted with a laugh. "The Weasleys are great but I imagine living in a house filled with more Dudleys and I cringe."

Hermione looked at him sympathetically. "Do you think you'll ever talk with them, I mean the Dursleys, again?"

Harry scooped up the last of his pie and considered his answer. "I don't know." He said eventually.

"You probably don't want to talk about it." Hermione said hurriedly. "I shouldn't have asked…"

"You can ask me anything." Harry interrupted her, holding her gaze firmly, "and it's not so much I don't want to talk about it as it's…difficult?"

"Things were pretty bad for you there, weren't they? More than you let on." Hermione said softly.

Harry shrugged, wanting despite his words to stop talking about it. "I knew that the way they treated me wasn't right but then…I guess I also didn't get how wrong it was until Sirius and…and it's the difference, you know? Not just the clothes and the rooms and the things but…Sirius always has time for me and if I draw something and give it to him, he'll display it somewhere, or he'll come and cheer me on at Quidditch. Little things." Little things that made it clear that Sirius cared for him; that he was important to Sirius. He shifted, deciding a change in subject was in order. "What about you and your parents?"

"We're closer again now that they have a way of connecting with the wizarding world." Hermione said, brightening. "The last few years, I've felt like I've been drifting away from them. There's so much about the wizarding world that they couldn't see or understand and I guess I stopped explaining things to them because I didn't want to worry them."

"I'm glad. I like your parents." Harry said.

"They like you too." Hermione blushed a little. "They're pleased we're dating."

Harry felt his own cheeks heat. "Yeah, Sirius is chuffed too."

They smiled happily at each other.

It felt like a moment; the moment.

Harry set his glass aside with suddenly clumsy fingers. Hermione had left hers on the floor so he didn't need to worry about upending a glass of juice on her. He held her gaze for a second, the question of 'is it OK?' travelling silently between them and Hermione gave an almost imperceptible nod, her cheeks flaring red again.

He leaned in, tilted his head…

She shifted closer…

He closed his eyes at the last minute…

And their lips met, a soft press before they gently moved and…

They were kissing.

Kissing.

His heart raced as he eased away, elation stampeding through him. He held out his hand and she
tangled their fingers together in a way that had become so familiar since he'd asked her out.

"Was that…" Harry began awkwardly, although he didn't think Hermione was going to say it was awful because she looked the way he felt; giddy and happy and…

"Perfect." Hermione stated firmly. Her eyes sparkled. "Especially since Professor Dumbledore didn't walk in on us too."

Harry gave a huff of laughter.

Hermione squeezed his hand. "I wouldn't say no to a second."

He grinned at her with what was probably a very sappy expression. "Yeah?"

"Well, it's like you and Quidditch." Hermione said primly, although her face was alight with humour and affection. "I mean, it was perfect but we wouldn't want to let the quality of our performance slide through lack of practice."

"Definitely not." Harry happily agreed.

And as his lips met hers again, and his soul went flying without the help of any kind of magic, he decided that he'd found something that was much, much better than Quidditch.
Spying was often a waiting game.

Severus observed Karkaroff surreptitiously at dinner. He took in the tight lines of tension that ran through the other man's body, the pinched expression and shadows under the eyes that spoke of stress and lack of sleep; how Karkaroff would occasionally touch his left forearm when Karkaroff believed nobody was looking.

Without asking him, Severus had verified to his own satisfaction that Karkaroff was being forced to assist the Dark Lord in his bid to, if not outright kill Potter, make the tournament a living nightmare for the boy in anticipation of the ritual.

That Karkaroff was under duress didn't surprise Severus in the slightest. Karkaroff hadn't been the only one to turn on his fellow Death Eaters for a lighter sentence of his own, but he had been the most prominent given those he had betrayed – Ministry workers and men of standing within the wizarding world. Severus was certain the Dark Lord considered the betrayal deserved a death sentence for Karkaroff but no doubt had convinced Karkaroff that the guillotine hanging over Karkaroff's exposed neck would not fall if he helped the Dark Lord with the tournament and tormenting Potter. The freed Dennis Travers was the most probable on site Death Eater keeping Karkaroff in line. His father had been one of those Karkaroff had sent to Azkaban.

It was unfortunate that observing was not enough, but Severus had no quibble with Black's plan. He had always known that when the Dark Lord regained power that he would have to return to spying. The Headmaster had been fooling himself if he had ever thought Severus would escape it. Or maybe, Severus mused as he finished his coffee, the Headmaster was simply put out that it had been Black's suggestion and not his. Severus found he didn't really mind that it was Black and that surprised him.

His view of his former nemesis had changed.

He still didn't like him; that much hadn't changed and Severus fervently believed that it never would. But there was a growing – Severus searched for an acceptable word – respect, he finally determined with well-hidden bemusement. Severus respected Black's political savvy, his strategic eye and his complete ruthlessness in hunting down the Dark Lord. He even had a sneaky respect for the manner in which Black handled his adopted son. It was clear that Black had rules and Potter, whose total lack of respect for authority Severus had deplored since the boy had set foot in Hogwarts, complied with them. Perhaps, Severus considered, because Potter knew Black set them out of love and not out of hate or apathy.

But if he had come to respect Black, Severus also believed, rightly or wrongly, that Black had come to respect him in return. Black certainly respected his skills; he had turned to Severus to deliver an antidote to the potion that kept the elf and the pregnant Summers woman in a coma-like state, after all. And Severus couldn't complain overly much at the assignment because, outside of the need and circumstances of the situation, he was enjoying the challenge – it was why he had become a Potions Master. Black didn't skimp on the ingredients Severus had asked for or the equipment; everything was top of the line and high quality.

Severus also believed given some of their exchanges in the previous weeks, that Black respected
Severus's motivations; that he truly believed Severus wanted the Dark Lord dead and revenge for Lily's death.

And it seemed Black respected his ability as a spy.

It was, in part, why Severus had accepted Black's proposition that he approach Karkaroff. Of course, the other part of his acceptance had been predicated on Severus's own belief that Karkaroff held the key to how the first task had been sabotaged, and the method by which the Dark Lord hoped to sabotage the others.

Karkaroff rose from his chair and Severus waited until he had left the Great Hall before following him. Severus had lived for years at the school and he knew its short cuts. He was easily able to place himself into Karkaroff’s path just outside of the school in a quiet corner by the rose gardens. He shocked Karkaroff into a stumble by looming up unexpectedly from the dark.

Severus placed a finger on his own lips to signal for the other wizard to remain silent before gesturing at him to follow him. Karkaroff glanced about anxiously but there was no-one about. Severus led the way into a sheltered corner of the gardens where he could see anyone approaching but they wouldn't be overheard.

Karkaroff fidgeted nervously as Severus erected a privacy bubble. "What's this about, Snape?" He demanded.

Severus pinned him with a frank stare that did more to call Karkaroff an idiot than if the word had passed Severus's lips. "I have a message for our Lord."

The other wizard paled so fast Severus thought for a moment he'd faint. "I…I have no idea what you are…"

"Oh, please." Severus sneered. "Lose that ridiculous affected accent and stop pretending you know nothing of the Dark Lord's rise after what happened with the dragon at the first task." He held Karkaroff’s gaze firmly. "You've done nothing but clutch at your Mark since you arrived and more since last week's events." He smiled without humour. "I'm sure you're being reminded who is your Master after your deplorable lack of holding your tongue at your trial."

"As will you in time." Karkaroff snapped out before flushing, realising he had just admitted that Severus had guessed correctly.

Severus didn't allow any of his satisfaction show. Really Karkaroff was an idiot. Karkaroff had all but confirmed that the suspicions of the War Council and Moody were correct; that Karkaroff was the weak link – and Severus hadn't even had to try that hard. "Ah, but I was a traitor at the Dark Lord's instruction." He said silkily. "And thus no traitor at all."

"So you say." Karkaroff muttered.

"Karkaroff, would I be sending the Dark Lord a message if I wasn't certain of my welcome?" Severus snapped impatiently. He adjusted his robes, smoothing down the black austere lines once again. "He is clearly gaining in strength and I am impressed at what he and his new circle have accomplished but he is not facing Albus Dumbledore and a disorganised Ministry this time but a powerful Lord Black, an equally powerful if youthful Potter, and a Ministry keen to thwart his every move. I have continued in my service as his spy and I have information our Lord needs."

Karkaroff regarded him sulkily. "I should report you to the Aurors."

Severus smiled evilly. "Oh, I rather think your keeper would see you dead before you could get one
word past those loose lips of yours, Karkaroff."

Karkaroff stared at him in shock.

"You're a traitor, Karkaroff," Severus pointed out dryly, "the Dark Lord would have made certain of your loyalty this time and taken reasonable precautions."

He was pleased when Karkaroff flushed red and looked away, unable to hold Severus's contemptuous glare.

"What do you want, Snape?" Karkaroff snapped.

"As I said," Snape said evenly, "I have a message for our Lord."

Karkaroff gestured at him. "Well, what is it?"

Severus laughed briefly. "I'm hardly going to give it you, Karkaroff. You will tell your keeper that I have information to relay to the Dark Lord, and I'm sure arrangements will be made that do not involve you at all."

"I am not a messenger boy!" Karkaroff stated forcefully, going red in the face again.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You're whatever the Dark Lord wishes you to be, Karkaroff, or you'll be dead." He made a shooing gesture. "Run along and relay my message to your babysitter." He stared at him hard. "And know that I will know if you do not and will not be pleased." He let another cruel smile drift over his lips. "It would be a shame if an unfortunate potion found its way into your food."

Karkaroff huffed and walked away quickly with an air of a man wanting desperately to run but knowing it would only provoke the predator behind him into attacking if he did.

Severus waited until he was out of sight before he gave a cough to alert his cohort that they were clear.

Moody yanked the invisibility cloak away, appearing on the bench behind Severus with a grunt. "I was right."

"Yes," Severus agreed dryly, "and thank you for the back-up but as you can see," he made a dismissive motion in the direction Karkaroff had disappeared, "it was not necessary."

Moody harrumphed. "He's a bloody idiot alright, but even bloody idiots are dangerous when cornered and I would say he's well and truly boxed in."

Severus had no argument to muster in opposition. He hummed instead.

"Well, he's at least confirmed he's involved." Moody said grimly. "You think he'll pass the message on?"

"He will." Severus said with certainty. It was more than Karkaroff's life was worth to mess with the Dark Lord's spy getting in touch with him.

"And then?" pressed Moody.

"And then I will receive a summons." Severus said simply. "Whether it will be to the Dark Lord or one of his latest lieutenants..." that he didn't know. He rather suspected that the Dark Lord would keep him at a distance; utilising him but not placing himself at risk of a double cross.
"I'd best get on with the patrol." Moody said. "You should head up and report to Black. Let him know you've made contact."

Severus desperately kept the automatic wince from crossing his impassive features. "Very well." He'd also let the Headmaster know.

Moody whirled the invisibility cloak over him and disappeared from view. Severus could hardly make out the DADA Professor's passage out of the garden. He made his own way out of a different exit. He hovered in the entrance of the Great Hall, musing on whether it would be best to see Albus and allow the old wizard to inform Black rather than tackle it himself. But the thought that he was reluctant because he feared Black had him turning his feet toward the tower and Black's suite of rooms with Potter.

The house elf answered the door and ushered him into the living area. Severus looked around with interest. The space was cozy, warm and welcoming. A host of photographs were crammed onto the mantelpiece and Severus examined them swiftly, settling on a muggle picture of Lily, young and carefree, smiling up at the camera.

"Snape." Black's voice sounded from Severus's right and he turned to see Black dressed entirely in muggle clothing in the doorway to an adjoining room. "Come through." He instructed, withdrawing and forcing Snape to comply.

Snape felt a frisson of frustration but he swallowed it and warily entered the unknown space. It was a study, he realised immediately. It was a small room, no larger than Snape's own office off the main lab in the dungeons. Black's desk sat off to the left; one chair in front of it, another comfortable visitor chair beside it. There were shelves filled with books along the right wall, broken up only by the fireplace which had a cozy seating area in front of it. A window looking out onto the grounds dominated the wall facing Severus. The curtains were still wide open despite the hour and Severus could see the glint of stars in the inky sky beyond.

He was slightly surprised when Black directed him to the seating area and didn't make him stand or take the lower visitor position at his desk. He realised why a moment later, his eyes taking in the stack of parchments Black was obviously in the middle of reading perched on the arm of a chair.

"Would you like any refreshments?" asked Black civilly. "Tea, coffee, whiskey?"

"No," Severus snapped immediately before he moderated his tone and offered a conciliatory gesture, "thank you, but I've just finished dinner." He frowned at the heavy silence that permeated the rooms. "Potter?"

Black pointed Severus at the seat opposite his own as he sat. "He's holding a meeting of the Heirs of the Potter alliance, and some of his other friends and supporters, to talk about the second task in some room Dobby found for Harry up on the seventh floor." He made a dismissive wave. "I take it you made your move with Karkaroff?"

"I've made contact," Severus confirmed, sitting stiffly in the offered chair, "and he confirmed through his reactions and responses that he is involved with the Dark Lord and has some kind of keeper holding his leash." He paused. "I expect to be called to see Crouch Junior within a week to relay the message I told them I had."

"Not Voldie himself?" Black questioned, tapping his fingers restlessly on top of the parchments. "Unlikely, in my opinion." Severus said. "The Dark Lord is too vulnerable within the body of the child; he will keep his location secret until he is at full strength. But I think he still believes me loyal
enough to continue as his spy, although I may have to do some grovelling over my hampering Quirrell." He inclined his head. "I think he will send his most trusted lieutenant in his stead and thus…"


"My impression is that Karkaroff is acting under duress." Severus continued. "Moody will confirm my observation."

Black raised an eyebrow. "I'll take your word for it."

Severus stared at him blankly in surprise. He shook it away. "Karkaroff is a dead man walking. On some level I think he knows it."

"He has to," Black agreed, "I saw enough on the continent to know if someone was captured as a traitor, they were given no quarter."

"You were captured yourself." Severus murmured. He'd been gleeful at the time when the news had trickled down to him but he felt the first stirrings of shame at his previous response, knowing what Black must have been subjected to in his captivity. Still, Black had managed to kill his captors when he'd escaped.

"Ah, yes," Black said cheerfully, "well, I don't remember much of that experience thankfully." He motioned at Severus. "But I do remember that spying is its own kind of hell. I appreciate your agreement to approach Karkaroff."

Severus nodded slowly, absorbing Black's sincerity. "It will be worth it if it leads to the death of the Dark Lord."

"Or the saving of innocents." Black waved at the parchments. "We lucked out with the information about the werewolf attacks. Amelia and her team have put together a good counter operation, but if Sian hadn't come forward…"

Severus shivered. He remembered all too well the brief moment when he had glimpsed the fury of a werewolf and the thought of knowing that kind of attack was imminent…

"It's not the full moon so they won't be fully transformed." Black continued. "Still, they can do a lot of damage with just teeth and claws in a partial transformation."

"I'm surprised to hear you admit that since you put me in the path of one." The words escaped him before Severus could stop them and he berated himself furiously for the slip because whatever truce had existed between them in their previous exchange disappeared abruptly.

Black glared at him. "Please; you set up that attack when we were at school. You know it, I know it, and thankfully Dumbledore knew it at the time."

Severus rose from his seat and gathered his robes. "I shall take my leave and inform the Headmaster of my meeting with Karkaroff."

"Do that." Black said tersely.

He was almost at the study door when Black called out for him to wait. He turned around and found Black on his feet, his hands in fists at his side, but a determined expression on his face.

"Yes?" Severus prompted snappily.
"We have to work together." Black stated grimly, his low voice carrying across the space between them. "I don't like you and you don't like me, and I doubt that will ever change given our history."

His words echoed Severus's thoughts from dinner and he made to nod briskly but then Black's grey eyes met Severus's, and Severus almost took a step back at the fierce anger that burned there.

"You plotted to get Remus executed and made me an accessory to it. It…it tainted my friendship with Remus for years after. I won't ever forgive you for that or for telling Voldemort about the prophecy." Black shifted weight, rocking a little back on his heels, some of the passion in his gaze dying. "But I'm prepared to admit that I was a...a bully to you for a large part of the time when we were at school, Snape." He snorted. "Under the new anti-bullying policy here, James and I would have been expelled a thousand times over, and I've wondered these last few weeks whether you would have been so quick to fall in with the Death Eaters had James and I simply left you alone, and allowed you your friendship with Lily without interference. So," he breathed in deeply, "I don't expect you to forgive me either. But..."

"But we have to work together." Severus repeated quietly, shocked in truth that Black had admitted his culpability for Severus's school days torment.

"And as much as I hate to say it we need to trust each other in this if nothing else. So: a truce." Black offered grimly. "We leave the past in the past and focus on our mutual goal of seeing Voldemort die once and for all."

"Agreed." Severus said quickly, recognising the truth in Black's words. "A truce."

Black nodded slowly in acknowledgement.

"I should still report to the Headmaster." Severus said, with a wave toward the door behind him.

"Give Albus my best." Black sat down and picked up a parchment.

Severus knew it was his signal to leave. He swept out of the study, through the living area, and out of the portrait. He paused in the corridor outside.

Respect.

He remembered his thoughts after dinner and grimaced; whatever new respect they had for each other clearly wasn't enough for them to work together without occasionally butting heads. They had possibly needed to clear the air and address their enmity too. Severus reluctantly admired how Black had swallowed his pride to offer the truce at all. But it spoke to Black's determination to see the Dark Lord defeated; to Black's need to protect Potter first and foremost because nothing was more important to Black – not petty school boy rivalries or past decisions that had led to nothing but heartache for them all.

And if Black could do it so could Severus.

He gave a firm nod as though to underscore his new resolve where Black and Potter were concerned, and made his way to the Headmaster's office with renewed purpose.

o-O-o

Harry rubbed at his scar absentmindedly as Neville whistled for everyone's attention. He gazed around the Room of Requirement, noting the configuration that Hermione had thought up.

It wasn't unlike the training room in his quarters. One area was arranged as a duelling area; another
was clearly staked out as a research point with tables, books, paper and pens (actual pens, Harry noted with amusement, and not quills); and, a final section acted as a planning area with a table staked out like a battlefield surrounded by several blackboards. One was already filled with the clues for the second task neatly labelled in Hermione's writing.

There were a couple of differences; namely, a table at the back held a variety of refreshments gleefully maintained by Dobby and Kreacher, and there was a gathering area with a variety of seating off to one side for group discussions. Such as the one they were having at that moment, Harry thought amused as Neville wrangled them all into silence and nodded at Harry to begin.

Harry cleared his throat. "So thank you all for coming," he adjusted his stance; hands behind his back, legs slightly apart, "and I'd also like to thank everyone for their help with the first task…"

A huge cheer went up from the Weasley twins, rapidly followed by applause and whistles from everyone else, except the Slytherins who clapped but didn't join in the more obvious boisterousness. Neville waited a moment before he shushed everybody again.

"Thanks," Harry said, waving off the plaudits, "but I couldn't have done it without you guys supporting me. The research teams were invaluable in working out the first task was a creature and the spells I needed to learn; the duelling team were excellent at helping me practice; and I can't tell you how much it's meant to know that I have my own cheering section and sounding boards." He figured he was bright red but it was worth it to see how pleased everyone else was to receive praise for their part.

"I think I speak for us all, Harry," Neville said, "when I say it was worth all the work to see you perform so brilliantly."

There was another round of cheers and Harry was the one to quiet them down since Neville was also cheering.

"Right then," Harry said, "as we did so well with the first, we have a lot to live up to with the second. Hermione…" he motioned at her to take over and she smiled as she took a step forward.

"As all of you know, the Champions were given clues about the second task based on the number of eggs they managed to save and Harry received the full set." Hermione said briskly. She tucked an unruly lock of hair behind her ear with one hand and clutched her notebook closer with her other.

"Thanks to Remus, he's already managed to decipher the clues which were given in the Mermish language and they take the form of a poem which is on the board." She waved at the blackboard at the planning table. "Water, water, everywhere; of your prized possession take great care; for prisoners rarely work together; and time will not last forever."

"So the language and the words of the poem suggest the lake as a venue." Daphne spoke up.

Hermione nodded, her curls bouncing. "Exactly, although whether under or above water is a question mark. We have to plan for both possibilities. Thanks to our previous research on the tournament we know both have happened in the past. I'm going to need a volunteer to research spells needed above and one to take below."

"I'll take above." Daphne said. "We have a sail boat and I know my father has a library of spells about sailing."

"I'll be below then," offered Luna, "Daddy and I often go diving when we're on our trips and there are all the creatures in the lake to consider as obstacles."
Hermione nodded and noted both names down. "It also sounds like something or someone will be taken hostage." Draco piped up, examining his nails as though he wasn't that interested. "Yes." Hermione agreed crisply. "Again, both are a possibility."

Harry shifted, drawing everyone's attention to him. "Frankly, I'm not fussed if it's a something." He admitted. "I have very few things that I would consider a prized possession and while I'd regret losing any of them, for the most part they're replaceable. A person is not."

"Well, that brings up two questions," Anthony Goldstein asserted, "how would the Goblet choose and what are your prized possessions in either case?"

Hermione nodded. "The how is the easy part. The judges are requested to supply a list of possibilities to the Goblet the morning of the day before the task, and the Goblet immediately chooses something or someone. The criteria for making the choice which the Goblet will use, was set in the initiation parameters and the judges are not allowed to tell us what they are. If the Goblet refuses to make a choice, the judges have to come up with alternatives until it finds an acceptable match."

"You can guess at the lists of the possibilities though, Potter." Theo said.

Harry nodded. He sighed, uncomfortable at giving up what he considered very personal knowledge about himself but he knew they needed it to plan effectively. "On the something side: I have a photo album of my parents, my Firebolt and a couple of family artefacts that have been handed down from my father."

There was a moment of silence as they absorbed Harry's minimal list.

"That's it?" questioned Draco in disbelief. "That's all you prize?"

Unsurprisingly Ron bristled immediately. "Some of us don't need things to get by in life, Malfoy."

"Only when some of us don't have things, Weasley." Draco retorted.

"Enough!" Harry said sharply, sending them both a warning glare.

"Well, the good news is that you have a short list of things to protect." Anthony said cheerfully.

"What about your owl, Harry?" Luna said dreamily.

"Hedwig's not a thing though and she's definitely not replaceable." Harry argued, his heart sinking as he realised he hadn't considered that Hedwig probably was considered by others to be among his prized possessions.

"But she should probably be on the list." Hermione said almost apologetically. "Possibly both as we don't know if the judges might deem her a thing or a being in her own right."

Harry sighed but accepted the addition of Hedwig with a nod.

"These artefacts," Anthony said, "I've noticed you've not said what they are?"

He had hoped he'd get away with not saying.

"One is an invisibility cloak," Harry said, shifting again as he knew that wasn't the whole story behind the cloak, "and one is a map my Dad created while he was at school."
"I assume the power of the Goblet overrides any protection on the possession if it's a thing?" Anthony asked.

Hermione frowned. "We don't know. We don't know if there is any way that Harry has of protecting his belongings that would get around the Goblet choosing it as part of the task."

"Why don't I take that?" Anthony offered.

"Which leaves the other kind of prized possessions;" the Gryffindor Quidditch captain spoke up for the first time, "the people you care about."

Harry nodded at Angelina. "It's a weird one because we really don't know what criteria will be used."

Lydia raised her hand tentatively. She had quietened down a lot since her friend Jessica had been expelled for attacking Hermione and she'd been given a bucketload of detentions along with Ginny. She darted a look towards Hermione as Harry nodded at her to speak.

"Isn't Hermione the obvious choice?" She asked.

"Just because your friend decided to make her a target doesn't meant the Goblet will." Ron glared at her, and then Ginny for good measure; Harry had given up trying to get the younger Weasley siblings talking again.

Ginny blushed bright red. Lydia was made of sterner stuff. She fixed Ron with a glare of her own.

"It was supposed to be a prank not an attack!" Lydia threw Harry a pleading look. "We wouldn't attack Hermione."

Harry dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. "Both of you are right on the point of the task; Hermione would be the obvious target as my...as my girlfriend." Hermione blushed beside him. "But equally we don't know that the criteria would lead the Goblet to choosing her. The Goblet might choose Sirius as my father or Ron as my best mate, or it could choose anyone who is notionally under my protection."

The latter had a rush of murmurs rippling through the gathered students.

Robert Ogden stood up. "That's a good point and relates to anyone formally in the alliance in particular."

"Or a member of one of Potter's primary Houses; Potter and Black." Draco said slowly, horror dawning on his face.

"Oh, please, Malfoy," Daphne drawled, "as if you'd be chosen as a prized possession of Potter's."

Draco whirled around on her angrily but Harry dived in before he could speak.

"My history with Draco aside, I do consider him a cousin now," Harry said firmly, "and he's an important member of the House of Black." He sent Draco a look to settle him. "However, I think you'd agree, Draco, that there are others in the House who'd probably come before you on a list of possibilities."

"So some of us are going to be possibilities," Neville cut in before Draco replied, "but some are going to be more likely than others."
"Can I take the statistical stuff, please?" Natalie Warren held up a hand. "We can probably work out who the most likely suspects are based on a few example sets of criteria. That would narrow it down."

"I think it's prudent we all learn some basic defence stuff in case we get taken hostage." Ron said firmly, crossing his arms. "It's only a precaution but…"

"But it's a reasonable precaution." Harry concluded with a nod. "It's a good suggestion."

"Who'll teach us?" Connor piped up.

"Harry." Ron stated.

Harry's eyes widened a little at Ron's declaration but seeing everyone else's pleased expressions couldn't bring himself to argue. "OK. We'll meet here once a week for a lesson. Hermione…"

"I'll work out a time for everyone." Hermione agreed happily.

Harry hoped Sirius or Remus would help him come up with a lesson plan…maybe he could ask Moody…

"Right," Hermione said, bringing everyone back to the issue at hand, "so Anthony will take research into prized possessions when they are things; Natalie will handle when they are people; and, we all practice some defence to ensure we're not helpless as hostages."

"We might be able…" Fred began.

"…to come up with…" George added.

"…a couple of things to help." Fred concluded.

George grinned. "Maybe something…"

"…that will help a hostage…"

"…get free."

Harry grinned back at them. "Great. Let us know when you have something."

"You know that line about prisoners suggests that there'll be more than one." Theo said suddenly.

"One for each Champion?" Blaise suggested, speaking up.

"That's one possibility," Hermione said, "and would make sense. Why would the hostages work together? Each is supporting their own Champion."

"But couldn't it also suggest that the prisoners will be the Champions themselves?" Jeremy Branstone argued. "They aren't meant to work together and isn't life itself a prized possession?"

"Good point, Jeremy," Harry said, "especially as the Champions were told not to talk with each other about this task."

"So I guess we have three possible scenarios around this point," Hermione listed, "one; Harry has to retrieve something that he values; two, Harry has to retrieve someone that he cares for who will be held prisoner alongside the other Champions' hostages; three, that Harry and the other Champions may be imprisoned and have to rescue themselves, and, or, their prized possession be it a something
"Add in the complexity that we don't know if it's above or below the water…” added Daphne.

"For having clues, there are a lot of bloody unknowns." Ron said bluntly.

"It wouldn't be a challenge otherwise." Blaise pointed out.

Ron sighed as he conceded the point.

"What we have is a lot of work," Hermione said briskly, "we're going to need plans for dealing with each scenario."

"Which brings us on to duelling and physical practice." Neville said. "Obviously we're some way away from having spell plans for scenarios but we'll have the defence lessons and you're probably going to need to practice swimming either way, Harry."

Harry frowned but nodded, relieved that Sirius had taught him to swim in the Summer at the Valley clinic when they'd had their own pool – their own heated pool. He needed to think about how he dealt with swimming in the freezing conditions in the lake in February. He'd talk to Sirius about that, Harry determined.

"I guess the cheerleading section continues as per usual," Jeremy said, "clear up the gossip and support you as much as we can. Are you doing any more press?"

They'd issued a brief statement after the first task, mostly stating condolences for the dragon handler who'd died, with an added statement that he was pleased to get the first task completed and to have established an early lead.

"I think there's something planned for the New Year?" Harry shrugged. "I'll talk to Sirius. I know he and your Dad have something worked out already."

Theo coughed discreetly. "You said you couldn't talk with the other Champions about the task?"

Harry nodded.

"So you can't ask them if they have the same clues or different ones?" Theo continued. "Or to coordinate with them on a strategy for their hostages to work with yours…or for you all to have a plan to work together if you were the prisoners?"

Harry nodded. "That's right. I do know Fleur has one clue now because of the sabotage, Cedric has two and Viktor has three." Amos Diggory had complained when Fleur had been granted a clue, pointing out it wasn't fair to Cedric who'd actually saved one egg. The new arrangement allowed for Fleur to be compensated for her dragon being sabotaged while ensuring each Champion had a clue ratio consistent with their standing in the tournament.

Blaise sent Theo a sympathetic look before focusing on Harry. "You can't talk with them but someone else could, perhaps?"

And Harry suddenly got it. He blushed a little as he gave Theo an apologetic smile. "Ah, yes, I guess. I mean, Bagman said we couldn't talk to each other about it before the task, I think? So…it's possibly best that I don't know about anyone else talking with other Champions or what was specifically discussed either? Just to be on the safe side?"

Theo nodded. "Understood."
Blaise frowned. "And the caveat is before the task, right? Which means there's nothing stopping you from talking to each other once the task begins."

He hadn't thought of that, Harry mused inwardly and gave a nod.

"Right then; I think we're done for tonight." Neville declared. "Thanks, everyone!"

It took a while for everyone to leave. People meandered out in twos and threes, chatting away about their new assignments. He was pleased that most were bubbling over with enthusiasm and excitement.

Draco approached him as the room was almost empty. "Cousin."

Harry nodded at him cautiously. "Cousin." He knew it was Draco's method of announcing that what he had to say was family business.

"I have a date with Katherine Gillingwood." Draco said. "The Gillingwoods are a pureblood family who own a great deal of land, some of it bordering the Black estates. They are not politically active per se but have contributed to Minister Fudge's campaigns in the past. I'd like to introduce her to you and Lord Black tomorrow night."

"She's very pretty." Neville commented. "Third year Slytherin. The Gillingwoods went abroad during the last skirmish with Voldemort."

Harry nodded his thanks at the additional information. "Shall we say six o'clock, Draco?" Harry replied. It was an inconvenience but it was part of the agreement he'd made with Draco and he'd keep to it.

Draco smiled. "I'll inform Katherine." It was his parting comment and Harry couldn't quite prevent the sigh of relief that escaped him at Draco's departure.

Eventually, it was just Harry, Hermione, Ron and Neville. Harry poked the boys and gave them his best 'please leave Hermione and me alone' look while Hermione was distracted, packing up her book bag. Ron rolled his eyes but allowed a smirking Neville to drag him out before Hermione noticed.

It was just in time.

Hermione raised her head and looked surprised at finding herself alone with Harry. She smiled shyly at him. "Hey."

"Hey." Harry said giddily. Their first date had gone splendidly as had their second. He hurriedly leaned in for a soft kiss and was pleased when Hermione responded enthusiastically. He had to pull himself away. "This isn't why I wanted you alone. I mean," he continued rueful honesty, "not the only reason."

Hermione grinned back at him. "Oh?"

"Well, I've been trying to find the perfect time but there hasn't been one so…" Harry swiftly reached down to the floor by the refreshments table and plucked his invisibility cloak away to reveal a small box. He offered it to Hermione, nervous again. "I'd like you to accept this token of my regard and hope that you will do me the honour of escorting you to the Yule Ball."

Hermione's face lit up and Harry felt relief swamp him as she immediately nodded.

"I've been wondering when you were going to ask me." Hermione said with a bright laugh. "Viktor
was joking the other day that he'd take me if you didn't get a move on."

Harry laughed. Viktor was intensely jealous that Harry had someone who wasn't bothered by his fame as Viktor himself had problems finding someone like Hermione – someone who liked him for who he was rather than someone captured by his Quidditch success and persona.

"Open the box." Harry encouraged, eager for her to see the present now the hard part of the invitation was out of the way.

Hermione glanced at him curiously but carefully undid the ribbon and opened the lid. Her mouth formed a wide 'O' as she drew out the snow globe where a miniature Hogwarts was covered in an everlasting fall of snow. "Oh, Harry!" She exclaimed. "It's beautiful."

"Sirius helped me." Harry said, answering her unspoken question of whether he'd made it. "Apparently my Dad used to make my Mum one for every ball they attended."

Hermione reached across the space between them and kissed him. "I love it and, for the record, I would love to attend the Yule Ball with you."

Harry grinned and they were kissing again, Hermione holding fast to the globe.

A knock on the door had them both breaking away with a guilty expression.

"Aren't you guys done yet?" Ron's strident voice drifted through the wood.

Hermione sighed and put her globe back in the box, reaching for her packed bag. "We really have to get him together with Lavender."

"Or anyone." Harry agreed as he clasped her free hand in his and began the walk to the door. "Anyone at all!"

o-O-o

7th December 1994

The Burrow was quiet in the middle of the night.

Percy stared up at the ceiling above his bed and brooded about the state of his life. It seemed incredible to him that just a few short months before he had been thrilled with his life; good job with prospects and a solid beginning for his political ambitions, a lovely girlfriend, and his family even embracing good connections to revive their status as an Ancient and Noble House. His dreams all lay in ashes.

He had no job, no prospects and he had let Penny go rather than keep her tethered to a dead weight such as he. He was a failure.

Why hadn't he questioned the way Crouch had changed after returning from flu? His remembered pleasure at being finally recognised for his hard work soured his stomach.

Percy heaved a huge sigh into the darkness. He couldn't sleep again. He felt restless, drifting like a useless piece of flotsam on the river of life. His thoughts turned relentlessly over in his head; what was he going to do? He couldn't live with his parents for the rest of his life, and he doubted whether even his mother's patience would last forever.

He tossed his blankets aside and rolled out of bed. Maybe a glass of warm milk would help. He crept
out of his room and down the stairs, careful to avoid the places that creaked and would bring his
mother running.

The living area glowed amber with the last of the fire's embers; a single chair puddled in the yellow
light of an oil lamp. He paused at the sight of his father, dressed for bed and wrapped up in an old
flannel dressing gown, reading. His Dad looked up from his book and blinked at the sight of Percy in
his pristine pinstriped pyjamas hovering.

"Can't sleep?" His Dad said evenly, keeping his voice low.

Percy shook his head, feeling like he was nine rather than the nineteen years of age he was.

His Dad set his book aside. "Warm milk?" He was up and into the kitchen before Percy could reply.

Percy trailed after him. He felt awkward around his Dad, too aware that he had been dismissive of
his father's advice about getting too close to Crouch, working too hard, and alienating his colleagues.
His Dad had refrained from telling him 'told you so' but Percy was all too aware that he deserved that
and more.

He thought again of how close his family had come to dying at the World Cup, how pained Bill still
looked occasionally. He shivered.

His Dad pottered around the kitchen and Percy slipped into a chair at the table. Eventually a warm
glass of milk was placed in front of him and his Dad sat down with a glass of his own.

"I should tell you," his Dad said conversationally, "that the reason why I'm up is that we might have
a werewolf attack tonight."

Percy almost choked on his milk. "What?!"

"Remus got wind of a rumour that Fenrir Greyback is supposed to menace Harry's supporters
tonight." His Dad said, calm considering the news he was imparting. "Amelia's posted a couple of
Aurors to watch the Burrow, but I thought I'd stay up and keep watch myself too."

"Does Mum know?" asked Percy worriedly, glancing up the stairs.

"No, I didn't want to get her upset. Bill knows but Alicia asked him to stay over with her and Elphias
so he's there." His Dad confirmed. "It may not happen." He raised his glass. "Or it may happen to
someone else."

"But you think it will happen to us?" Percy noted.

"We're known to be one of Harry's closest supporters and we've already been targeted once." His
Dad shrugged. "I'd be sticking my head in the sand if I didn't consider the possibility that we're top of
the list."

Percy suddenly wished he'd thought to bring his wand with him. He took a sip of his milk. "Well, I
might as well stay up and keep you company." He offered a little hesitantly.

His Dad's eyes gleamed with an approval that eased something in Percy. "I'd like that. Thank you,
Percy."

They sat for a moment in silence.

"I'm sorry." Percy blurted out. "I'm sorry for all of it. I thought...I just wanted to establish myself and
prove that I was ambitious and had drive and initiative and…” And that he wasn't like his Dad, content to drift in a department he might enjoy but which didn't have potential – or hadn't had potential until Sirius had intervened.

"And it's not your fault that Crouch Junior took advantage of that to get the information he needed for his plans to hurt Harry and us.” His Dad said firmly.

Percy lowered his gaze to the table. "It feels like I should have known."

"According to everyone I've talked to," his Dad replied, "Crouch Junior is a very intelligent, very insane and obsessed individual. You were lucky all he did was play you for information, Percy." His eyes shone behind his glasses. "We're just thankful you're still alive."

Percy hadn't considered that in his brooding. He shivered again, suddenly cold in the warm cosy kitchen of his home.

"I don't know what to do now." Percy admitted with a heartfelt sigh. "I wanted to be Minister one day and now…” he winced, "I'll always remain the idiot who didn't realise that he was working for an imposter because he was so caught up in enjoying the attention from his boss."

"Nothing is an impossibility, Percy," his Dad chided gently, "there are plenty of redemption stories out there.” He motioned with his glass. "I would never have thought that Sirius Black would be Lord Black and leading us regardless of Cornelius being Minister."

Percy gave a hum at that because it was very true; nobody could have guessed at what had happened with Sirius.

"All I've ever wanted to do is work at the Ministry," Percy said plaintively, "I never truly considered another career."

His Dad nodded. "Well, now you have to and that's maybe not a bad thing, Percy. Maybe this happened because it wasn't the right path for you to follow."

Percy frowned as he considered that. What path had he been on truly?

In hindsight, he wondered at how much he had pushed colleagues away in his ambition and determination to outperform them at every level. He'd also pushed his family away, considering them a liability to his ambitions more than anything since their revival as an Ancient and Noble House had been so new and they'd never been interested before.

His family had never deserved his scorn; he knew that deep down. His father might not have worked for an important department for a while and he may have been considered without power by some, but he was well liked, well respected and considered an honourable man. His mother had worked hard to raise them all. Bill and Charlie had good careers and his younger siblings might need to mature but they were smart and likely to do well once they did. Perhaps, he mused seriously, all his path at the Ministry had done was to turn him into a person he wasn't sure he liked in retrospect.

"Maybe you're right." Percy admitted quietly. "I guess I hadn't really thought about it in those terms."

His Dad hummed. "When I was your age, I wanted to do a study of actually living in the muggle world; write a book, become the foremost authority on muggles, maybe end up teaching back at Hogwarts. Your Mum was supportive and we'd both secured jobs so we could save a nest egg to fund it. But then…we found all our plans upset by Bill's unexpected advent into our lives."

Percy's eyes opened wide. He hadn't realised that Bill had been an accident.
"So, I stayed with the job at the Ministry because we needed the income and, well, that was that." His Dad said. "And yet here I am years later; considered the foremost authority on muggles, interacting with them and their world on a regular basis in my new role, and the rest of it may come to fruition yet."

"You took a different path but you ended up where you wanted to be in the end." Percy said out loud.

"And I have seven wonderful children including you that we probably wouldn't have had otherwise." His Dad said with a smile.

Percy smiled back ruefully. "I don't think I've been so wonderful recently."

"You're not the first to go through a tough time." His Dad murmured. "You should ask Charlie why he didn't try out for Quidditch teams."

Percy stared at his Dad with blatant curiosity.

"Not my story to tell," his Dad said, "you should ask Charlie."

"What should I do?" Percy asked. "I never really considered any other career. I don't even know what I'm qualified to do."

"There are a lot of possibilities out there, Percy." His Dad said. "You should consider what you enjoy doing; what you would be good at."

Percy nodded. "I...I sometimes thought about law, I guess, when I was young. But you need a sponsor to get a Mastery and I never knew a solicitor to ask and I didn't think it was possible really."

"Maybe we can introduce you to Brian Cutter." His Dad said. "I'm sure even if he can't sponsor you, he can give you some good advice or point you in the right direction."

It rankled that he needed help but Percy swallowed his pride and nodded briskly. "That sounds good."

His Dad stiffened suddenly. "Something's crossed the outer ward by the orchard."

Percy tensed.

Merlin! They were being attacked!

A lizard patronus, a chameleon, suddenly glided through the wall, startling them both.

"Stay inside!" Tonks's voice said when the patronus opened its mouth. "We have two werewolves on the move!"

His Dad stood up and unholstered his wand anyway.

Percy stood up and motioned vaguely in the right direction. "I'm going to get my wand!"

He didn't wait for an acknowledgement just charged out of the kitchen and up the stairs. It took him less than a minute to locate it on his bedside table but as he reached for it, he heard the smash of glass below as a window at the front broke.

He froze.
"Stay out! I'm armed!" His Dad yelled.

Percy didn't think twice about it. He grabbed his wand and rushed downstairs to help defend their home.

His Dad was crouched behind a chair, firing silver javelin curses toward the broken window. Percy dived behind the nearest chair, aimed his wand and did the same.

There was a howl from outside that chilled Percy's bones and then…silence.

Was it over?

His Dad stood up carefully, signalling Percy to stay down. He walked gingerly over to the window and…

A brick flew through the dark and slammed into his father's shoulder; he flew backwards and landed with a thump, his head glancing off the leg of the dining table.

"Dad!" Percy shouted. He scrambled out from behind the chair, scurrying across the floor to check on his Dad, so motionless on the ground.

Hands grabbed his pyjama top from behind and Percy yelped as he felt it tear as he struggled to get free. A clawed hand slapped his forgotten wand away and clamped around his chest. He was held fast when he tried to desperately pry the hairy arm from his body. He found himself being dragged backwards towards the broken window, legs scrabbling wildly against the wooden floor as he tried to free himself.

"Let me go!" Percy screamed.

His Dad moaned and shifted on the floor in response.

A sudden whistle through the air was the only warning as a silver javelin curse impacted the werewolf, throwing Percy clear at last, the pyjama top tearing again as the werewolf tried to hold onto him anyway.

"Get away from my son!" His Mum looked like an avenging angel in her white flowered nightie, her red hair sticking up wildly, as she brandished her wand like the weapon it was. She threw another silver javelin curse at the rapidly retreating werewolf and then another.

Percy finally got a glimpse of his attacker; a youngish man, partially transformed into a wolf – a muzzle distorted his face and his claws were viciously sharp, the dim firelight glinting off the lethal tips.

He regained his senses enough to hurry towards his dropped wand; to turn and stun the werewolf cowering from his Mum's curses against the wall underneath the broken window.

His Mum breathed out heavily and nodded her thanks at him. Her eyes went wide at the sound of his Dad groaning.

"Arthur!"

"Dad!"

Percy was closer but his Mum beat him to it, already casting diagnostics.

His Dad attempted to get up only to get pushed down again by his insistent wife.
"No, Arthur, you've hit your head." His Mum's tone had a touch of hysteria in it.

"I'm fine, Molly." His Dad insisted.

There was a bang on the door.

They all froze.

"Mister Weasley?!" Tonks' voice sounded from the other side of the door. "Mister Weasley, are you alright?"

"Answer the door, Percy!" His Mum said, gesturing for him to answer it.

Percy went with alacrity. He hurled the front door open and pointed at the unconscious werewolf.

"One of them got past you!" He said, more accusingly than he had meant to. "My Dad's hurt; he needs a healer."

Tonks nodded grimly. "Let me secure the prisoner and we'll call a healer for your Dad." She hurried inside and cuffed the werewolf with heavy steel chains. She floated him out of the Burrow where a large mage light ball hung illuminating the area. Percy followed as she handed the werewolf off to another Auror who immediately apparated.

"He'll be placed into secure holding at headquarters for questioning." Tonks promised. "That's the last of them. Greyback wasn't with them. Two of them tried the back, sent the other round the front. He stunned the Auror we had posted there."


"His pride's wounded mostly. He's already gone back." Tonks said as she peered at Percy. "It looks like we should get you inside and have a healer look at you too."

"Hmmm?" Percy looked down to where her eyes had zeroed in on him. His pyjama top hung in rags and across his stomach were five long thin scratches, the sting of them suddenly making itself known as the adrenaline faded.

He'd been scratched.

By a werewolf.

"Merlin!" He murmured weakly.

Tonks placed a hand on his shoulder steadying him. "Come on, Percy. Let's get you inside and we'll call the healer."

"I'm scratched." He said helplessly. "I've been scratched."

Tonks nodded as she guided him back into the Burrow. "I know, Percy. I know. It's going to be OK."
8th December 1994

"We have nine werewolves in custody, another four got away including Greyback." Amelia said as soon as she entered Cornelius's office for the impromptu War Council. She accepted the cup of tea Bertie pressed on her. She looked calm and collected but Sirius knew she had hardly slept a wink.

Sirius nodded at her. Her numbers tallied with the numbers Remus had relayed to him during the early hours of the morning. "Thirteen werewolves; and four targets with Greyback attempting to get to your good self, Amelia." He listed from memory.

Amelia gave a huff. "It's a pity I wasn't home," she said belligerently, "I would have loved a go at him. By the time the wards alerted me and I got there, he was long gone."

Cornelius looked at her in disbelief. "Rather you than me."

"He left a message." Amelia said tersely. "The body of a young lamb with the name Susan written on it in blood."

"Fenrir will not be able to reach her in Hogwarts." Albus reassured her.

"Especially now we know the Durmstrang ship is the likely point of entry for Riddle's associates." Sirius added. "The kids are taking precautions too. They've set up a good buddy system."

Amelia breathed out. "Three other homes were hit; the Weasley's, the Longbottom's and Dirk Cresswell's. The only casualties were at the Weasley's; Arthur was knocked out for a while although the healer has cleared him for work this morning and Percy who is at home receiving treatment for scratches."

Bertie sighed. "He's very lucky it wasn't a full moon and the scratches were given by a werewolf partially transformed otherwise he would have contracted lycanthropy himself."

"He thought he had." Sirius muttered.

"He'll still be scarred for life." Amelia retorted, but she softened her hard words with a nod of agreement. "He was lucky."

"The press this morning has been very positive." Cornelius said brightly, picking up his cup and saucer. He pointed at the Prophet laid out on his desk. "Rita managed to capture all the salient points."

"It was a good article." Sirius admitted grudgingly. He really didn't like Skeeter but she had her uses.

The article that morning certainly played to the alliance's rather than to Wenlock's agenda. It had celebrated the capture of the rogue werewolves; had given credit to law-abiding werewolves who'd blown the whistle on the imminent attacks because they supported the recent push for new laws. There was a strong statement from Augusta which questioned why the supporters of fairer laws had been the subject of the attacks, casting suspicion on the other political side as the originators. Augusta should have been a Slytherin, Sirius thought with amusement. He would have liked to have seen Wenlock's face when he'd seen the article.

More importantly, Sirius mused as he sipped his coffee, the article and the events of the previous
night had sent a clear message to Voldemort; that Fenrir had ultimately failed his mission to derail the alliance, to hassle and hurt them. Arthur was more determined than ever in the wake of the attack and the whole affair seemed to have given Percy a good kick up the arse. When Sirius had paid them a call at breakfast, Percy had been up at the table eating a veritable mountain of bacon and sausage, and had been talking about retraining as a solicitor focused on werewolf rights. It looked like Remus had been right about Percy, Sirius considered ruefully; the young wizard had needed to find his own way.

"We've come out of this remarkably unscathed." Albus commented. There was a hint of disbelief in his voice. "I fear this will only enrage Tom to greater acts of defiance."

Sirius hummed. "He'll certainly be pissed at Fenrir's failure." He set his cup down, glancing at the clock. "We owe much of our success last night to the information Sian provided to Remus and Tonks."

"Fenrir is going to have to address the dissension in the ranks of his pack." Bertie theorised. "That should keep him busy for a while and unable to assist Riddle with any plans."

"He's likely to discover that you and Remus have offered sanctuary." Amelia sighed. "Are you and Remus prepared for that?"

"We already have a better location chosen for such a scenario. The chateau will become a way-station." Sirius said. "All the werewolves taking refuge in our pack know there is a risk Fenrir will react once he's aware of the exodus from his own." He shifted uncomfortable with the truth of what he was about to say. "Remus is also very aware that ultimately it may come down to a fight between him and Fenrir. He's..." he struggled to find the words to fit, "prepared is the wrong word but..."

"Accepting such a thing will come to pass?" suggested Bertie.

Sirius nodded. "He's returning to France today to shift everyone to the secondary location."

"Sian?" Amelia asked.

"Staying at The School House in Hogsmeade. Kreacher is taking care of her." Sirius said. "She's shaken up but holding steady." He still didn't like her much. It wasn't rational but in some way he blamed Sian for drawing Remus away from himself and James in the past. And yet probably out of all the werewolf contacts Remus had made back then, she was the one that had done the least to attract Remus to the packs.

Sirius pushed the thought away and gestured at the clock. "We should all get to the chamber."

"Indeed." Albus said, rising with surprising grace.

The group made their way through the Ministry corridors to the Wizengamot chamber, drawing looks and murmurs with every wizard and witch they passed. They entered the Wizengamot together and Sirius knew they made a statement; the head of the DMLE, the head of the DOM, the Minister, the Chief Warlock and himself all together.

Wenlock's face was a picture.

Sirius felt a rush of satisfaction similar to the rush he'd once gotten when they'd played a good prank – not one of the malicious ones but one of the funny make-everyone-laugh types. He parted ways with the others as he walked up the steps to take his seat, the rest of the Wizengamot Houses rising in respect, although Sirius noted that Wenlock was the last to rise and he sat almost with Sirius rather than after him. It was a small rebellion but one that told Wenlock's supporters that Wenlock was after
Sirius's position; was close behind and would one day have the Houses stand for him, sit for him. Since Sirius found the whole sitting thing bizarre in the first place, he was mostly amused by Wenlock's pettiness.

Augusta nodded at him across the chamber; she looked fierce in red, her head held high. According to the Auror's report, she had whacked one of the werewolves across the back of the head with a cricket bat. He glanced at Arthur and was relieved to see him looking well despite the fading bruise on his temple. A glance up at the public gallery had Sirius connecting gazes with Amos Diggory. He looked just as furious as he had at the previous Wizengamot and Sirius wondered whether angry was Diggory's current constant state of being.

The Wizengamot was called to order, allowing Sirius to break his glaring stand-off, and the usual agenda progressed with little fanfare or surprises. There were a couple of Heir announcements including a change of Heir for Flint that interested Sirius. Marcus Flint had apparently split with his father over the issue of the Dark Lord's genealogy. Sirius cast a glance toward Lucius who made a cautious nod of agreement; he'd speak to the boy through Draco, assess whether Marcus Flint could be an ally or, at least, a neutral.

The agenda moved on.

Sirius chatted with Richard Bones during the break as he normally did. Richard was unsurprisingly concerned by the message that Fenrir had left at Amelia's and Sirius did his best to allay Richard's concerns while recognising that Richard had genuine cause to be concerned.

Finally the last item of the agenda was called; the report from the Committee reviewing the Magical Creature laws.

Dirk Cresswell shifted to the centre of the Wizengamot to make his report. He opened his mouth to speak and…

Wenlock stood up. "Point of order, Chief Warlock!"

The entire Wizengamot shifted to look at Wenlock. He'd made an effort with his appearance, Sirius realised. The robes were new, a dark authoritative blue colour but old fashioned in style; set to emphasise conservatism and security. His crest was prominent on the breast of the robes, silver thread catching the light and drawing the eye. Wenlock had obviously taken care in his grooming; not a hair was out of place. He made a solid impression and had clearly learned over the previous months that style was just as important as substance in the political arena. It was also clearly the opposite of Sirius's own style which displayed his physicality and emphasised his reputation as a former Hit Wizard, a battle mage. 'Here,' Wenlock was saying, 'see how safe I am compared to the dangerous Black.' Sirius was somewhat amused again.

"Lord Wenlock." Dullard, the clerk was on his feet, glaring at Wenlock. "What is your point of order?"

Wenlock sneered at him; he'd addressed Albus not Dullard but the clerk was resolute and Wenlock finally spoke.

"Due to changed circumstances, any member of the Wizengamot can call for a Committee to be dissolved and all suspended or withdrawn laws made under that Committee's purview to be voted immediately back into law." He drew himself up. "After recent events, I wish to make such a call in regards to the Committee to Review the Magical Creature and Races Laws."

An outbreak of chatter in the public gallery accompanied the knowing looks exchanged across the
floor of the Wizengamot by the various factions.

Sirius watched instead of taking part, quietly observing the Minor pureblood Houses in Wenlock’s group starting to recognise that the move hadn’t taken the Potter alliance by surprise; that some of the neutral Minor Houses weren’t looking toward Wenlock but away from him.

Dullard dragged the session back to order. "What are the circumstances that would constitute a reason for such a call to be made?"

Wenlock smiled as smugly as a cat that had caught a canary. "Firstly, the events of the first task of the Tri-Wizard tournament clearly show that dragons are dangerous creatures. Lord Potter was almost killed by a feral dragon, and the rest of the Champions were gravely injured." He lifted a hand in the direction of the empty Potter seat.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at the gesture. It irritated him but then he knew it was meant to irritate him so he let it slide.

"Secondly, the events of last night when three members of this Wizengamot were attacked by werewolves clearly demonstrates that these creatures are just that; creatures." Wenlock sniffed. "We did not have such a spate of attacks while the Werewolf laws were in place and they should be reinstated immediately."

Dullard sighed and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Does anyone object to Lord Wenlock's call for a dissolution?"

It was Daniel Greengrass who stood up for the alliance in opposition. Wenlock had wrongly presumed it would be Sirius and so all his careful grooming was for nothing. Daniel was the consummate neutral; safe, cautious and conservative. His own immaculate green robes lacked the newness of Wenlock’s and therefore seemed more genuinely Daniel's own style rather than an affectation.

"I object." Daniel said forcefully. "If I may take each point in order: each task within the Tri-Wizard Tournament is constructed to give the Champions an almost impossible challenge. Dragons were used back in 'fifty-three in the first task resulting in two of the Champions sustaining similar injuries to the ones that we saw in this year's tournament; minor burns, scratches and bruises. We would never normally sanction young men and women climbing into a dragon's nest to steal eggs. In fact, there is an international law prohibiting such action whether dragons are in the wild or on a reserve because of the danger to the thief. The tournament constitutes an exceptional circumstance in regards to the law."

Daniel adjusted his stance, commanding all attention.

"In addition to this, the dragon that went feral went feral with assistance from wizards."

Murmurs swept the Wizengamot until Albus stood and called for silence so Daniel could continue.

"What evidence do you have of this supposed assistance?" demanded Wenlock.

Amelia stood up, coolly gazing up at Wenlock with considered derision. "The official DMLE investigation with the support of the Magical Forensics team from the DOM found that the Horntail had been drugged to be overly aggressive. In addition, the chain securing the Horntail had been charmed to vanish during Lord Potter's task. It is the view of the DMLE that there was an attempt to sabotage the first task and Aurors are tracking down the suspected culprits."

Daniel nodded sagely at her succinct reporting and turned to Wenlock. "A dragon sabotaged by
wizards cannot be said to have changed the natural threat that dragons represent above and beyond the usual circumstances that exist and did exist at the time the Committee was formed. Therefore, I believe there is no substance to the first point of Lord Wenlock's argument."

Wenlock's nostrils flared in anger.

"His second point misses several salient facts." Daniel continued blithely. "Firstly, it is certainly strange that after years of oppression, a number of werewolves suddenly have decided to attack. After all, only the most restrictive of laws regarding their employment were suspended; the main law determining execution for a werewolf attacking a wizard or a witch remains in effect. Why would they attack now when we are making strides to help our fellow wizards and witches affected by lycanthropy?"

Daniel made a small wave towards Amelia again.

"According to the initial report from the DMLE published this morning, all nine of the werewolves arrested last night confirmed that they attacked on the orders of their pack leader Fenrir Greyback, a known rogue who has been wanted by the DMLE for over twenty years." Daniel gazed around the Wizengamot. "While last night was a systematic attack which hasn't been seen for a while, Greyback and members of his pack have been suspected in a spate of sporadic attacks over the last several years – hardly then, a changed circumstance."

He held up a hand as Wenlock made to argue back.

"Furthermore, the report clearly states that all attacks were thwarted thanks to information provided by disaffected members of Greyback's own pack who believe that their leader was wrongly endangering the political move to review these laws. Werewolves, ladies and gentlemen, provided the information to take down their own because of the steps we've taken to review the laws affecting them, to try to provide a fairer view." He pinned Wenlock with a hard stare. "I will give you that is a changed circumstance but I would argue it is a positive one, supportive of the Committee and its aims which should proceed without any further attempt to derail the democratic political process."

Silence greeted Daniel's final words.

Albus cleared his throat, the sound echoing loudly. "Do you have a counter-argument, Lord Wenlock? Or do you withdraw your objection?"

Wenlock dragged his gaze from a triumphant Daniel to look at Albus. "I believe my initial argument stands." He blustered. "And I have the support of the Head of the Department overseeing the control of magical creatures." He indicated Diggory who nodded briskly.

That was poor form, Sirius mused. Had Wenlock been so sure the alliance would be taken aback by his use of obscure Wizengamot protocol that he hadn't been prepared for a cohesive opposition? It looked like it. And calling on Diggory, who simply looked like a bureaucrat trying to maintain the importance of his own position, was not a good move.

Albus smiled benignly at Wenlock. "Mister Dullard, am I correct in my belief that in matters of this protocol where a call is made for dissolution and an objection lodged that it is my right as Chief Warlock to determine the outcome?"

The point was made so mildly that Wenlock almost missed it but when he got it, he flushed a brilliant red.

"I was led to believe the matter is put to a vote, Chief Warlock." Wenlock spoke over Dullard as he
began to answer.

Dullard glared up at Wenlock. "You were not recognised to speak, Lord Wenlock, and I believe the Chief Warlock addressed his question of protocol to myself as the clerk of this body." He moved to speak with Albus. "And the Chief Warlock is correct; he determines the outcome."

Albus beamed brightly. "In which case, as I am very well acquainted with both situations that Lord Wenlock outlined and which Lord Greengrass explained so well, I rule in favour of the objection to the call for dissolution."

"So noted!" Dullard called out. "The call for dissolution is defeated. The Committee will report as per the agenda of the Wizengamot."

And Sirius couldn't quite prevent his smile as everyone politely ignored the still standing Wenlock and focused on Dirk Cresswell as he began to speak.

A well-played prank, thought Sirius with glee; a well-played prank indeed.

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The fury of the Dark Lord was something to behold.

Peter had seen it before when he'd been a spy. Mostly he'd watched in his rat form as the Dark Lord had tortured some poor bastard that Peter had revealed as a traitor or who had failed in their own mission. Peter knew that he'd been asked to witness both as an honour and to hammer home the message of what awaited him if he didn't comply with the Dark Lord's agenda, didn't complete his missions.

It was a lesson Bartemius Crouch Junior was learning for himself since he had turned up unexpectedly that morning just in time to witness Fenrir admit the failure of the werewolf raids the night before. The wizard watched enthralled and repulsed as the Dark Lord tortured Fenrir Greyback with verve and ferocity. Crouch had actually winced on a couple of occasions as the Dark Lord had applied a Crucio with enough force to completely levitate Greyback from the floor.

For the most part though, Crouch looked on like a son learning at his father's hand, eager and keen; something Crouch was deluded enough to believe was the deal with him and the Dark Lord. Peter wasn't about to disillusion him. Crouch would learn soon enough that the only person the Dark Lord cared for was himself...although admittedly he might have a fondness for the snake, his familiar. Crouch was just another tool; one who the Dark Lord used most effectively by pretending a paternal caring.

Peter didn't allow his own wincses to show. He kept a small smile of faked enjoyment on his face.

"Explain to me again, Fenrir, what happened?" The Dark Lord sneered.

The large hairy man lying curled up on the floor, panted. "They were prepared, Master…"

"And why were they prepared, Fenrir?" The Dark Lord shot another Crucio toward Fenrir who yelped as it hit.

Fenrir caught his breath again. "Traitors. There are traitors in my pack."

The Dark Lord made a tsking sound of disgust. "You've lost control of your pack, Fenrir. How disappointing."
Fenrir whimpered, hugging one side where Peter was sure the ribs had actually cracked.

"I expected better of you, Fenrir." The Dark Lord continued. "You were such an Alpha when you were young but now...well, you're just an old wolf. I should have expected it."

There was a growl from Fenrir and he managed to stagger into kneeling before another spell sent him to the floor again, howling in agony.

"How can I possibly agree to giving your pack absolute freedom when I have taken the government, Fenrir, when you cannot guarantee their loyalty?" The Dark Lord said, holding the spell until Fenrir's howls turned to gasped breaths.

The wolf man lay curled up on the floor. It was clear that he wasn't getting up any time soon.

"Tell me you know who the traitors are, Fenrir?" The Dark Lord's voice fell to a low purr. "Tell me you have not fallen so far in your leadership that you do not know."

"Eleven are missing," Fenrir choked out, his voice a raspy mess from the screaming, "but only one since I called for warriors. She's a friend of Lupin."

"Lupin?" asked the Dark Lord as though he didn't know although Peter suspected he did.

Fenrir's lip curled. "Dumbledore's wolf." His gaze darted briefly to Peter and Peter knew what was coming and jumped before Fenrir could push.

"Remus Lupin, Master," Peter said, "you may recall that he was part of the group of friends I had within Dumbledore's Order."

"Ah, that wolf." The Dark Lord chuckled quietly before he snapped his wand angrily, light spilling out to hit Fenrir again who arched upwards in pain, another bone snapping somewhere in his body. "Well, well, well. So, one of your pack runs to Lupin and all my plans for torturing Potter are undone! Unacceptable!"

The Dark Lord stopped, breathless, and he waved off his snake who was peering at him with what Peter presumed was a snake's expression of concern.

Perhaps, Fenrir, we should let Lupin take your pack." The Dark Lord taunted. "You sired him, did you not? Sons challenge their fathers." He held out a hand to Crouch and Peter wasn't surprised when Crouch immediately sped to the Dark Lord's side. "Bartemius and I know this only too well."

"Lupin will never serve you as I." Fenrir said haltingly. "He is devoted to the Potter boy and Black; they are his pack. The rat will confirm it!"

Peter reluctantly nodded in agreement as the Dark Lord's red eyes fell upon him again. "Remus would refuse a place by your side, Master, I am certain of it."

The Dark Lord's young face turned thoughtful. He settled back on the mountain of cushions that Peter had constructed for him on the settee and glared at Fenrir.

"I will give you one chance, Fenrir," the Dark Lord said, "one chance to take back your pack and instil in them the need to obey me above all others. You will kill Lupin and your traitors or I will find another wolf to do it and take your place."

Fenrir's lip curled up in a half-snarl but he nodded, his hair falling over his face to hide the tiny flame of defiance in his eyes.
"Come, come now, Fenrir." The Dark Lord chided. "Your reward if you should prevail will be worth it. The freedom to roam unmolested...to bite those who would stand against us without penalty...all this will be yours and your pack's when I rule." His expression hardened and he motioned at the wolf. "Leave. And, Fenrir, do not come back until you have Lupin's head to show me."

Fenrir crawled to the floo and only just managed to croak out a destination. He disappeared in the green flames and Peter immediately locked the floo down.

"We should move location." Crouch said. "Fenrir is a liability and he knows where we are."

The Dark Lord smiled at Crouch. "An excellent suggestion. I grow weary of this place." He looked around the small living area of the flat in distaste. "But it will wait for tomorrow." He peered into Crouch's eyes. "You are here because you have news for me, do you not?"

Crouch nodded somewhat less eagerly than Peter had assumed he would. "Snape has made contact with Karkaroff."

"He made contact a week ago," the Dark Lord corrected silkily, "why the delay in informing me?"

"He threatened Karkaroff with punishment if he did not relay the message and I was interested in what he would do." Crouch admitted with a faked chagrin.

The Dark Lord stared at Crouch until Crouch averted his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Father, I should have informed you immediately." Crouch apologised, kneeling in front of the Dark Lord, a very picture of contrition.

"Do you challenge me, Bartemius?" The Dark Lord asked mildly, a small hand stroking through Crouch's hair in a way that turned Peter's stomach.

"Never." Crouch promised fervently.

"What did Severus do to Igor?" asked the Dark Lord, apparently appeased.

"A mild poison." Crouch said in a small voice. "Karkaroff was violently ill most of yesterday."

The Dark Lord gave a twisted smile. "See how wonderfully inventive my Potions Master can be? You should take note, Bartemius."

Peter wondered whether Crouch heard the warning in the careful phrasing; he certainly did. He shivered.

"Meet with Severus, Bartemius. Find out what message he brings me." The Dark Lord said firmly. "And do not delay again."

Crouch nodded. "Yes, Master."

Peter watched as Crouch bowed low to the Dark Lord before turning and opening the cabinet that would lead him directly to another hidden in Karkaroff's quarters on the Durmstrang ship. Peter didn't like the cabinet. He feared entering it and never coming out again. The Dark Lord had talked about how he'd first come across the cabinets when he'd spotted a damaged version forgotten in a room in Hogwarts. What happened if the cabinet was damaged while you were in it, mused Peter as Crouch entered it and closed the door, disappearing from view.
The Dark Lord sighed. "When I am fully myself once more, Peter, there will be a reckoning." He looked down at his tiny body with disgust. "But I cannot blame Fenrir and Bartemius for believing me weak while I reside in this."

Peter scrambled for a reply. If he confirmed the Dark Lord looked weak, he'd no doubt be punished. But if he didn't agree with him... "They forget that the strength of your spirit is undiminished, Master."

The Dark Lord smiled. "I chose well when I made you my servant, Peter. You of all my Death Eaters appreciate the honour the most."

Peter bowed his head, inwardly pleased to gain some recognition after weeks of Crouch being heralded as the favourite.

"You will convey a message to Lupin." The Dark Lord said, surprising Peter who almost made the mistake of looking at him.

"Me?" He squeaked instead.

"Who better to contact him than an old friend, Peter?" The Dark Lord said. "Tell him that Fenrir hunts him on my order but that if he survives I would welcome him and his pack into my service, and in exchange I will ensure no werewolf will ever be executed."

Peter frowned heavily. "Master, he will not..."

"No," agreed the Dark Lord dryly, "but I will give him the chance, one leader to another, and should the pack learn that he turned down my deal. Well..." he smiled again, that twist of lips that spoke of cruelty, "how long before Lupin would be cut down by his own kind?"

"You are very clever, Master." Peter babbled out quickly.

The Dark Lord inclined his head. "I am fatigued, Peter. A potion and then bed, I fear."

Peter nodded briskly and hurried to comply, already wondering how he was supposed to get a message to Remus, and knowing if he did not, it would be him writhing on the floor in agony.

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9th December 1994

"...and one, two, three...no, don't look at your feet," Andromeda instructed briskly, "and one, two, three and..."

Harry gritted his teeth and carried on attempting to lead Andromeda around the duelling area of the training room which had been turned temporarily into a dance floor. He wasn't doing too badly, he thought desperately; at least, he hadn't stepped on any toes during the current lesson which was much better than he'd done at all his others.

A polite cough interrupted them.

Harry stumbled to a stop as Andromeda halted mid-step. They both turned to look at the new arrival.

Narcissa stood just inside the doorway with a wide smile on her face. "Forgive me, Sirius informed me that you were both in here practicing a dance for the Ball before our dinner, and well, I could not resist taking a peek."
"He's doing very well for someone who has had no lessons until this Summer." Andromeda said defensively.

"I'm pants." Harry admitted bluntly. He pushed a hand through his hair, frustrated. "I'm going to totally embarrass Hermione at the Ball." He sighed. "The Champions are supposed to open it with a dance and I can't do it!"

Narcissa's face softened a little. "Andromeda is correct, Harry. You are doing well for someone who has not had previous training or experience. However, we cannot have you representing the House of Black with such a lacklustre display." She gestured at her sister. "May I?"

Andromeda sent her a look that said 'be careful' but stepped aside.

Narcissa moved into the space she had vacated. "Now, I believe that your problem is just a matter of perspective, Harry."

Harry frowned at her.

"You hear the word 'dancing' and it terrifies you." Narcissa explained. "You stiffen up, you become self-conscious about your body and you fail to listen to the music."

"Uh-huh." It was a reasonable enough theory.

"So, we are not dancing but flying." Narcissa lifted his hands into the correct places, pausing to correct his posture. "You hold your partner as you would your broomstick; with tender care and trust that they will follow your lead and perform the tricks you need them to make."

He gazed at her warily but got the analogy. In the air, his broomstick was his dancing partner.

"A waltz is very similar to the first Obroski drill for a Seeker. Do you know it?" Narcissa asked.

Harry nodded; the Obroski drill she had mentioned was a basic searching drill, one of the first Wood had taught him because it was simple and easy to master. He felt some of the tension bleed out of his shoulders.

"Excellent." Narcissa said. "Close your eyes and focus on the pattern and transferring your movement to a ground practice. When you have it clear in your head; move and trust that I will follow."

Harry did as she instructed. The pattern was familiar enough and he had practiced it on the ground during his first year when he was reliant on having supervision when he flew.

He signalled his intent with a brief press of his hand against her waist (a shift of his hand on the broomstick) and moved. He stepped easily through the pattern, his hands alerting Narcissa (the broomstick) and moving with him. After a while, music began to play. Harry ignored it, just as he ignored the crowds on a game day and carried on with the drill until the music stopped and Harry opened his eyes.

A smug Narcissa beamed back at him. "Very good, Harry."

"Very good?" Andromeda remarked as she applauded them both. "It was bloody brilliant!"

Narcissa lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "I suggest you continue practicing the drill, Harry." She considered him carefully. "You should also practice with Hermione ahead of the Ball. Both of you will be more confident if you have practiced together."
"That's a good idea, Cissy." Andromeda said.

The door to the training room opened and Sirius poked his head in.

"We're about to sit down for dinner." Sirius informed them cheerily. "All OK in here?"

"A breakthrough." Andromeda said brightly. "Cissy is a marvellous teacher."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, Narcissa."

"Not at all, Cousin. It was my pleasure." Narcissa said. "You may escort me to the table."

Sirius sent him an amused look but Harry offered his arm and they walked through the rooms to the dining table which was resplendent in crisp white linen, gleaming china crockery, shining silver cutlery and sparkling crystal.

Hermione raised her eyes as she took in Narcissa on Harry's arm and he knew he'd have to explain it to her later but that was good as it would give him the chance to ask her to join his practicing. Narcissa was right about that; he probably would feel more confident if he and Hermione had already danced before the Ball.

Lucius was sending his wife an equally questioning look but Narcissa simply gazed back serenely as Harry seated her in her usual place.

Draco caught Harry as he made to move to his seat. "Obroski?"

Harry nodded quickly. Evidently Narcissa had used the method on Draco in the past. Somehow that was more comforting to him. Draco was very polished in comparison to Harry and if Draco had needed Narcissa's flying analogy in order to learn to dance then Harry felt better about needing it himself.

He sat down hurriedly as Sirius assumed his place at the head of the table.

Sirius tapped it once and each place was suddenly filled with a bowl filled with a steaming portion of creamy watercress soup, along with side plates of warm brown bread rolls and golden butter. Harry dug in hungrily.

Ted cleared his throat. "Dora said that Remus has gone back to France?"

Sirius nodded, scooping up some soup. "After Fenrir's recruitment meeting, there was an influx of werewolves trying to escape any future missions. So, we're moving the werewolf sanctuary to the Baltics. The chateau will act as a way-station instead. Remus is sorting out the details and the move over the next week or so."

"A sensible move after the events of Wednesday." Lucius commented, fingering his napkin. "The word is that Fenrir has sought help from a sympathetic healer yesterday to deal with injuries. I doubt that the Dark Lord was pleased with his performance and made his displeasure known to him."

"Do we have to speak of such things at the dinner table?" asked Narcissa sharply.

"I agree," Andromeda said firmly, "the dinner table is no place for such talk."

Minerva nodded her own agreement. "After dinner will be soon enough."

Harry watched as the adult men exchanged identical looks of exasperated frustration at being curtailed by the women. He ducked his head and focused on his soup.
"How are the Weasleys?" asked Minerva, changing the topic. "I understand from the news reports that Arthur was injured again?"

"Bump on the head but he was fine at the Wizengamot yesterday." Sirius said succinctly. "Percy will have some scars but, thanks to his mother, nothing worse."

Harry felt a frisson of guilt ripple through him. He knew that the werewolf attacks on his supporters were Voldemort's way of coming after him; of telling him that no-one Harry cared about was safe. Yes, everyone had survived and the Weasleys had been the only ones hurt but...but it felt like that was already one too many people being hurt because of Harry; because Harry had told Voldemort he wouldn't be cowed or terrorised by choosing to compete fully in the tournament.

Sirius nudged his hand. "Something wrong with the soup?" He said quietly.

And Harry realised he'd simply been stirring it for a few moments rather than eating.

Harry flashed him a brief smile of reassurance and dived back into his meal. But his hunger had disappeared and it was a struggle through the rest of the dinner to do justice to the meal Dobby had prepared. From the looks Sirius occasionally sent in his direction, Harry was certain he hadn't fooled Padfoot into believing that everything was fine.

They all adjourned to the living area for the coffee portion of the meal, Harry eschewing it for hot chocolate, Hermione following Minerva and Andromeda with her insistence on tea. Draco accepted the coffee and pulled a face. Harry managed to wrangle sitting next to Hermione which was the only plus point in his opinion.

"If the ladies are agreed, may we speak of Fenrir now?" Lucius asked, a hint of impatience creeping into his tone.

He got a trio of glares for his trouble and Harry spotted Ted hiding his mirth in his cup of coffee.

"So the Dark Lord punished Fenrir for his failure?" Sirius asked, determining the answer to Lucius's question with quiet authority.

Lucius gripped his cane and gave a sharp nod. "So it would appear. He was suffering from prolonged exposure to a pain curse; cracked ribs and a broken wrist."

"My heart bleeds." Sirius commented dryly.

Lucius inclined his head. "He approached Wilkes for assistance this morning." He held up a hand. "Denied, obviously. Apparently, he's been tasked with bringing the traitors in his pack to heel and killing your pet werewolf as a bad influence or the Dark Lord will find another werewolf to work with."

Fenrir had been tasked with killing Remus?!

Harry's magic bubbled up and rattled the ornaments. He yanked it back desperately, breathing deeply to recover his control. Hermione slid her hand into his, settling him further.

Sirius's hand landed on his shoulder. "You know this for certain?"

"Wilkes told Fenrir that under the détente he couldn't help him and good luck finding someone with the wherewithal to help him who didn't have a détente with you, or who wouldn't refuse to help because of a deep desire not to draw the Dark Lord's displeasure by helping Fenrir with a mission given to him to make up for a failure." Lucius said.
Sirius glanced down at Harry with a silent question.

"I'm fine." Harry said.

"That's why the ornaments suddenly decided to get up and do a jig." Draco drawled from his seat on the other sofa.

Harry shot him an annoyed look. "It got away from me for a moment."

"I'm going to call Remus and let him know." Sirius said. "Is there anything else you should have told me, Lucius, I don't know, before we'd gotten to dinner?"

"No," Lucius said mildly, his eyes glittering darkly, "I think that's everything."

"Then I think we should walk Draco back to Slytherin and take our leave." Narcissa's sharp tone could have cut through concrete and evidently Lucius was aware that he'd annoyed her because he stiffened. "Draco can tell us how his date with Katherine Gillingwood went."

Draco sighed heavily but got to his feet. "Well, that should take all of two minutes." He complained as the Malfoys left.

Sirius made his excuses to the others and headed for his study to mirror call Remus.

Hermione looked at Harry questioningly. "You met Katherine didn't you? What did you think?"

"She's pretty and nice." Harry said. "But...I bet she bored Draco to tears within ten minutes of their actual date."

Andromeda coughed to try to hide her amusement. "Poor girl. You must have a different view surely, Minerva?"

"I cannot comment as I'm her teacher and there are students present." Minerva said briskly. "However, I will say that I feel Mister Malfoy possibly needs someone who'll challenge him a bit more."

In other words, Harry thought with satisfaction, Katherine was pretty and nice and boring just like he'd said. His satisfaction faded as he considered Lucius's news about Fenrir.

Remus was in danger.

Of course, they'd always known that opening up the sanctuary would mean that Remus would be in danger from Fenrir. It was a challenge to Fenrir's leadership of the pack, Harry could see that. Remus might claim that he wasn't fighting Fenrir for the leadership of his pack by offering those who no longer wanted to be part of Fenrir's pack a place to go but really it was semantics.

"...I think that's a good idea, don't you, Harry?"

Hermione's hand squeezed his, drawing him out of his thoughts.

"Sorry," Harry said with a mild blush, "I was miles away."

Andromeda smiled at him sympathetically. "I suggested to Hermione that she should join us for dance practice next Friday."

"Yeah," Harry nodded, sneaking a look at Hermione, "that's a good idea if you're sure you don't mind?"
Hermione shook her head, the heavy fall of her hair bouncing lightly on her shoulders. "I think I'd like to practice before we have to open the Ball."

Minerva grimaced. "Do not look at me accusingly, Harry. I was simply the messenger."

"And given your final performance tonight," Andromeda chimed in, "I shouldn't worry; you did fine." She sighed. "Narcissa would have made a good teacher, I think. She has a knack for it."

Minerva hummed. "Perhaps you and she would consent to teach a wider group? I'm certain there are other students who would appreciate a class on dancing ahead of the Ball."

Andromeda smiled briefly. "I'll ask her. I'll do it either way." She winced visibly and deliberately. "My poor feet!"

"Just as well you're married to a healer then." Ted laughed jovially. He put down his coffee as Sirius re-entered the room. "All sorted?"

"Remus had already heard on the werewolf network about Fenrir's latest assignment." Sirius sat down on the arm of the sofa next to Harry. "He's going to take some extra precautions."

Harry blew out a breath. Remus was sensible enough not only to know he needed extra precautions but to actually put them in place too.

"I've put The School House on lockdown to protect Sian. Tonks is going to go over and keep her company until Remus gets back." Sirius added.

"Well, that should be interesting." Andromeda said wryly.

Sirius frowned at her quizzically.

Andromeda grinned at Sirius. "According to Dora, both she and Sian are interested in Remus romantically."

"Ah," said Sirius, fighting to keep the smile off his face and failing, "awkward."

Ted covered his face with his hands. "I don't need to hear this. I'm her father!"

"You'll be relieved then, dear," Andromeda said mildly, "that Remus is looking at neither of them."

"Oh well, that's a shame." Ted said dropping his hands to reveal a look of genuine regret.

Andromeda raised both eyebrows. "First you don't want to hear about Nymphadora's interest in Remus, but now you're…disappointed Remus isn't interested back?"

"Yes?" Ted admitted hesitantly. "He's a good man."

Andromeda rolled her eyes but she patted her husband on his arm. "Yes, he is, and yes, I'm disappointed too, and on that note, I think it's time to go home and return you to the Gryffindor dorm, Hermione."

Minerva placed her empty cup down and stood with the others. "I'll walk out with you."

Sirius winked at Harry as he steered the others way, leaving him and Hermione alone briefly. He figured everybody knew Sirius was allowing them a private goodbye since they pointedly didn't look in their direction while gathering coats and chattering about the next week's dinner arrangements.
Hermione blushed lightly but leaned in for a lightning fast kiss. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Harry nodded, heat flaring up in his own cheeks as Sirius glanced in their direction. He walked Hermione over and joined in the goodbyes.

The portrait closed and Sirius flung a friendly arm around Harry's shoulders when he would have made for the stairs. "Not so fast, Pronglet. You want to talk about what's bothering you?" He asked bluntly, steering Harry back towards the living area.

"Is that code for 'you will talk about what's bothering you'?" Harry asked, tension turning his words a tone more sulky than he had intended.

Sirius ignored the tone and ushered Harry back into his seat. "If you like." He sat down opposite Harry on the coffee table. "You were fine until Minnie asked about the Weasleys and then you started playing with your soup, so I'm guessing you're upset that they got hurt in the werewolf attacks."

It was a good guess.

"It feels like it was my fault." Harry muttered, knowing Sirius already knew but wanted Harry to admit it.

"And you know it wasn't." Sirius said firmly. "The only people responsible for hurting the Weasleys are Voldemort, Greyback and the werewolves who hurt them."

"Voldemort ordered the attacks to get to me." Harry argued hotly.

"Yes, he did." Sirius agreed. "He ordered these attacks because he's pissed at you and he knows hurting the people you care about hurts you." He held Harry's unhappy gaze. "And the people you care about know that too. Nobody blames you, Harry."

He wasn't sure that was true since Ron had been kind of quiet with him since they'd gotten the news about Arthur and Percy the day before, and maybe, Harry recognised with chagrin, maybe that was at the heart of his worry.

"And it's not your fault that Fenrir is going after Remus." Sirius continued briskly. "Fenrir's always been after Remus in one way or another. Really, Voldemort giving him an assignment to kill him just gives him an excuse to actively go after him."

Harry accepted that point since Remus's history with Fenrir started long before Harry had even been a twinkle in his father's eye.

"Not your fault." Sirius said again. He rapped Harry's knee lightly with his fist. "Any of this getting through?"

Harry sighed heavily. "Look, I know it's not my fault here," he pointed at his head, "it's just…"

"It doesn't feel like it here." Sirius tapped Harry's chest.

"Yeah." Harry admitted morosely. "And I get that my being upset is what Voldemort wanted but I can't help it."

Sirius pressed his lips together, looking at Harry sympathetically. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't get upset at people being hurt, Harry. And I can't promise you that nobody is going to get seriously hurt in the future because Voldemort is lashing out at the people you love to get to you, and frankly,
the people who love you will try and protect you. But everyone is taking what measures they can to stay safe; we plan for the worst and hope for the best. The Aurors did a brilliant job on Wednesday for the most part and Molly was able to deal with the werewolf threatening Arthur and Percy. Arthur said she looked like a Fury in a nightdress."

Harry chuffed out a thin laugh at the image.

"It's OK to be upset." Sirius comforted him. "I got upset myself after the first task about you being in danger and had to remind myself it's exactly what Crouch wanted. Moony reminded me that it was alright to be upset; we just don't do it where Voldemort or Crouch will see us." He waved a hand around the room. "That's exactly why we've got these rooms; to give you – and me – a space to breathe in."

His heart tightened into an achy mess at the thought of Sirius being upset but he nodded in understanding.

Sirius examined his expression, switched to sit beside him, and pulled him in for a hug. Harry hugged Padfoot back for a long while, the confession of how he'd been upset after the first task fresh in Harry's mind.

"So," Sirius cleared his throat, "what's Obroski got to do with dancing?"

Harry shuffled back and began to explain. The explanation led to a demonstration and by the time Harry crawled into bed, he'd almost been able to forget that he'd been upset and why.

Almost.

Was Ron angry with him about the Weasleys getting hurt? Harry sighed in the darkness of his room, wishing for once that he was in the Gryffindor dorm with Ron just across from him so he could ask him. But he couldn't just walk over to the dorm, wake Ron up and ask.

Could he?

Harry sat up abruptly, considering the idea. It wasn't like it would be the first time that Harry had gone sneaking about Hogwarts in the middle of the night. OK, so it would be the first time that Harry had gone sneaking about while he was living with Sirius at Hogwarts since he knew part of the reason for their own rooms was to keep Harry safe, but…

But he didn't think there was too much danger with Moody's security people patrolling and the upgraded wards. And wouldn't it be worth it to check that everything between him and Ron was fine?

He pushed his covers away, pulled on his dressing gown over his pyjamas and hurried over to get the invisibility cloak – there was no point taking unnecessary risks. He wrapped it around himself, opened the bedroom door, and cast a glance towards Sirius's.

It was closed and there was no light peeking out of the crack at the bottom. Sirius was probably asleep.

Harry was careful though. He placed a silencing charm on his feet and tiptoed down the stairs and out of their rooms with his heart beating loudly in his chest.

Quick visit, Harry determined hastily; it would be a quick visit; there and back before Sirius even noticed he was gone. He practically ran to the portrait of the Fat Lady and had to catch his breath before giving her the password.
Sneaking up to the fourth year boys' dorm was a cinch after that. He opened the door, arrowed in on Ron and hurried over with Neville's snoring providing background cover. He shook Ron awake briskly.

Ron opened his eyes groggily and glared up at Harry for a moment before his brain engaged and the realisation that Harry was in the dorm when he wasn't supposed to be hit. Ron opened his mouth and Harry frantically shushed him. He motioned for him to follow him down to the Common Room. Ron nodded quickly and shoved his arms into his dressing gown as they left the dorm.

The Common Room was preternaturally silent; the slumbering fire casting everything in amber. Harry led Ron over to a couple of easy chairs in a corner and set up a privacy bubble and a notice-me-not charm.

"What's wrong?" asked Ron immediately. "Do you need us to go spy on someone or…"

Harry shook his head swiftly. "I just…" he sighed and pushed his glasses up his nose, "you've been quiet since yesterday and the news about your Dad and Percy and I…well…" he shrugged unable to actually ask Ron if he blamed him because he was so afraid the answer was yes.

Ron looked abashed. "You noticed, huh?"

"I noticed." Harry said, his heart beginning to sink. Merlin, Ron did blame him!

Ron subsided into the chair, deflating like a balloon. "I just can't help the way I feel, mate." He began.

And Harry couldn't say anything to that.

"I've just felt so guilty about Percy," continued Ron, staring at the fire.

And Harry couldn't…wait; what?!

"You've felt guilty about Percy?" Harry checked that he'd heard correctly.

"Yeah, I mean, I thought he was a total git to everyone before he lost his job and he's been an even worse git since," Ron explained, poking the carpet with his toe, "but he didn't deserve to be set on by a werewolf and my Mum said in her letter that he was really brave and defended Dad so…"

"So you've been feeling guilty about thinking he was a total git." Harry summarised, feeling gleeful that it wasn't about him at all. Guilt that he'd been so self-centred wormed its way through the glee in short order.

"That's about the size of it." Ron sighed heavily. "I mean, what do I say? Sorry I thought you were a git but you don't deserve being scarred for life and I'm glad you're not dead or a werewolf?"

"I guess?" Harry agreed hesitantly. "Maybe just focus on the I'm glad you're alright' bit. And I think it's OK that you thought he was a git before." Because Percy had definitely fallen into the git category in Harry's opinion.

Ron snorted. "Yeah." He darted a glance toward the girls' staircase. "I guess I should probably make up with Ginny too. She tried to talk to me earlier about Percy and I shoved her off."

Harry rolled his eyes at him. "She's very sorry about what happened with Hermione and she is seeing the mind healer now."
Although, admittedly his own forgiveness of Ginny's very peripheral involvement in the attack on Hermione had been mostly because Hermione had asked him to forgive Ginny, and because Hermione had already forgiven her.

Ron nodded slowly. "Right then." He glanced over at Harry and smiled. "Hey, thanks for coming and talking to me. I've maybe kind of missed this. You know, you and me talking about stuff just the two of us."

There was another twinge of guilt because Harry was rarely alone with Ron any more. He and Hermione made an effort to include Ron when they weren't on an official date but Ron was probably feeling excluded anyway. It probably didn't help that Harry spent most of the Gryffindor Quidditch practices with Ginny as she had taken over as Seeker, and his personal practice time had turned into something of a get together for the Champions. He sighed.

"I was just thinking if I was in the dorm I could ask you so…" he confessed, "I like having the rooms away from everyone but I miss living here too."

Ron punched him lightly on his upper arm. "Well, you can come over any time." He gave another sheepish smile. "And thanks. I'll collar our Ginny in the morning and send Percy a note."

"You can use Hedwig."

"You can use Hedwig." Harry offered, still feeling a touch guilty that Ron's issue hadn't been with him and he might not have questioned his friend if he'd thought it wasn't. "And maybe we could go for a Quidditch practice just the two of us this weekend?"

Ron's face brightened immediately. "That would be great." He frowned as he got to his feet and Harry removed the spells he'd cast. "You should get back to your rooms, yeah?"

"Yeah." Harry grinned at him and covered himself with the invisibility cloak.

"Show off." Ron complained good-naturedly and waved in Harry's direction as he stifled a yawn on his way back to bed.

Harry felt a lot better as he opened the portrait hole out into the corridor. He stumbled though when he caught sight of the Grim sat just in front of it waiting for him, the Marauders' Map in its mouth.

Bugger.

Padfoot rose from his sentry position, took a step toward Harry and nudged his leg through the invisibility cloak.

Harry got the message; start walking.

He was in so much trouble, Harry mused despondently.

And began to walk.
Severus sniffed derisively as he entered The Three Broomsticks.

The hour was late but the tavern was still filled with a respectable number of drinkers. A young couple were squirrelled away in one corner on a date; two old wizards played dominoes by the fire; and a gaggle of women of a certain age, huddled around two tables on what was clearly some kind of birthday celebration. The ambience was one of cheerful and welcoming cosiness. Severus despised it on principle.

Severus sniffed again, unwound the scarf from his neck, and made for the bar.

Roslerta smiled warmly at him. "Professor Snape. We don't often see you in here."

And Severus had no intention of making it a regular habit. "A private room has been arranged in the name of Prince."

It was his mother's maiden name and Snape wondered whether Crouch had looked it up or been told it by the Dark Lord. Either way it was a good cover. Crouch could pretend to be a distant cousin looking up his remaining family. There were some relatives still alive on his mother's side, Severus mused; his great-great-great uncle's progeny. They had left years before, moving to the States and Severus wasn't interested in tracking them down.

"Oh, of course!" Rosmerta's smile turned conspiratorial. "Room one, dear. The lady is already up there along with your refreshments." And she winked at him.

Severus glowered at her and left. What cover story had Crouch constructed, he wondered as he made his way stiffly up the stairs. He knocked on the door three times and waited.

"Enter!" A female voice called breathlessly.

Severus let his wand drop into his hand and opened the door. The smell of faint perfume hit his nostrils first; lilies. He controlled the immediate burst of anger, reminding himself that Crouch had no doubt chosen it on purpose hoping to evoke such a reaction. He stepped through the doorway and closed the door behind him.

A female figure lounged on the rose-petal strewn bed in a flimsy nightie, smiling coquettishly at him, green eyes peeking out from semi-closed lids. She was slim, pale and had a cascade of red hair. But even in a bad light and half-blind Severus would never have mistaken her for Lily Potter.

Or rather mistaken him.

"Bartemius Crouch Junior, I presume?" Severus sneered.

The female's smile turned predatory. "Severus Snape." He pouted. "You don't seem to like the surprise I prepared for you."

Severus glared down his nose at him. "I prefer to keep business strictly business."

"Pity." She – he slid off the bed and wrapped himself in a pale pink silk dressing robe. He grabbed a packet of cigarettes and lit up, blowing out a stream of smoke. "I haven't had a good shag in ages."

Severus arched one eyebrow and moved to sit on the comfortable wing-backed chair by the dresser.
He didn't unbutton his outer cloak or take off his soft leather gloves.

"I assume you intend for our cover story to be a clandestine love affair?" Severus questioned tersely. It was a reasonable cover, he conceded to himself.

"And you have a known type, darling." Crouch grinned at him as he threw himself back on the bed. "If anyone asks a mutual acquaintance introduced us and we have been owling in secret since the beginning of the Summer." He gestured at a stack of parchment on the dresser. "Your evidence."

Severus swept his wand over the paper and found it benign. He sniffed to ascertain if there was something the paper had been steeped in but couldn't scent anything other than the infernal perfume Crouch had sprayed the room with. He picked the first parchment up with gloved hands and read the text with little fanfare.

Crouch had done a good job if the letter was any indication. Madame Albright was a widow with a gift for potions and the letter had one half of what appeared to be a lively exchange about a past article published in Potions Monthly around August.

Severus picked up the rest of the parchments and tucked them away into the inner pocket of his outer robe. He settled his gaze back on Crouch. "Does the Dark Lord wish for verbal or written reports?"

Crouch blinked. "You know Father never said."

Father.

Well, that was an interesting turn of events, Severus mused, and one Crouch wanted him to know.

"Verbal then." Severus said as though disinterested in Crouch's new status. He smoothed down his cloak. "You are aware that the Summers woman and your elf are now in the protective custody of Albus Dumbledore?"

Crouch perked up. "At Hogwarts?"

Severus inclined his head although only the elf was actually within the school. The Summers woman was with her brother in some DMLE safe house known only to Scrimgeour and Bones. "I have been ordered to find an antidote."

Crouch shrugged. "Why should Father be interested in that? The draught we used has no antidote."

And so the game began, Severus thought with amusement. "It is true that the Sleeping Beauty draught has no antidote except for the true love kiss of one with a pure heart. Something that is unlikely to happen to either female in this case."

He watched in satisfaction as Crouch's face stilled with shock.

"Well, well, well," Crouch said, "so you may be as useful as Father said you were, after all, Potions Master Snape."

Severus raised his eyebrow again. "The Dark Lord is aware of my skills and I can confirm that I will probably be able to determine an antidote within a few months." He lifted one shoulder. "I will be able to delay perhaps until May but no longer."

"You will delay until after the Summer solstice." Crouch snarled, lurching to his feet to pace. He looked a sight; an angry pinched looking redhead stomping about the room in a flimsy pink negligee.
And there was one more confirmation of the Dark Lord's ritual timetable, Severus noted.

"Albus Dumbledore was mentored by Nicholas Flamel." Severus said with an affected patience as though talking to a small child or a Gryffindor. "He is able to follow my process and determine cause and effect, review my results and know if I am prevaricating. May is the best I can do."

In truth, May was likely the time that he estimated he would have a working antidote. Any sooner just wasn't possible given some of the ingredients he believed he required. It was something that the Dark Lord with his own knowledge of potions might know and understand.

Severus watched as Crouch continued to pace, trailing smoke and ash. "The Dark Lord will need to move at that time as the elf and the Summers woman will be questioned about his whereabouts."

"They don't know." Crouch responded immediately.

"And your elf would not be able to find you once she's awake? Would not rush to your side?" Severus drawled. "Black has many tricks and more than enough house-elves to send after her to get a location."

Crouch stopped abruptly. He whirled around and pinned Severus with a hard stare. "So kill the elf!"

Severus simply looked back at him. "And expose you to the Black elves instead? You are connected to the House of Black through a marriage. If you lose the protection of your own elf bond, you become visible to them. Isn't that the reason why you've kept her alive?"

Crouch swept his hands through his hair. "Bloody Black!"

"Well, on that much we can agree," Severus said dryly, "he is superb at being the proverbial thorn in one's side." And Severus didn't even have to lie about that. Crouch's brow lowered. "I will see him dead."

Severus took note of the anger written over Crouch's female features and hummed. "I was rather hoping for the honour myself."

"He killed Rabastan." Crouch snapped out. "He's mine!"

Severus shrugged as though unconcerned. "If that is the wish of the Dark Lord then so be it."

"Know this: I don't trust you." Crouch said bluntly. "From everything I've been told you had a thing for Lily Potter and I know the urge to avenge a lover."

Severus allowed a faintly amused smile to drift over his lips despite the rage that surged inside, the brief thought that Crouch was right about his trustworthiness and why. "Your source being Pettigrew the rat, I assume?" He shook his head. "I wouldn't believe much that passes his lips. It is true that Lily and I were friends once but I made my choice and she made hers." He let the smile settle. "And we were never lovers."

"You wanted to be." Crouch accused him roundly.

"Of course, I wanted to be at one time," Severus said lightly. "I was a teenage boy and she was an attractive witch. But she chose Potter." He gestured. "And I committed my life to the Dark Lord."

"Do you deny that you tried to prevent Father's attempt to obtain the Philosopher's stone?" Crouch argued, stubbing his cigarette out in an ashtray on the bedside table.
"I tried to prevent Quirrell from obtaining the Philosopher's stone." Severus countered. "Had I known it was the Dark Lord, I would have made every attempt to assist him. Since he never revealed himself to me, I can only assume he wanted to succeed alone and he would have done so had Potter not gotten in the way."

Crouch was barely mollified, Severus noted.

"I've watched you around the school. You are close with the old fool, with Moody, with Black." Crouch argued.

And that was confirmation that Crouch had access enough to Hogwarts to note the various relationships Severus had fostered.

"Have you never heard of keeping your friends close but your enemies closer?" Severus smiled cruelly. "As a spy I have to cultivate some relationships that I would prefer to avoid but cultivate them I must if I am to be of service to the Dark Lord."

Crouch glared at him. "I don't trust you…"

"But the Dark Lord does," Severus interrupted smoothly, "otherwise we would not be here, and since I have not brought the Aurors or worse, Black, to your door, one might assume that the Dark Lord knows best." He stood.

Crouch stared at him. "You're not leaving."

"I have imparted the information I have." Severus said. "Of course, if you have further instructions from the Dark Lord I will stay and listen." He gazed at Crouch questioningly.

The younger wizard looked perturbed but he drew himself up sharply, a keen gaze entering his too bright eyes. "I may need you for something we have planned for Yule." He waved towards Severus. "I will send you a parchment as Madame Albright when I wish to convey information rather than use Karkaroff."

Severus began to wind his scarf back around his neck and head. "Very well. I trust that you can leave the room in a state befitting a romantic tryst? I will ensure I'm not seen as I depart."

Crouch smiled sharply. "Goodbye, lover."

Severus scowled and walked out. A shudder ran through him as he closed the door on Crouch. He cast a Disillusionment spell on himself and went out through the staff exit down the back stairs and through the kitchen. He apparated to the Hogwarts' gates and hurried back to his quarters.

He needed a drink, Severus determined as he entered the living room, grateful for the warmth of the fire crackling in the hearth.

He divested himself of his cloak and scarf but kept his gloves on to draw out the stack of parchments Crouch had handed him and placed them in a wooden box. He would test them for poisons and potions the following day, he decided. He finally peeled the gloves away careful not to touch the outside of them, tossing them into the fire in case they had become contaminated.

Constant vigilance, Severus thought wryly. Moody would be proud.

He glanced at the clock as he poured himself a drink. Albus would be awake, probably Moody too, although he expected Black and Potter to have retired for the night. Still, his report could wait until morning. Apart from the news that something definitely was planned for Yule, something they had
already suspected, there was nothing new to report.

Other than Crouch was indeed bat-shit insane and apparently thought the Dark Lord had adopted him.

Severus shuddered again and tossed back his whiskey. He wondered whether Crouch was aware that the Dark Lord was simply playing on his Daddy issues. He doubted it. And what would happen when he was faced with the truth of it, Severus mused. Possibly it would be enough to send him over the edge completely.

Which might not be a good thing.

The Dark Lord was evil and clever and cruel but he was sane. And a sane wizard could be predicted. A crazy wizard, on the other hand…

A crazy wizard did things like dress up like the ghost of a dead woman to seduce a spy and test his loyalties.

Severus poured himself another drink and tried to ignore the scent that lingered; the fantasy Crouch had guessed at so accurately. He grimaced at Crouch's tactics. There was always more than one way to torture someone and Crouch had succeeded in tearing open most of Severus's barely healed wounds, although Severus was assured that he hadn't allowed any of them to actually bleed in Crouch's presence.

Crouch was remarkably dangerous, Severus concluded with reluctant admiration. Crazy, dangerous and out for Black's blood; a lethal combination. For the first time ever, Severus found himself worried about Sirius Black. Merlin knew Black had wounds all over him ready to be ripped open and Black would bleed himself to death for Potter.

Severus shook his head. He'd talk with Black in the morning, warn him. Knowing Black he probably already knew Crouch was insane and dangerous but it was a point worth repeating. He glanced at the wooden box with its potentially lethal contents and picked it up, heading into his private lab to begin testing them immediately. Potions had always settled his nerves and he was prepared to admit, if only to himself, that he needed them settled.

o-O-o

10th December 1994

Boys, thought Hermione, reading the note from Harry explaining why he was grounded to his suite of rooms for the weekend (barring his mind healer session and duelling elective and other official commitments that Sirius deemed he had to do) with exasperation. Why hadn't he just waited and talked to Ron in the morning?

She shot Ron an annoyed look as he fed Hedwig a piece of bacon. It was just the two of them that morning as Neville had a date with Hannah, and the rest of the Gryffindor fourth year had apparently decided to sleep in.

"Don't blame me!" Ron said, not looking at her. "I didn't ask him to come to the dorm!"

That was true.

"And he promised me we'd do a Quidditch practice just the two of us this weekend so it's not as though I haven't lost out because Sirius caught him either." Ron complained, a faint look of disappointment on his face.
It was the disappointment that convinced Hermione more than anything that Ron hadn't been complicit in Harry's midnight run to the Gryffindor dorm.

"Why didn't he just wait?" Hermione wondered out loud.

Ron's freckled face turned sheepish. "He, uh, kind of picked up that I was upset about Percy and…" he sighed, feeding Hedwig another piece of bacon, "came to talk to me."

The last part was mumbled and Hermione was pleased that she'd had three years already of interpreting Ron.

It was sweet of Harry to have been concerned about Ron, Hermione sighed, finally letting go of the topic to tuck into her porridge. And just like Harry to have gotten the idea to go talk with Ron and instead of waiting just gone ahead and done it.

The risk had been minimal, Hermione thought. Harry had the invisibility cloak and while they knew Crouch and company had masqueraded as fake Durmstrang students, the patrolling security were also well aware and on the look-out for students out of place. The dorm and Harry's room were also both in Gryffindor tower so it was unlikely that Harry would have run into trouble, but…

But Harry had sneaked out.

It was that more than anything that had probably prompted Sirius to ground him. If Harry had woken Sirius up and just asked him, Sirius would probably have agreed and, OK, probably escorted him there and back just to be safe.

She couldn't really blame Sirius for grounding Harry for sneaking out. It was just annoying. She had hoped to talk to him about the whole Ron situation. And she guessed from Harry's offer to Ron to spend time just the two of them that Harry had noticed that things were awkward too, despite her and Harry trying to ensure Ron felt included.

Which created another issue, Hermione figured, in that in trying so hard to include Ron, both she and Harry had started resenting his presence at times.

They'd known, Hermione reminded herself briskly; they'd known when they'd started dating that the dynamic between the three of them would change. They'd just naively assumed it would be easy to deal with.

The truth was that her own changed dynamic with Harry made Hermione feel slightly breathless and dizzy with happiness every time she thought about it. Harry wasn't perfect, but he always made her feel important and special when they were together even if it was just holding her hand, or occasionally smiling at her across a classroom. He had turned out really good at romantic gestures too. The roses that he had given her on their dates and to ask her out initially had been dried and preserved by Dobby; the snow globe sat on her bedside table. It had been oohed and aahed at for a long time by the other girls in the dorm. He was very good at kissing too – not that Hermione had previous experience, but compared to some of the horror stories she'd heard (sloppy with drool, too hard and aggressive, too much tongue), she believed he was good enough, especially as it made her heart beat faster and her blood buzz with pleasure.

Hormones, thought Hermione logically, but it didn't take away the fact that she enjoyed kissing Harry.

So, she and Harry were good, great even; the problem was Ron.

It wasn't exactly Ron's fault.
Hermione knew that.

They had been the ones to assure him that he wouldn't be left out once she and Harry started dating, and perhaps that was just the problem; she and Harry were making every effort to make sure Ron was OK at the detriment to the time they should be spending together. And perhaps the truth was that it wasn't so much that Hermione wanted more alone time with Harry – although that would be nice – but that Harry had such limited time anyway.

She could understand Ron not wanting to let go of any minute to spend with his best friend, when said best friend was no longer living in the dorm and eating in the Great Hall, no longer on the Quidditch team, and was generally less available. If Harry had been dating anyone else, Hermione believed that Ron would have already been sulking over losing even more time with Harry. As it was, when she and Harry weren't officially on dates, it was still the three of them – four sometimes if Neville joined them at lunch.

It was a difficult balancing act.

Hermione still believed a lot of it could be alleviated if Ron would start dating himself and so had someone else to spend time with.

Lavender was perfect. She was very interested in Ron, thought he was adorable, and even thought his cluelessness was adorable. Maybe she wasn't going to end up Mrs Ronald Weasley but Hermione thought she was a good first girlfriend for Ron – one who genuinely seemed to care for him. Hermione had never thought she would be the type of friend who started dating only to push others to do the same but it was a solution to The Problem of Rarely Getting Time Alone with Harry.

There was no better time to start pushing Ron towards some kind of realisation, Hermione thought, then right at that moment. It was only the two of them at breakfast (she wasn't counting Hedwig who'd delivered the missives from Harry) and Lavender was nowhere in sight.

"So," Hermione set her letter from Harry aside, "have you thought about who you're going to invite to the Ball?"

Ron's head whipped around so fast she thought he might give himself whiplash. He paled under his freckles. "Well, we're all going together, aren't we?"

Hermione's heart sank because she had known on some level that Ron had been thinking that and she just wasn't doing it. She wanted a special night with Harry, and fortunately the tournament gave her an excuse.

"That's not going to be possible, Ron," she shook her head before he started to argue with her, "the Champions are going to open the Ball with a dance – something neither Harry nor I are looking forward to – and then we sit on the Champions' table and have to do the whole political thing of mingling afterwards." She looked at him sympathetically. "We'll spend time with you after, of course we will, but…"

"No, I get it." Ron said morosely. He crossed his arms. "What am I going to do?"

"Well, who do you like?" Hermione asked bluntly.

"Fleur." Ron blushed, red adorning his cheeks almost the same colour as his hair. "I mean, she's perfect and it would be perfect because then you, Harry and I would be together too doing all the Champion stuff I mean."

Hermione hummed. "I think she's going with Robert Ogden."
"Oh." Ron sighed heavily. "That's just the thing isn't it? All the good looking girls will have been
snatched up by now."

"Not all," Hermione said quickly, swallowing the urge to ask him why looks were the only criteria
he was basing his choice upon, "I know Lavender and Parvati are still looking for a date."

Ron frowned. "Maybe I'll ask Ginny." He said as though Hermione hadn't spoken. "She won't get to
go unless someone asks her and it'll make up for, you know..."

It wasn't a half bad plan, and in other circumstances Hermione knew she might have encouraged it
since Ron's silent treatment with his sister did need to be fixed.

"What's wrong with Lavender?" Hermione said pointedly.

Ron blinked at her as though confused. "We're talking about Ginny."

"You're talking about Ginny," Hermione said exasperated, "I'm talking about Lavender." She
pushed her finished porridge to the side and reached for the fruit bowl.

"Why are you talking about Lavender when I'm talking about Ginny?" asked Ron, perplexed.

"Because you weren't listening to me tell you that Lavender is without a date." Hermione said firmly.

"I heard you," Ron said impatiently, "and I said that I'd ask Ginny."

Hermione took a deep breath and reminded herself getting frustrated with Ron would not be
conducive to getting him to agree to ask Lavender to the Ball.

"Why not Lavender?" Hermione asked again.

Ron sighed. "Look, I know I've been a pain with Ginny since the whole thing with you getting
attacked by Jessica and I want to make it up to her. The Ball's a good way of doing that, and I don't
have to do all this poncing about getting a date. I saw that globe thing Harry gave you; I don't have
time to do anything like that."

Hermione bit her lip. "OK, I see that it would be a nice thing for you to do for Ginny, and I'm sure
she'd appreciate it as a gesture of reconciliation, but it's a special night and don't you want to spend it
with someone other than your sister? And I appreciate that you don't have time," or skill, Hermione
filled in silently, "to do something extra, extra special to ask someone else, but I doubt anyone will
expect a snow globe. I'm sure the most they'd expect is something like Harry gave me for our first
date – a rose or some other flower as a gesture."

"Maybe," Ron said doubtfully, "but still; I think I'll ask Ginny." He fed Hedwig once last piece of
bacon and offered a letter to her. "For Percy, Hedwig. Harry said you wouldn't mind delivering it."

Hedwig cocked her head and stuck her leg out. Ron tied on the letter and Hedwig took flight.

"I wish you'd reconsider, Ron," Hermione tried one last time, "Lavender really likes you; she'd say
yes."

Ron shook his head. "I told you; I'm asking Ginny." He brightened. "In fact, why don't I do that
right now?" He was away from the table before Hermione could protest.

She battled the urge to hit her head against the solid wood of the table. Once Ron got that stubborn
set to his jaw, there was no arguing with him. Well, Hermione told herself briskly, you could argue
but it would only lead to angry words.

So, Hermione thought somewhat despairingly, her first attempt at match-making was a dismal failure.

Luna slipped into the seat beside her and started to help herself to breakfast fare. "You seem contemplative this morning, Hermione."

Hermione nodded. "I'm thinking I make a poor match-maker."

"But you're more worried that perhaps you make a poor friend." Luna said in the direct way she had that Hermione both admired and was shocked by in equal measure.

"Maybe." Hermione admitted, squirming under the observation. "It's...I don't want Harry all to myself, I don't. His friendship with Ron is important to him..." he wouldn't have sneaked out in the middle of the night to talk with him if it wasn't important to him, "and my friendship with Ron is important to me too," although perhaps secondary to Hermione's friendship with Harry never mind her relationship, "but I just..."

"It's hard to rebalance when one person steadfastly remains in the same position while the other two have moved?" Luna offered.

"Yes," Hermione said, "that!"

"But why would Ron finding someone to date move him from his current position?" Luna asked, her attention apparently on the mushrooms she was spooning onto toast rather than Hermione.

Hermione was caught by the question. "Well, he'd understand about needing time alone with his girlfriend."

Luna raised her thin blonde eyebrows and Hermione sighed.

"Or maybe not." She admitted ruefully. Especially if the choice was forced upon him rather than one that he wanted. "You're right. You're right." She threw her hands up in defeat. "I'm pushing Ron into something and it's not the solution." She sighed. "Not if I want to be a good friend."

"And a good match-maker." Luna added sagely.

Hermione chuckled. "That too." She pressed her lips together. "It seemed like such a good solution. Lavender really, really likes him and I think Ron would enjoy having a girlfriend of his own."

"What does Harry think?" asked Luna.

Hermione propped her head up on her hand, her elbow on the table. "He's kind of agreed with me when I've said we should get Ron together with Lavender but..."

Harry had a tendency not to argue with her when she put an idea forward; if he disagreed he just worked around her. In hindsight he'd often agreed with her about finding someone for Ron in a jokey way rather than a serious one. And hadn't Harry in terms of his actions gone to the trouble of seeking Ron out? Talking to him? Offering to spend one to one time with him? And that...that maybe was the difference between their approaches, Hermione thought with chagrin. Perhaps Harry had the right of it; maybe what Ron wanted wasn't to encroach on Hermione's time with Harry but to re-establish some time of his own with him.

Hermione sighed. "I think Harry thinks Ron would like to spend time with Harry on his own."
Luna hummed and finished her mouthful of food.

"And I should be thinking of ways to help them achieve that rather than trying to push Ron at Lavender." Hermione nodded briskly. Maybe Ron would get together with Lavender, maybe he wouldn't; but it was not for Hermione to decide and she felt lighter without it weighing on her. She'd talk to Harry when he wasn't grounded and figure out something. "Thanks, Luna."

"I haven't said anything very much." Luna pointed out.

"You asked all the right questions," Hermione replied dryly, "and it's definitely sometimes what you don't say than what you do that makes the difference."

Luna smiled brightly. "I did have another reason for sitting beside you."

Hermione straightened. "Yes?"

"I think I've noticed a new form of bug," Luna said cheerfully, "kind of related to a beetle perhaps but it flies and it has a peculiar facial decoration. It also seems to have strangely random habits and from what I've observed isn't that interested in eating but following humans around. I was hoping you might help me observe for a day?"

Since she owed Luna for the whole Ron-Lavender advice (because she had a feeling there wasn't an actual bug just another of Luna's imaginary creatures), Hermione nodded. "I have some electives this morning but we can go bug watching this afternoon?"

"Perfect." Luna beamed at her. "That would be perfect."

Feeling slightly better about the situation with Ron, Hermione practically skipped away from breakfast, returning to Gryffindor tower to collect a couple of books for her Healing elective. It was fascinating and it had reaffirmed to Hermione that it was what she wanted to do with her life.

Her sense of light-heartedness disappeared as soon as she entered the Common Room and walked in on Ron and Ginny centre stage yelling at each other.

She absently noticed that everyone else in the Common Room, the Weasley twins included, had taken defensive positions in the corners giving the squabbling siblings a wide berth.

"...and I say you're not going out with him!" Ron yelled.

"It's not your decision to make!" Ginny shouted back. "I can go out with whoever I like!"

"You haven't exactly been making good decisions lately!" Ron retorted.

Ginny's eyes blazed at her brother. "Don't you dare throw that in my face! You know Lydia and me didn't have any idea that Jessica was going to attack Hermione!"

"You didn't get detentions for nothing!" Ron shot back at her. "You admitted you'd all talked about it!"

"Talked, Ron! I didn't think any of us were thinking of doing anything seriously and neither did Lydia!" Ginny said hotly. "And yeah; we are punished for it anyway and Hermione has already forgiven me!"

"Leave Hermione out of this!" Ron ordered. "She has nothing to do with you dating Michael Corner!"
"You were the one who brought it all up again and I'm not dating Michael!" Ginny snarled back. "I just agreed to go to the Ball with him!"

"Over my dead body!" Ron said.

"That can be arranged!" Ginny muttered and stormed off up the girls' staircase where she knew Ron couldn't follow her.

"Bloody come back here!" Ron shouted up the stairs.

The faint reply of 'Bugger Off!" drifted down to the Common Room. It was probably best Ginny was wary of the anti-bullying policy after the whole thing with Jessica, Hermione considered hearing the anger that vibrated through the words; Ginny had a very mean Bat Bogey hex when she was riled.

Hermione assessed the situation and wandered over to Ron, noting everyone else was carefully continuing to keep their distance. "Ginny's going to the Ball with Michael Corner?"

Ron shoved his hand through his hair. "Bollocks!"

And Hermione wondered what Ron was most upset about; that Ginny was going to the Ball with Michael or that she wasn't available to go to the Ball with him. She placed a consoling arm around his shoulders.

"Come on," Hermione said gently, "I'll just grab my Healing books and we can go to duelling. It's our only chance to see Harry today."

Ron nodded, some of the colour fading from his face. "Yeah," he said gratefully, "let's go and see Harry."

"Maybe you can rearrange your Quidditch practice with him." Hermione suggested. "I'm sure he was looking forward to it too."

"You're brilliant, Hermione." Ron said grinning at her. "Just brilliant."

Hermione tried to hide her wince. "I have my moments." She said and scarpered up the stairs before he realised just how not brilliant she had been at breakfast.

o-O-o

11th December 1994

The Black farm near the River Batova was beautiful. It was a rural work of art; large rambling farmhouse, enough worker cottages and outbuildings to provide individual space for any number of people, and completely self-sufficient. It was easily defensible; had a good amount of land and was actually already surrounded by a nine foot fence which threw a lightning bolt at anyone who came near it – both from the inside and the outside.

It was the perfect place for a werewolf sanctuary.

Remus mused again at how forward thinking Sirius could be at times, remembering their first conversation about where to put a sanctuary…

"I don't think the chateau is right in the long term." Sirius commented, his image blurring slightly in the mirror.
Remus sighed. "I'd rather stay in France. I know the French Alpha, Robert, somewhat although it was many moons ago and I know he'll deal fairly with other werewolves," he forced himself to say the full truth, "another pack, encroaching on his territory."

"Hmmm. There are no other suitable properties in France." Sirius murmured, a crease forming between his brows as he thought about it.

"So the chateau it is." Remus said briskly.

Sirius shot him a look over the mirror. "Look, Remus, I can understand wanting to stay in France – you know the territory so to speak, and admittedly it will be easy for anyone from Britain to get there since portkeys are ten-a-knut to France and there's plenty of muggle transportation to boot."

"But?" prompted Remus.

"But at some point Greyback is going to learn of the exodus and frankly, the chateau is not set-up for either a siege or for defence. It was a holiday place for the Potters with the side benefit of producing wine." Sirius's expression grew fond and nostalgic. "Really, really great wine."

Remus ignored the last comment and focused on the main point. "I take it you have another suggestion?"

"The farms out in the Balkans you mentioned would probably be more suitable, particularly the Black one." Sirius said simply. "Look, let's start off in France. It's close, you have the relationship with Robert, and the chateau doesn't have a great deal of work to do on it before it could house guests. In the meantime, build up a relationship with…"

"Gregor." Remus supplied as Sirius floundered.

"...and take a gander at the Balkan properties. Choose one of them as a back-up plan for when Greyback finds out." Sirius said.

It had been a very good idea, Remus thought wryly, as he took in the delighted faces of the thirty-eight other werewolves around him as they settled around the large communal table in the farmhouse kitchen. He was infinitely more pleased when Clara slipped into the seat beside him. He allowed himself a moment of appreciation for her red cap of hair, warm brown eyes and wide welcoming smile.

"This place is great." Clara declared brightly. "I love it."

Remus nodded. "It's certainly more secure than the chateau."

And there was a hint of relief in his own voice at that. He'd known intellectually that he and Fenrir were heading towards a showdown but finding out that Voldemort had made his death a requirement for Fenrir to have Voldemort's support for his violence had rocked him a bit.

It had always bemused Remus why Fenrir followed Voldemort. Fenrir was definitely an Alpha; he was very much a leader and expected his word to be followed as law within the pack. When Remus had been involved with the pack peripherally during his spying days, he had steered clear of direct confrontations with Fenrir but he had gotten to know enough pack members that he knew Fenrir's leadership style. It seemed bizarre that Fenrir kowtowed to Voldemort.

But maybe there was an attraction at being given legitimacy, Remus mused as he dug into the beef stew the elves had prepared. With Voldemort, Fenrir was recognised as a leader by someone other than his own pack albeit a leader not equal to Voldemort himself. And there were the benefits
Voldemort dangled in Fenrir's face; freedom to roam unmolested, unchallenged; permission to bite whomever and wherever he wanted…a heady temptation for someone who embraced the violence of his wolf, who was more the wolf than he was the wizard he had once been.

The dinner was a lively affair.

Remus watched over everyone to assess how they were settling. Cliques were beginning to form. The couples in the original group who had first been at the chateau had grouped together somewhat, forming solid friendships. The others, including those who had fled after Fenrir's call for volunteers for raiding, had formed into two other groups; one group of single werewolves who were all relatively young, and a second group of couples.

It was a good arrangement in some respects, Remus thought. Each grouping provided support and companionship in a relatable way for its members. There wasn't any sign of hostility among the groups or the individuals which was a relief. There would no doubt be conflict eventually. Thirty-eight different people meant thirty-eight different personalities and some would clash. He'd be expected as Alpha to intervene and make judgements in conflicts.

He needed a beta, Remus mused. His gaze shifted to the woman beside him. Clara was a strong wolf; very much like himself in her views and opinions, in her education. He felt deep down he could trust her to make the calls in his absence. Moreover, she was the exception to the groupings, seemingly content to drift between them and therefore held no allegiance to any other than the entire pack as a single entity.

There might be an issue with some of them with him choosing a female for a beta but Remus set his jaw stubbornly. If he was going to have a pack then his pack was going to be what he wanted. Of course, he was really going to have to think about it more because someone (Sirius) might claim that putting Clara as his beta was more about Remus fancying her than about her being right for the job. And someone (Sirius) might be right about that, Remus thought wryly.

He mopped up the last of his stew with freshly baked bread and sighed in contentment as the dishes were whisked away, the very excellent beer refilled, and a dessert of sour cherry tart appeared with sweetened natural yoghurt as an accompanying sauce.

It looked delicious and Remus was about to tuck in when Jugen the head elf at the farm popped in beside him.

"Honoured Steward," Jugen said in heavily accented English, "there be Balkan wolfy at the gate."

Remus frowned. He'd had a floo call with Gregor the day before to confirm Gregor's acceptance of the pack establishing its base in Gregor's territory. Perhaps he should have expected a personal visit of some kind. He nodded briskly at Jugen and stood up.

"You should not go alone." Patrick, the single wolf who had been with the pack since the beginning at the chateau, and who was probably the other natural candidate for beta, stood up.

He was a relatively young man; sixteen when bitten at the end of the previous war, he had fallen into the fringes of Fenrir's pack. He had been as unhappy with Fenrir as leader as Sian and just as seemingly incapable of challenging Fenrir himself. Despite that, Patrick was good at organising and had fallen naturally into helping Remus with the move to the Balkans. He was also very sociable and well-liked by all the werewolves in the pack; he loved pack life in a way that Remus couldn't grasp and was self-educated in a range of different eclectic subjects.

Clara nodded in agreement. "Patrick and I will accompany you, Remus."
And there, Remus thought with a sigh, was the pack's leadership team forming right in front of him, and it probably wasn't a bad thing because Clara and Patrick balanced each other out. As if in agreement, the others were nodding, content to stay at the table and allow the pair to assume the task of protecting the Alpha.

Remus didn't protest either Patrick's or Clara's presence; he led the way out of the kitchen and as soon as they were clear of the farmhouse, they apparated to the gate.

He recognised the werewolf standing there immediately and gave the command to allow him entry even as he went to greet him with a wide smile. "Tomas."

Tomas smiled back, easy and friendly. "Alpha Lupin."

"I've told you before; call me Remus." Remus instructed with a sigh as he clasped forearms with Tomas. He gestured at Patrick at his right shoulder and Clara at his left. "Tomas, this is Patrick Keefe and Clara Holliday. Patrick, Clara; this is Tomas Lubric. He serves in the Auror guard for the Bulgarian Minister and is a member of the Balkans' pack."

Tomas nodded at Patrick and Clara who nodded back warily.

Remus ushered them all back to the farmhouse, bringing Tomas side-along with himself. Within seconds Remus and Tomas were ensconced in the cosy den, plates of cherry tart served along with fresh beer for Remus and coffee for Tomas as they settled down to talk. Patrick and Clara had left to join the others in the kitchen and reassure them all was well.

"Alpha Popov sends greetings and well wishes to the Lupin pack." Tomas began after the elves disappeared.

"The Lupin pack thanks him for his consideration and his graciousness in allowing us to stay within his territory." Remus said formally. "We are in his debt."

"There is no debt between friends and family." Tomas returned. "Gregor believes this more than anything."

Remus smiled. He liked Gregor very much and he had a feeling the Slavic pack leader saw himself as some kind of a mentor to Remus.

"He has asked that I serve as a liaison between our packs." Tomas continued. "If that is acceptable to you, Alpha?"

"More than." Remus said. "I'll introduce you to the rest of the pack after our discussion. You should probably meet Sirius and Harry formally at some point too. He always made an effort to reinforce that he considered them his pack.

"I would like that." Tomas said simply, rubbing his fingers on a napkin. "You have chosen your beta?"

"Not exactly," Remus said, shifting under Tomas's regard, "Patrick and Clara both volunteered to escort me to see who was at the gate. They're the prime candidates. If it was Clara I know there might be gender issues…"

"Probably not when in human form," Tomas interrupted, "but it is most likely when wolves."

Remus nodded slowly, reconsidering his earlier thought. He didn't think as a wolf, Remus mused, and that was a disadvantage as a pack leader.
"So…probably Patrick then." Remus said out loud.

"With your Clara as a den mother." Tomas added. "They will make a good balance, hmmm?"

And Tomas had put into words what Remus had subconsciously noted as they'd left the kitchen.

"I was just thinking that myself." Remus admitted with a chuckle.

Tomas nodded and drew out an envelope from his robes. "From the Minister's office."

Remus raised both eyebrows in surprise. He hadn't expected to get such a fast reply to his request for a personal meeting with Bogdan to discuss an issue of security with the Durmstrang ship at Hogwarts. He opened the envelope and scanned the letter; an invite to breakfast the next day.

That was fast.

"Wow." Remus murmured.

"He is eager to meet with you to discuss the issue you stated." Tomas stated. "Gregor also has told him about allowing your pack to occupy the farm and I believe the Minister is looking to bid you welcome."

Remus nodded slowly. It wasn't unexpected that Gregor had informed his government but it set nerves flying in Remus's belly.

"I look forward to our breakfast." He placed the letter back in its envelope and set it aside. "Let's go introduce you to the others. I'll pen a reply while you speak with them." He declared.

An hour later, Tomas had departed, the pack was in their chosen accommodations sleeping and Remus was talking to Sirius on the mirror.

"You and Bogdan really did get on like a house on fire, didn't you?" Sirius commented.

Remus waved away Sirius's words. "I think it has more to do with us moving our pack to his country."

"Well, good, if it means we can speak with him quicker." Sirius said, pushing a hand through his hair and looking every year of his age.

"How's it going with Harry?" asked Remus, getting to the source of Sirius's concern. The mirror call the day before had been one long complaining session by Sirius about Harry sneaking out.

Sirius sighed heavily. "He's fine."

"Pissed?" inquired Remus. "Sulking?"

"No," Sirius shook his head, "he's actually fairly accepting that he broke the rules, put himself at risk and therefore has to pay the consequences. He's been quiet but…fine." He grimaced. "Do you have any idea how many times I sneaked out of the tower after curfew, Remus?"

Ah.

Remus repressed the urge to sigh himself. Sirius really struggled with being a disciplinarian. It wasn't Sirius's fault. Sirius had never said but it had been obvious even as kids that Sirius's parents had been abusive. Sirius tended to equate being disciplined with being hurt – and while he'd had a couple of years under Charlus Potter's system, Sirius had never lost that learned belief. It was likely that Sirius
on some subconscious level felt he was hurting Harry disciplining him. Of course, some of it simply was Sirius feeling like a hypocrite for telling Harry off for breaking the same rules Sirius had broken as a teenager. Remus figured every parent had their own moment of hypocrisy and Sirius should stop dwelling on it. But then as much as he loved Harry and was invested in raising him, he had the freedom of not being the actual parent and therefore possibly had no idea how it felt punishing a child for doing something he'd done himself.

"He obviously knows you have to punish him even if you did do it yourself in the past," Remus reassured Sirius, "and besides, you didn't have people wanting to kill you when you sneaked out; Harry does."

"Snape." Sirius retorted.

"Not the same thing and you know it." Remus frowned. "Speaking of Severus, has he heard anything more about the Yule thing?"

"Now who's impatient?" questioned Sirius archly. He shook his head. "It's only been a couple of days and Yule is weeks away. He may not hear from Junior for quite a while."

"I still can't believe he told you to be careful." Remus said out loud.

Sirius shrugged. "His official diagnosis of Junior was that he's madder than a box of cats hyped up on catnip and dressed up in Easter bonnets and therefore unpredictable."

"Have you told Harry?" asked Remus.

"I've told him Snape has been informed that something is being planned for Yule." Sirius fidgeted. "I haven't said anything to him about Snape thinking Junior's definitely going to come after me in some way at some point. He already knows Junior blames me for Rabastan...there's no need to spell it out and ultimately it's only Snape's opinion. Harry has enough to worry about."

Remus nodded slowly. He agreed with Sirius's decision. "How's the second task planning coming?"

"The kids have done well pulling together a plan. Most of the alliance cooed over it. Daphne Greengrass sweet-talked her father into sending her half a library on sailing and magical spells for boats." Sirius said with a grin. The grin faded. "Harry's worrying over whether someone he cares about will be taken but we don't know what criteria were set in the task for the Goblet to choose."

"It could be a thing." Remus countered.

"It could be Harry himself." Sirius waved a hand, distorting the image in the mirror for a moment. "It doesn't make any difference to him brooding over it." He sighed heavily. "Healer Allen says it's natural enough and he'll work through it but...it's not as though I can promise Harry nobody will get hurt."

"I'm not sure anything we say will help take away his anxiety about losing someone he cares about, Padfoot." Remus said sadly. "He lost James and Lily; that's the root of it. Even if he doesn't remember losing them, he knows how his life was without love in it and he fears that history will repeat itself."

They all did. Remus felt a familiar tug of worry pull at his own gut; a tug that whispered that he'd lose his pack again, be alone again, be bereft again. And mostly he knew that it was because of his certainty that if Harry ever died, Sirius would either be dead from trying to prevent it from happening or die in the attempt to avenge him.
Sirius's grey eyes met his knowingly in the mirror. "We're a right bunch, aren't we, Moony?"

And that gave away Sirius's own anxiety over losing the people he loved again, Remus mused.

Sirius motioned for Remus to ignore his last comment. "Get some sleep and enjoy your breakfast with the Minister."

The mirror winked out without any further notice and Remus huffed in annoyance before conceding that Sirius probably had been upset at the last part of their conversation and needed to hide for a while.

He should be there, Remus thought guiltily. He should be there rather than in Bulgaria playing Alpha to werewolves who needed…needed a sanctuary and someone to stand for them.

Bugger.

Remus pushed a hand through his hair and took himself off to bed.

Breakfast at the Bulgarian Ministry was intimidating.

The Minister's dining room was huge, able to accommodate huge parties, and the large table claiming the centre of the room reflected that in its many, many chairs. Only two places had been set at the top of the table; the head place which Bogdan occupied and the seat to the right of him which the officious secretary who had shown Remus in, pulled out for him as Remus shook hands with Bogdan.

"Sit, sit!" Bogdan said in Bulgarian, ushering Remus into the chair.

An instant later, waiters arrived with a veritable feast of breakfast foods. Remus succumbed to Bogdan's obvious hospitality and accepted an array of bacon, sausage, fried potatoes, mushrooms, tomatoes and a beautifully fried egg sunny side up. He noticed Bogdan stuck with a porridge like bowl of cereal and some fresh fruit.

"Diet." Bogdan said with a grimace, patting his rounded stomach. "My wife insists."

Remus nodded politely, his mouth full of sausage.

"I welcome you and your pack to Bulgaria." Bogdan said warmly. "I was most pleased when Gregor informed me you had requested permission to build a sanctuary here."

"Thank you and I'm glad you approved the move." Remus replied, patting his mouth with his napkin. He had a feeling Gregor would claim that he had told Bogdan than requested his permission but he wasn't getting in the middle of their relationship.

"How could I not?" Bogdan said with a good-natured smile. "You, I trust, Remus."

"Thank you." Remus said again, thinking back to how Bill had once commented that he'd be worried about Remus building a pack if it wasn't for the fact that it was Remus building the pack. It gave him a warm glow to think people trusted him so much.

"I have also received your request from Tomas regarding the Durmstrang ship." Bogdan's brow lowered. "You are certain that there are Death Eaters hiding on the ship?"

Remus nodded quickly. "Certain of it. Igor Karkaroff has admitted as much to our spy and the circumstantial evidence suggests that they used the ship as the base when they attempted to sabotage
the first task. However, there isn't any official evidence that carries enough weight for the British government to present a formal request through international diplomacy."

"And in the meantime, these dogs continue to use the Durmstrang ship." Bogdan hit the top of the table with his clenched fist. "Bastards!"

"Hence the informal request from Lord Black, although Cornelius – Minister Fudge – is aware that we are approaching you and supports us." Remus said seriously. "If we could have your permission to search the ship, we could find these men and arrest them."

Bogdan's face fell. He sighed and picked up a segment of grapefruit with a sour expression. "Unfortunately, it is not that easy, my friend." He waved his small spoon at Remus. "What do you know of Durmstrang, the school not the ship?"

Remus paused in slicing another piece of bacon up. "Very little." He admitted. "It has a very good reputation as an educational institution although its curriculum slides across some Dark magic too much for British tastes which skew to the Light."

"And it's location?" pressed Bogdan, glaring at the grapefruit as though it could change its taste.

"Well, I have to admit," Remus said hesitantly, "until it was confirmed it was Bulgarian territory for the tournament, I wasn't aware of the exact location. I know it's a well-guarded secret."

"It is because Durmstrang has no exact location." Bogdan said, giving up on his grapefruit and reaching for his strong black coffee. "The school will move year to year between the states commonly grouped under East Europe and the Baltics. This year, Bulgaria; next year it may be Russia; the year before Croatia held the honour. You see?"

Remus inclined his head. He saw only too well, he feared. "I understand." Remus said. "What you're telling me is that you cannot make a blanket decision to allow the search because the Durmstrang ship is only nominally under Bulgarian sovereignty and in actuality involves the sovereignty of many states."

Bogdan nodded. "If it were my decision alone..." he jabbed his spoon as though it was a wand, "I would have my Aurors searching the ship now."

Remus rubbed his head, trying to think of another solution, another way to convince Bogdan but his mind was a terrifying blank.

"I want to assure you, Remus, that I will take the informal request to my opposite numbers and request their permission to allow my Aurors to search but..." Bogdan sighed heavily, "it will take many weeks. While only a few are sympathetic to these Death Eaters, diplomacy will take some time for pressure from others to come to bear especially as this is an informal request and not an official approach."

"Thank you," Remus hastened to say, grateful that Bogdan would pursue it, "something is better than nothing and in the meantime, we may get the evidence we need for a formal approach."
Bogdan smiled at him widely. "Now, enough talk of this! You must tell me all about the first task of the tournament!"

Remus was happy to oblige the Minister and they happily wiled away the rest of the hour. It was with a full belly that Remus apparated back to the farm. He decided a walk was in order to clear his head and physically make himself feel better about his very delicious breakfast.

It was almost half an hour later that he ran into Clara as he reached the treeline at the back of the farm. She was dressed warmly in sweatpants, a fleecy jacket, woollen gloves and hat. She had clearly been running and had stopped to stretch. She gave him a brilliant smile.

"Remus!" Clara grinned at him. "How was your meeting?"

"Good." Remus said, surprised to find that he meant it. Somehow on his walk he'd come to accept getting permission for the search of the ship would take time. "He's happy to have our pack here."

Clara waved at the farmhouse. "Heading back?"

"Yes." Remus said.

"I'll walk with you."

"I'd like that." Remus admitted with a smile. He had a whole stack of work to plough through. He really needed to think about finding an assistant. His eyes went to Clara. Maybe his idea of her being a beta for him wasn't appropriate given the pack dynamics but she was an educated witch who would be perfect in the role of his assistant. "Clara, have you thought about your employment situation?"

"I thought we were all going to be working on the farm?" Clara turned to him surprised.

"Yes," Remus said, "that is the plan but you're qualified to do a lot more than farm-work."

"Perhaps." Clara tilted her head. "Did you have something else in mind?"

"I find myself in need of an assistant." Remus said. "Between the organisation of the pack, my stewardship of the Houses of Black and Potter, the bloody tournament and…I'm drowning in work."

Clara hummed. "Patrick could assume most of the pack stuff as your beta."

"Agreed." Remus said. "I'll talk to him about that later but there is the rest of it. Believe me; there's more than enough work to go round."

"What does Lord Black say?" Clara asked directly.

Which was a good point. Did Remus actually have the authority to appoint his own assistant? He and Sirius had a rather loose relationship as Lord and Steward but possibly he should ask.

"He'd need to sign off on your appointment naturally but…" Remus shrugged. "I'm sure he'll trust me to use my own judgement."

"And what about the girl you've moved in with?" Clara said delicately. "I understand she's another werewolf?"

Remus frowned as he realised she'd heard the gossip about Sian before he'd had a chance to tell her.

"As far as the work goes, Sian has her own business as a jewellery designer and I haven't moved in
with her," Remus corrected swiftly, "Sian came to us with information about Fenrir and the DMLE wanted to put her in protective custody. Sirius agreed she could stay in the same property where I'm currently residing as a compromise when Sian asked not to be in Auror custody."

Clara looked at him perplexed. "But the others were saying you're friends? Close friends?"

"Sian and I are just friends." Remus said firmly, drawing them both to a halt before they reached the farmhouse and someone decided to interrupt them. "Old friends – Sian was someone who tried to get me to join a pack back in the 'eighties." He smiled a tad shyly. "And beyond, I can assure you there's nothing between us."

Clara gave a startled laugh. "I'm sorry, Remus. It's none of my business, really."

He reached out and took her hand. "Isn't it?" He asked hopefully.

Colour flooded her cheeks and a host of things flashed in her eyes; regret, chagrin and concern for Remus…enough to know that he'd read her all wrong and she had no interest in him romantically.

"Well," Remus said before she could speak, "this is awkward." He let go of her hand and gave a rueful smile. "I'm sorry I…"

"No, Remus," Clara hurriedly reached for his hand and held it tightly, "I'm the one who is sorry." She looked down at their clasped hands and back at Remus. "As a wolf…I find you very attractive. You're an Alpha…my Alpha. I can feel it here." She placed her free hand on her sternum just above her heart. "But as a witch…I prefer women, Remus."

"Oh." Remus blinked at her.

Clara gave another small laugh. "I thought you knew." Her eyes met his meaningfully. "I did talk about my ex, Allison, a lot."

Allison? He'd assumed she was just a friend.

Remus shook his head. He remembered Tonks's graciousness at his rejection of her, how she had made it easy for him, and determined he could do the same for Clara. "Since I clearly lack the right gender, I guess I'll settle for being your Alpha then and your friend." He gave her a crooked smile and squeezed the hand she held.

She shot him a grateful look back. "And if Lord Black agrees, my boss." She said wryly. She nudged him and released his hand. "Perhaps it's best if I do work for you that things aren't going to get complicated with a romance."

"That's possibly very true." Remus concurred. He waved at the farmhouse. "Shall we?"

"Tell me more about this job then." Clara invited looping her arm through his as they started walking again.

He felt a momentary pang of regret at the loss of his possible romance as he began describing the duties he thought his assistant would assume and pushed it away. Still, the ache lurked and he couldn't deny he was relieved to reach the house and have an excuse to draw away from Clara's presence as the elves demanded his attention.

No doubt, he thought ruefully, Sirius would laugh himself silly when he told him.
15th December 1994

There were times when Sirius regretted taking up his Lordship. That afternoon was quickly becoming one of those times. Having returned from two tense meetings with minor pureblood Houses who were clearly trying to maneuver for a détente without actually admitting they wanted a détente (which meant two whole hours of Slytherin fencing and saying everything by saying nothing), he paused in the doorway of his study at Hogwarts, scanned the heap of paperwork on his desk and groaned loudly.

Penny gave him a commiserating smile from her seat in front of the fire. She'd spread out her work on the sofa. "Sorry but Remus says they all need your review and signature."

"Remind me again why I thought this was a good idea?" Sirius asked as he threw himself into his chair and dragged the first parchment towards him.

"Harry." Penny answered as she continued to open envelopes with a brisk wave of her wand.

"Right." Sirius said brightly. Because Harry was the reason and he made it all worthwhile. The quiet pop of Dobby beside him brought much appreciated refreshments and Sirius dug into the work with a renewed, if grim, determination.

Most of the paperwork consisted of financial reports from the various properties and businesses that the House of Black managed. Remus had used muggle yellow sticky paper to highlight the salient points and direct Sirius's attention to decisions that he needed to make as Lord. The report on the Fevrier negotiation for the Italian's version of the Lumiere document was filled with numerous yellow stickies all basically saying 'not bloody likely' in respect to Fevrier's need for more money for odd items he deemed necessary supplies.

Half-way through, restless and bored with the financial reports, Sirius changed tack and delved into another pile. It was a tactic he used to keep himself motivated. As soon as he started to chafe at one task, he'd switch for a time to another to ensure he kept working. He'd just reached for the first parchment when Bill knocked on the open study door.

Sirius waved him inside. "What's up?"

"Thought you'd want to know the talk with the Ravenclaw ghost didn't go well." Bill sighed and slumped against the door jamb. "She basically told the Headmaster to sod off."

Sirius arched an eyebrow, torn between amusement (because he would have loved to have seen that) and frustration (because the search for the damn diadem in Hogwarts was going nowhere).

"Next step?" asked Sirius mildly.

"The Headmaster's going to ask a few of the other ghosts but…" Bill shrugged, "Caro and I figure we'll continue searching out from the original route we devised and take it from there. I don't think we're going to be done any time soon."

Sirius sighed. It was hard not to be discouraged. "You heading home?"

Bill nodded. "I have a date with Alicia."
"Is that Veela still following you around?" teased Penny.

"Quarter Veela," Bill said defensively and nodded, "I have told her I'm not available but she insists she just wants to be friends and…"

"And you don't want to break her heart by telling her to take a hike." Penny concluded.

Sirius cleared his throat and the two of them made apologetic looks, Bill quickly excusing himself and Penny returning her attention to her work.

With the interruption over, Sirius grabbed the top parchment which turned out to be a hiring request from Remus; he had detailed out his assistant's job, the salary and benefits, his view of his suggested appointment's relevant skills and experience. Attached was Clara Holliday's Curriculum Vitae, references, and a letter from her to Sirius detailing out her reasons for assuming the role. Sirius frowned as he reread over everything. On paper, it looked like a good fit especially since Remus had revealed nothing of a romantic nature was going to happen between them with Clara's interest being permanently elsewhere (although Sirius wasn't certain he was going to forgive Remus for a whole hour of whining about Clara's lack of interest over the mirror). Clara was an intelligent witch with good references and her own letter had revealed a dry wit and a sensible attitude. He had an inkling he'd like her very much but that wasn't the point.

He scrawled a message to Remus stating that they hadn't covered whether Clara would be able to do the position wholly from the farm (if that was the intention) and he'd like to meet her before saying a definitive 'yes.' He had to admit Remus had been right about Percy as a prospective candidate; that Percy had needed to find his own way. Sirius had learned from Arthur that Percy had been taken on by a friend of Brian Cutter's as a legal secretary with evening classes to complete a Mastery in Law. It looked like a good move for him.

Sirius's eyes sneaked to Penny. She and Percy hadn't resumed their romantic relationship although he knew Penny had gone to see him soon after the werewolf attack and had come back happier with the overall situation. Sirius thought it was a shame. They were a good match as a couple but then… maybe they weren't if Percy could ditch her at the first sign of trouble.

There was too much lovey-dovey stuff flying around the place, thought Sirius with sardonic amusement. Between Remus's romantic misadventures, Penny's broken-ish heart, and Harry's first foray into love with Hermione, Sirius felt surrounded. A tiny pang went through him; longing for something of his own, regret that he didn't have a love in his own life, but then there was a larger part of him that was relieved that he didn't have the ups and downs of a romance to deal with on top of everything else. He also wasn't entirely convinced that Harry was as sangfroid about Sirius dating as his son had claimed. So all in all, better that he was free and single and…

"Sirius?" Penny's puzzled tone cut through his thoughts and dragged Sirius back to the reality of his desk and the mountain of paperwork.

"Hmmm?" Sirius threw over his shoulder.

"This letter is telling me that as I am neither Mister Padfoot nor Mister Moony I should keep my beaky nose out of it." Penny said amused as she waved the parchment at him.

Sirius's blood ran cold. His wand was out immediately casting detection spells for harmful hexes and curses. They came back negative and Penny looked at him wide-eyed.

"Sirius?"
"Give me the letter." Sirius ordered. "It's from Worm…Pettigrew."

Penny blanched and hurried over. He levitated it from her hand, sealed it with an Auror spell to preserve evidence and finally grasped it. The instant the parchment was in his hand, the writing Penny had seen disappeared and new writing began to reel across the paper.

"Padfoot,

The Dark Lord has ordered Greyback to kill Moony. He will offer Moony a deal if he survives and expects when Moony declines another member of the pack will kill him instead to become Alpha and take the deal.

Wormtail."

"Bloody bastard!" Sirius snarled harshly, unsure if he meant Voldemort, Greyback or the rat. He closed his eyes briefly. He froze the writing so it could be read by others. "Dobby!"

The elf popped in immediately.

"Take this to Amelia Bones. Tell her it came in the mail and is from Peter Pettigrew." Sirius said.

As soon as Dobby departed, Penny turned to him. "Do you think…has he…is he on our side now?"

"No." Sirius said curtly. He motioned his apology with a vague hand wave. "Peter is all about looking out for number one. I would guess he's playing both sides just like he did last time." He leaned a hip against his desk and folded his arms. "I'm not even sure that this wasn't done without Voldemort's sanction. Peter still has to be a willing servant for the ritual to work in the Summer, and I'm certain Peter won't risk not being exactly what he's meant to be because if he got the ritual wrong, Voldemort would kill him."

Penny sighed. "So we can't trust anything he says?"

"We don't trust his motives and confirm everything he tells us through other sources." Sirius confirmed. "And in this particular instance, he's already late in his news." He pointed at the rest of the correspondence she had been working through. "If you get something else from Pettigrew set it aside immediately for me to examine. I know our mail flows through Gringotts and they deal with the hexes and everything but…it doesn't hurt to take precautions."

"I will." Penny promised. She made a tempus charm and frowned. "Mrs Malfoy should be here shortly."

Sirius repressed the urge to groan. "You get yourself home." He instructed. "Did Narcissa say what this meeting was about?"

"Just family business." Penny said, moving to retrieve her work and pack up her things.

She had just finished by the time Dobby announced Narcissa was waiting in the living room. Sirius escorted Penny out and returned to greet Narcissa formally.

He kissed her cheek and ushered her to sit again. "Tea?"

"That would be lovely, Sirius." Narcissa said, rearranging the skirts of her ice-blue velvet robes. They were trimmed with some white fur that probably wasn't fake and diamonds glittered at her earlobes and wrist. Her blonde hair was free around her shoulders, falling in a silken waterfall. She looked as beautiful as an ice sculpture and about as approachable.
Dobby set the tea and a plate of homemade shortbread on the table. Narcissa smiled at him tightly. "Thank you, Dobby. They're my favourite."

Dobby gave a cautious nod and popped away. Sirius remembered belatedly that he had once been the Malfoys' elf.

Narcissa played Mum, pouring their drinks with elegant grace before she subsided into her chair and picked up the delicate china cup.

Sirius regarded her thoughtfully. "Why the meeting, Cissy?"

Her blue-grey eyes flashed at him for the nickname. "I wish to inform you as my Head of House that I am with child." She couldn't help her lips curling up at the edges into a sweet awestruck smile or the softening of her expression.

"That's wonderful news!" Sirius said sincerely. He placed his cup aside and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Congratulations, Cousin."

"Thank you." Narcissa said, allowing the smile to form properly. "I'm very happy."

"And Lucius?" Sirius asked politely, picking up his cup again.

"He agreed to the attempt but I haven't informed him yet." Narcissa explained. "Protocol…"

Protocol was for her to have told her Head of House first and Sirius held primacy.

He winced visibly. "I'm sorry. You could have told him first. I wouldn't have minded."

"I would have." Narcissa said simply. She gazed at him with something that looked like amusement. "You've restored honour and status to the House of Black, Sirius. I'm proud to be a daughter of the House and I am deeply satisfied to have you as Lord Black. It was no hardship to tell you first before my husband who agreed to give me this child as a way of keeping me biddable."

Sirius wondered if he should feel as pleased as he did at her praise for his performance as Lord Black before he focused on her comment about Malfoy. "I thought things were fine between you two?"

"They are." Narcissa said firmly. "But our dynamic has changed and Lucius prefers to believe that within our home he holds primacy. He knew I wanted another child and hopes that by giving me one, I'll continue to support him with you; that I won't push to shift from my position as the woman behind the politician to being the politician when we host his alliance."

Sirius sighed and drank his tea rather than say something he'd regret.

"But for all that, he's a good father," Narcissa continued, "and he's an acceptable husband. He doesn't beat me or mistreat me. His dalliances have been discreet and never within our home. He doesn't love me but neither do I love him."

What had he been thinking about romance and love, Sirius mused darkly.

"You deserve better, Cissy." Sirius said softly.

"I have my children, a beautiful home and a husband that appreciates me." Narcissa lifted one shoulder in a graceful shrug. "It is more than I hoped for when Father told me there would be an arranged marriage."

"If you ever change your mind…” Sirius said lightly.
"You need Lucius at present, Sirius." Narcissa commented dryly. "He's your only check on Wenlock where the pureblood Houses are concerned." She didn't mention Lucius's value as a link with Voldemort and the former Death Eaters.

"True." Sirius demurred. "But circumstances change and if they do change in the future and you want out, you should let me know." He held up a hand to prevent her from arguing the point. "Let's talk of the child. How far along are you?"

"I'm due at the beginning of July." Narcissa said, brightening. "She's a girl."

"You said Lucius agreed to the attempt so presumably he'll be pleased with your pregnancy?" Sirius asked. "What about Draco?"

"We discussed the prospect of another child with Draco and he agreed." Narcissa's lips twisted. "However, he may have some difficulty adjusting to the reality of his no longer being an only child."

"How do you want to do the announcement?" Sirius said.

"I'll inform Lucius tonight." Narcissa said. "I thought he and I could speak to Draco before tomorrow's family dinner and it could be announced to the family then?" She paused. "I would like your advice on a formal announcement…"

"Lucius will want to do it regardless of primacy, I assume," Sirius shrugged. "I'll work it out with him." His eyes narrowed as he considered the increased risk to Narcissa from her pregnancy. "You may become a target for Voldemort. He kidnapped two pregnant pureblood women for this ritual we think he's going to do. You're not impregnated by a muggle but…"

"He may see me as an acceptable substitute as I am the vassal of a Marked servant of his?" Narcissa's hand grazed over her belly protectively.

"Kreacher!" Sirius called for the Black elf who arrived promptly.

"Lord Black." Kreacher's ears waggled.

"Narcissa carries a child of the House of Black." Sirius said. "Your primary duty, excepting any other order from me or my Heir, is from this day forward to protect and serve her until she has the child."

Kreacher bowed low to Sirius and then to Narcissa. "I bes honoured, Mistress Narcissy."

"Thank you, Kreacher." Narcissa said.

"Appoint another elf to look after Black Manor and the School House." Sirius ordered and dismissed Kreacher.

"Thank you, Sirius." Narcissa said. "I will admit that I am comforted by the additional protection."

Sirius nodded. "Kreacher's fanatical about the House. He'll take care of you." He drank down the rest of his tea. "So a girl. Any idea about names?"

"I was thinking of either Dorea or Regina as possible names."

"Regulus would have gotten a kick out Regina." Sirius said thinking of his younger brother with regret.

Narcissa nodded. "I think so too." She sipped her tea. "He tried to warn me, you know. The last time
I spoke to him, he told me I should take Draco and move to Mother's relatives in France; that the Dark Lord was not the promise he purported to be and Lucius would be lucky to escape with his life." She pressed her lips together. "I didn't listen to him."

Sirius had no idea what to say. Grief at losing Regulus stirred again. "I wish he'd come to me." He said quietly. "Before he'd ran off and tried to take on bringing down Voldemort on his own."

"He would have wanted a position of strength when he did come to you, Sirius." Narcissa said evenly. "It would have been important to him."

Sirius nodded. That sounded like Regulus. Sounded like himself. Sounded like every Black he'd ever known.

He poured himself another tea and topped up Narcissa. "Did you ever meet Bartemius Crouch Junior?"

"Once," Narcissa said, spooning sugar into her freshened cup, "Bella brought him round for lunch soon after he was Marked. I was sworn to secrecy as no-one was supposed to know outside of the LeStranges."

"What did you make of him?" Sirius asked interested to know the answer given Narcissa's sharp observational skills.

Narcissa took a sip of her tea. "He had taken the Mark out of love for Rabastan and for no other reason. He was not politically minded. He was…uncommitted on the issues whereas Bella…"

"Always had strong opinions." Sirius supplied when Narcissa considered her words.

"Yes," Narcissa agreed softly, "and therefore I turned the conversation to other things and there…he was an intelligent and articulate wizard with interesting theories about charms and potions. His magical ability was downplayed but the depth of his knowledge indicated practical application, yet he was charming and I didn't call him on it."

"So no hint that he'd turn into a raving madman?" commented Sirius idly, contemplating a charming, witty Crouch taking lunch with Sirius's cousins.

"Only when the subject of his parents was raised."

Sirius's head snapped up and he stared at her, silently requesting more of an explanation.

She smoothed a hand over her skirt. "He was…adoring of his mother. Bella teased him that he was a Mummy's boy but it was more than that. He spoke of her in almost reverential tones." She sighed. "His father was the complete opposite reaction; angry terse comments. You could tell that he wouldn't have thought twice about killing him even then."

"Problems in his childhood?" theorised Sirius out loud. "Stern father, sympathetic mother?"

"More damaged than that, I fear." Narcissa murmured speculatively. "His parents were quite the couple in society terms before their son was imprisoned. She was beautiful and quiet; an adornment for her husband's authoritative leader demeanour. But for me there was always the sense that something was rotten underneath the surface and their son…he was the embodiment of that picture; surface perfection and yet underneath, hostility and resentment and ruthless cruelty all bubbling away in a soup that would boil over eventually." She paused as though she had surprised herself.

"So basically he was nuts even back then." Sirius concluded, mulling over her comments in his head.
Narcissa shot him a warning look. "Damaged." She corrected sharply. "Possibly his mother giving her life to obtain his freedom coupled with his father's imprisonment of him destroyed whatever sanity he might have had left."

Not to mention Sirius killing his lover.

She didn't say it but she didn't have to, Sirius thought wearily.

"Why the question?" asked Narcissa.

"There's some increased concern that I'm a specific target of his." Sirius said.

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "Through Severus, I presume? I assume you know he's attempted communication with the Dark Lord? Avery couldn't wait to tell everyone."

"At my request although Lucius isn't to be told of Snape's exact loyalties." Sirius said mildly. He figured Cissy liked Severus enough not to put him in danger but his words made sure of it given the vows she had taken.

"I understand." Narcissa said after a moment. "And I assume Severus has concluded much the same as I in regards to Crouch?"

"If you're talking about the completely nuts, you'd be right." Sirius said brightly.

There was a chime that sounded through the rooms and Narcissa set down her cup, understanding it signalled the end of the school day.

"I should be getting home." She stood and Sirius did the same, kissing her cheek before she curtsied to him.

"Take care of yourself, you and the baby, Cissy." Sirius said.

She inclined her head and left.

Sirius sat down to wait on Harry's arrival. While Harry's punishment had effectively ended with his weekend grounding, and Harry hadn't seem unduly moody in the aftermath at all, Sirius couldn't help the churning gut of unease that disciplining Harry always left him with. He knew Harry knew Sirius loved him; he was certain Harry loved him back. But punishing Harry always made Sirius feel as though their relationship was off kilter somehow and he very much wanted everything back to normal.

It didn't take long before Harry walked in the door and Sirius was unsurprised when Ron, Hermione and Neville followed him – all of them talking over each other, babbling about the last lesson of the day and their History of Magic homework.

Harry waved at Sirius as they took seats at the dining table, pulling out books and parchment. Sirius got up and went over.

"Good day?" He said, placing his hands on the back of Harry's chair.

"Tons of homework." Harry replied, motioning at the school work littered across the table.

"Tons." Ron parroted morosely.

"Which is why we should start it now." Hermione said briskly, rearranging her own space into a tidy area of stacked books, inkpot, parchment and quills.
Neville nodded. "She's right though. If we can get the History of Magic essay done tonight we have all weekend to spend on the Herbology project."

"You just want to spend the weekend on the Herbology project, mate." Ron retorted.

"Not denying it." Neville said cheerfully.

Harry chuckled.

Hermione rolled her eyes expressively. "Let's just get on with it."

"I'll get Dobby to bring you some snacks." Sirius said. He ruffled Harry's hair and got a fondly exasperated look in return.

Sirius headed for his study and his own stack of work. He glanced back at the dining table and saw the kids all immersed in their study, quite happily ignoring him. Well, he'd wanted everything back to normal, Sirius thought wryly.

o-O-o

19th December 1994

Harry gazed intently at Hedwig on the perch beside him.

She returned his look with an amber glance of reassurance. She spread her wings in a wide arc, bent her legs visibly so he would see the bend and then the release as she launched herself into the air. He watched as she adjusted the angle of her wings as she glided to the second perch across the room; watched as she banked her wings, stuck her legs out and landed, braking with her wing movements gracefully. A moment later, she returned to his side and he watched the landing up close.

It was his turn.

He took as much of a deep breath as he could in his raven form. He spread his wings, bent his legs and…

He was aloft!

He was so giddy at the rush of flight that he almost forgot what he was doing – the landing perch suddenly a lot closer than it had been a moment before. Hurriedly, he stuck his legs out, and banked his wings.

It wasn't a good landing; he teetered on the perch for a long minute, flapping his wings wildly and gripping like mad with his claws, before he regained his balance and settled, his heart pounding wildly against his ribcage.

Minerva clapped from where she stood with Sirius observing at the side of the training room. "Well done, Harry. Now back again, please."

Harry took another deep breath and tried to calm his heartbeat. He just needed to nail the landing which meant not getting so enthralled with the flying. He launched himself back across the room, focused his gaze on the perch and…

He managed to land without overbalancing but he still needed to flap his wings madly to stop himself.

Hedwig nuzzled his neck and gave him an approving hoot. She arched her wings, launched, flew
once around the room and landed on the perch again.

Lesson two, Harry thought with unbounded delight. He launched into the air.

Ten minutes later, Minerva brought the lesson to a halt.

"Time to change back, Harry."

Harry grumbled with a disgruntled caw – he loved flying – but his wing muscles were achy and he had almost overshot the landing again on his last flight. He launched off the perch and onto the chair Minerva brought over before making the change to his human form. Minerva had insisted that he wouldn't have the flying lessons until he could make the change between his forms seamless.

Still, he checked everything was back to normal as Minerva beamed at him proudly and Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder.

"How do you feel?" Sirius asked, his hand rubbing Harry's shoulder as though he already knew it was sore.

"Like I've just played a few hours of Quidditch." Harry admitted ruefully, rubbing at his wrists. He felt drained. His shoulders felt pained and his arms hurt.

"A hot shower." Minerva advised. "We use different muscles when we operate in our animal form and it can take a while for those muscles to build up stamina and strength." She smiled at him. "But I'm very pleased. You did very well and I'm sure your flying teacher would agree."

Hedwig shifted position on the perch and dipped her head in a parody of a nod.

"I suggest you change and fly every night until you can manage a half an hour comfortably without too much ache in your human muscles afterwards." Minerva said authoritatively.

Harry had just enough energy left for a grin. "I can do that!"

Sirius sighed but his eyes were twinkling. "I guess we can add it into your schedule." He nudged Harry off the chair. "Go, get your shower."

Minerva smiled at him. "I'll see you tomorrow in class, Harry."

Harry escaped the training room, Hedwig following him up the stairs. She made for her perch in his bedroom. He locked himself in the bathroom and stood for an age under a barrage of hot water until he figured his muscles had relaxed enough to be able to get out of the shower. Back in the bedroom, he pulled on some sweats, wincing as his muscles protested. Maybe he shouldn't have demanded one last flight, Harry thought grumpily.

A soft knock dragged him out of his pity party.

It was probably Padfoot checking on him before dragging him down to dinner. He blushed a little remembering the stern talking-to he'd endured over sneaking out. He had kind of deserved it but it had still stung. The two days of grounding had been much more bearable than seeing the look of disappointment in Padfoot's eyes.

"Come in." Harry called.

It was a surprise to see Ron poke his head around the door. "Sirius said I should come up. You decent, mate?"
"Yeah!" Harry waved him inside. "What are you doing here?"

Ron slumped into the chair by the window with a hefty sigh. "Did you know that Lavender's going to the Ball with Dean?"

Harry winced. "Nope. Sorry, Ron." He hated seeing Ron's morose expression but, on the other hand, it wasn't like Hermione and he hadn't tried encouraging Ron over the past weeks to ask her out sooner rather than later.

"I asked her in front of the whole Common Room." Ron blurted out suddenly.

Bugger, Harry surmised with a sinking heart.

"And Dean was properly hacked off me with. Which you know if I'd known I wouldn't have…" Ron flapped his hands expressively and lifted his gaze to the ceiling. His cheeks were almost as red as his hair.

"He didn't hit you or anything?" Harry asked, concerned.

"Nope, just glared at me the whole time as she told me." Ron sighed heavily again. "I couldn't stay in the Common Room. Neville's on a date with Hannah and Hermione's out bug searching with Luna again. Is it OK if I have dinner here?"

"OK with me." Harry said. He quickly called Dobby and asked him to check with Sirius and if Sirius was fine with Ron staying to send word to Minerva.

"Thanks, mate." Ron said, relief written across every freckle. He fidgeted for a long moment. "I think I'm going to go home for Yule."

Harry's eyebrows shot up and his eyes widened in shock. "Why?"

Ron looked away from him. "Well, I just think…my Dad got hurt and there's Percy, I probably should apologise in person. Ginny's not talking to me because of the whole thing with Michael and…" he sighed, "it's not like I have anyone to go to the Ball with so…" he shrugged as though unconcerned but Harry knew it was the complete opposite.

"Ron, there are plenty of people without dates." Harry assumed there were plenty of people without dates anyway.

"Nobody from our year in Gryffindor or in the other Houses. Parvati's going with Blaise," Ron ticked off one finger, "Sally is going with Ernie, Lisa is going with some sixth year bloke and even Draco's nabbed that Selwyn girl despite his 'woe is me I'm no longer the only child' misery…there's no-one left to go with me."

"There's bound to be someone." Harry pointed out, although he wasn't entirely certain Ron's information wasn't right.

Ron crossed his arms over his chest, pulling his uniform robes askew. "The only one I know is Eloise Midgen and I am not going with her."

And she probably wouldn't want to go with Ron if she knew she was a last resort, thought Harry. Or maybe she would in preference to going alone. He really had no clue where girls were concerned.

Dobby popped in and announced dinner. Harry dragged Ron to wash his hands before they made their way downstairs and they sat down at the table where Sirius was waiting.
"You alright there, Ron?" Sirius asked as the food – steak pie and chips with a side of mixed vegetables – appeared.

"I'm just a disaster with girls." Ron half mumbled before pushing an overly ambitious forkful of food into his mouth.

Sirius nodded sagely. "Most men are."

Ron chewed quickly and swallowed, looking a tad more relieved. "Yeah?"

"Absolutely." Sirius said scooping some pie crust. "Look at Remus. He approached a girl the other week and it turned out she preferred the fairer sex herself."


"So, not an unusual thing for a man to make a fool of himself over a woman." Sirius continued. "James tripped over himself with Lily a million times before she actually consented to give him the time of day."

"Right." Ron's shoulders straightened a bit and Harry shot Sirius a grateful smile for cheering up his best friend.

"So has this one had a chance to tell you about his first flight as a raven?" Sirius asked, winking at Harry.

Harry brightened and immediately began to tell a rapt Ron about his animagus lesson. He grimaced as he finished explaining and rolled his shoulders experimentally.

"I am going to have to practice because it is a bit painful." Harry said cheerfully. "You'll have to do the same when you master your form."

Ron gestured with his loaded fork. "Rather you than me with the whole flying thing, mate." He said. "'Sides, I don't think I have to worry about all that stuff for a while. I can only transform a toe of my dog form."

It had surprised everyone that Ron had found his form before Hermione who still struggled to maintain the meditation long enough to make sense of any vision of her potential forms. Ron had simply fallen into a meditative snooze one lesson and woken up with the surety that he was a dog. He had been slightly grumpy about not being a lion but he liked the idea of how useful a form being a dog was and had embraced his lessons.

"I only had a paw for about two months." Sirius commiserated. "Eventually, I managed to get the whole leg and then that was it. James could do everything separately but couldn't put it together for a while and one day; boom! It all came together. Bloody scared the life out of the rest of us."

Ron nodded. "I'll keep working at it." His gaze held a wealth of promise; a loyalty that Harry knew resonated in the symbolism of his chosen form.

The plates were scraped clean just as the door chimed.

Sirius motioned for them to carry on with dessert as he went to answer the door. Luna and Hermione were ushered inside and took seats at the dining table with Sirius's invitation, Hermione sliding into the empty seat beside Harry, Luna taking the one next to Ron.

Harry blinked at the bizarre butterfly clip that was attached to Luna's hair and focused on his dessert.
"Dobby," Sirius said dryly, "I'm going to take my dessert in my study. You kids enjoy yourselves." He wandered off leaving Harry alone with his friends.

Harry felt a pang of guilt that they'd somehow forced him from the room before his attention was snagged by Ron.

"I guess you heard what happened." Ron said sheepishly, poking at the peach and plum cobbler he'd drowned in custard.

Hermione nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Ron. If I'd been there, I would have warned you. Lavender told me this morning but I haven't had a chance to tell you."

"It's alright." Ron sighed heavily. "I made a prat of myself and Dean's not happy with me."

"Dean said to say he figured nobody had told you when you looked so mortified and he's, and I quote 'cool with the whole thing.'" Hermione shook her head at Dobby's offer of cobbler.

"Lavender's pretty gutted, I think. She really wanted to go with you but there's only a week to go and well...Dean asked her since Parvati who he wanted to go with agreed to go with Blaise."

Harry shook his head. When had Hogwarts turned into such a soap opera, he mused grumpily. It was like that awful Australian soap his Aunt Petunia had watched where the kids kept swapping girlfriends and boyfriends and getting married and falling pregnant – not necessarily in that order. It was all the fault of the Ball, he determined.

Ron nodded at Hermione, downcast.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a mutual helpless 'what do we do now?' look.

Suddenly, Ron's head shot up and his eyes went to Luna, wide with hope and realisation. "Luna, you're a girl!"

Luna smiled serenely at Ron. "Yes, Ronald. I will go to the Ball with you."

Ron's smile lit up the room. "Really?"

Hermione frowned heavily at him. "Ron, that's a terrible way to ask someone if they want to go to a Ball with you. It makes it sound like you only asked Luna because Luna's a girl."

Ron squirmed under her disapproving gaze but Harry sympathised with Ron. It wasn't easy asking someone to a Ball.

Luna shrugged. "I don't mind, Hermione. I'd like to go to the Ball and it will be nice to go with a friend even if I'm only a last minute choice."

Ron shot her a pleased look. "Thank you, Luna." He smiled at her warmly. "And even though the way I asked was pants, I promise you won't regret it."

Luna smiled sweetly at him.

Ron smiled goofily back at her.

Uh-oh, thought Harry and cast about desperately for a change in subject. "Bug! You guys were out bug searching! Did you find the bug?"

Luna's silver eyes sparkled as though she'd guessed why he'd asked and was very amused. "Not yet but we think that the bug and the press people may be related."
"The one time I've seen the bug was the evening the press corp were visiting Hogwarts for the Yule Ball press conference thing you and the other Champions did." Hermione said, a gleam in her eyes.

Harry winced. That had been excruciating.

"When I went over the times Luna's seen the bug, she's also only noticed it on days the press is around." Hermione tapped her fingers against the table top restlessly. "There has to be a correlation."

"It is a surprising relationship." Luna said breezily. "We're going to be prepared for the next time the press is around."

"That'll be the Yule Ball." Harry pointed out because he really didn't want Hermione distracted by a hunt for a bug when they were at the Ball.

Hermione frowned, understanding without him saying anything. "Well, we can keep an eye out while we have fun, and maybe plan a proper trap for the time after that."

Luna nodded, her blonde hair swinging and her butterfly clip flapped wildly on the side of her head. "It's so exciting discovering a new species!"

And as talk turned to the bug, Harry let out a small sigh of relief that Ron's Ball woes were over. He slipped his hand into Hermione's and for the first time began looking forward to it.

"Merlin!" Hermione said suddenly. "I'd better get back to the dorm! I promised Neville I'd review his Herbology project report." She kissed Harry's cheek as she eased out of her seat and Harry felt the usual surge of fluttering delight that accompanied their kissing.

"Hmm." Luna said, getting up. "I should go and finish my charms essay…"

"And I'd best get back and do my apologies." Ron said grimly. He shook himself and smiled shyly at Luna. "Shall I walk you back to Ravenclaw?"

"Thank you, Ronald." Luna said.

As the girls made their way to the door, Ron hung back with Harry.

"Thanks, mate." Ron said sincerely.

"Any time." Harry said back.

Ron nodded, cast a look to check on whether the girls were far enough away and leaned in with an anxious face. "Merlin, Harry! Dancing! What do I do about dancing?!" He hissed.

And so much for the end of Ron's Ball woes, Harry thought amused, dragging a hand through his dark hair even as he made comforting noises about practice to his best friend before shooing him out of the door.

o-O-o

24th December 1994

It was a miserable day.

Sirius glared out of the window of his study. Rain fell relentlessly out of the sky washing everything grey. The sky was opaque; filled with cloud and blocking out the weak Winter sun. He didn't need to set foot out of the door to know there was a freezing wind since all the trees in view were bent under
its force; the few students traversing the outside huddling into their clothes and each other for warmth and protection.

School had officially ended the day before with the first and second years, along with those students in the upper years who didn't have a date for the Yule Ball or who didn't want to attend, shipped home to their parents and guardians. There'd been an increased Auror presence at Hogsmeade and King's Cross – Amelia wasn't taking any chances. But everything had gone to plan; the home-bound students were safely home and Hogwarts was half-empty. The rattling and echoing hallways and corridors suited the eeriness of the day.

He shook away his mood in a move that was reminiscent of Padfoot shaking off water. He strolled back into the living area and found Remus reading the paper on the sofa. Moony looked well-rested. The full moon had passed without incident, Clara had begun work as Remus's assistant, and Remus had appointed Patrick as his beta back at the farm. Sirius felt a spark of satisfaction that Remus looked – if not happy – contented.

The fire was crackling merrily away; four stockings hung above it named 'Pronglet,' 'Padfoot,' 'Moony,' 'Minnie' and 'Dobby.' The rest of the room was similarly decked out for Christmas; swathes of gold and red tinsel with a real tree tucked into the corner, full of the traditional Potter Christmas ornaments that had been rescued from the cottage at Godric's Hollow.

They'd only done the tree the night before at the family dinner and it had been a wonderful evening even with the Malfoys present; eggnog and good food, all of them decorating the tree. There was the lingering scent of a cranberry candle; chestnuts and mulled wine. Sirius had told stories about the ornaments he remembered, Narcissa had supplied a couple of others when she noticed a few that must have come from the Black side of the family, and Harry had listened to everything with wide-eyed eagerness at learning more of his history, his heritage.

It was Harry's heritage and history that was the plan for the day; a visit to the Potter vaults and Godric's Hollow, the cemetery…

Sirius swallowed hard and breathed deeply, searching for the calm and strength he knew he would need to get through the day and be there for Harry, for Pronglet, for his son.

"We don't have to do this today." Remus commented, not raising his eyes from his newspaper.

"Harry asked to do this today." Sirius retorted, folding his arms over his heavy cable-knit black jumper.

"And Harry would understand if you want to delay." Remus did look up as he argued. "If you're not ready…"

"I'm ready." Sirius stated firmly.

Remus stared at him and Sirius caved under the concerned warmth of Remus's gaze.

"Just…I have been back to the cottage but not inside and I'm a little worried about freaking out and scaring Harry." Sirius confessed, talking quickly because he didn't think he would be able to say it otherwise.

"I think you'll be far too concerned about Harry and being there for him for any freaking out, Sirius." Remus said quietly. His head lifted as he heard movement above them. "That'll be him now." He stood up and brushed down his clothing; a black v-neck jumper over a plain grey shirt, with black corduroy trousers.
Sirius grimaced at the expanse of black but he'd gone for the same; black jumper teamed with black denim jeans.

And Harry was decked out the same when he came down the stairs; black jeans but a dark green jumper. His hair was its usual mess and the green eyes behind his gold frames were dark with trepidation.

"Ready?" asked Sirius, dredging up a smile from somewhere.

Harry nodded jerkily.

"If you want to change your mind about doing this today, you can." Sirius reassured him. "Neither Remus nor I will mind."

Harry sighed and pushed his hands into his jeans' pockets, rocking back slightly. "I need another wand." He said stubbornly. "And we're all agreed that since it's illegal to buy another wand – which I don't really get why it's illegal to buy another wand just for the record – that my ancestors' wands are likely to be the best match for me."

Sirius sighed. "I would argue that I don't make the laws but I kind of do but I can argue that I didn't make that particular law and…"

"It's to do with the limited supplies of wand cores." Remus explained, breaking into Sirius's ramble. "Fifty years ago, the Wizengamot and most other countries determined an embargo on buying more than one wand. Replacement wands in the event of loss or breakage were fine but not buying two wands at the same time. It's not actually illegal to carry two wands just to buy two wands…and I don't know why I'm telling you this." He trailed off at the bemused glazed expressions on Sirius's and Harry's faces.

Harry patted his arm. "I guess I understand why it's illegal now?" He frowned at Remus. "Are you sure you're OK with leaving Sian alone for the day?"

"Tonks is with her." Remus said dismissively. "I actually think Tonks has moved in." He admitted, a confused look darting over his features for a long moment.

"It's all part of her dastardly plan to get you into bed now Clara's turned out to like women more than you." Sirius commented.

Remus's hands clapped over Harry's ears. "No talking about me and Tonks in front of Harry, please!"

Harry rolled his eyes at Sirius, mischief and amusement all over his face as he batted Remus away from his ears. "Hermione thinks she's just protecting her territory and making sure Sian doesn't make a move on you since Tonks wants you herself."

Remus went bright red. "Hermione…" he repeated faintly. He turned around and glared at Sirius. "Who else have you told?"

"Nobody." Sirius said hurriedly.

His friend searched Sirius's innocent expression and started to turn away.

"Just Andy." Sirius said brightly, watching with amusement as Remus went stiff as a board. "And she's probably told Ted. Maybe, possibly, most definitely I also told Simeon when I was chatting to him the other night but that's everybody I swear."
Harry chuckled and tried to turn his chuckle into a cough when Remus glared at him.

"There will be retribution." Remus stated calmly, straightening his shoulders. "And it will be mine."

Sirius felt a tiny frisson of alarm shiver through him because Moony was never to be underestimated. "Right!" He clapped his hands. "Coats!"

He grimaced once they had pulled on outerwear because they were all in black and it very much looked like they were off to a funeral. He sighed and led the way out of Hogwarts so they could apparate directly in front of Gringotts. Sirius side-alonged with Harry; he’d taught Harry how to apparate but only over short distances.

Remus split with them once they entered Gringotts as he had business with Kipbold. Sirius and Harry took the cart down to the Potter vault, the goblin assigned to guide them there actually giving them a smooth ride. It backed up the view from Dirk and Cornelius that the goblins were pleased with the steps that the Wizengamot had taken to review the laws around magical creatures and races.

Harry stepped out and placed his hand on the Potter vault door. It swung open and Sirius followed Harry inside. The last time they’d visited after Harry's inheritance ceremony there had been no time to properly explore. Harry had dived for James's old school trunk and that had been about it.

As Harry wandered further inside, Sirius's gaze wandered around the cavernous vault; money was set to the right in large heaps; gold galleons piled on top of one another as far as the eye could see; knuts buried beneath so it was gold as far as the eye could see.

The left was storage space; furniture and trunks and old sleeping portraits, mostly landscape, that had wound up in the vault instead of a Potter property. Most of it was stacked haphazardly with no organisation except for the section at the front that Remus had overseen where the trunks from Godric's Hollow were placed in order of rooms and items.

Harry had bypassed them, wandering through until he stood in front of a shelving unit filled with odd ornaments and items. Sirius's eyes skated over the trunks from the cottage once last time and went to join Harry. He was almost beside him when Harry reached out and plucked a box from the shelf in front of him.

It wasn't an ornate box; just a simple wooden lockbox. But it had Sirius's heart pounding when Harry pulled it closer to examine it.

"Harry, what are you doing with that?" Sirius hated the sharpness of his tone and wasn't surprised when Harry's gaze snapped to him with guilty innocence.

"I, uh…it just…called to me?" Harry raised the box to show it to Sirius. "What is it?"

"Well, the box is just a box but inside the box…” Sirius resisted the urge to tap it, "is the Resurrection stone."

"The other Hallow?" Harry quickly stuffed the box back on the shelf and pushed his glasses up his nose. "It is creepy that it called to me like the wand? My cloak doesn't do that."

It was a good point.

"I'm prepared to go with creepy." Sirius admitted. "There's nothing in the story that said the Hallows could call to the Peverell they'd been given to but then we know the story is really just that: a story. We really don't know enough about their true properties beyond the obvious.” He needed to have Richard or Augusta go back out to Paris and push Fevrier. He didn't want to do it himself because
that would mean leaving Harry alone.

"Maybe because the cloak is the Hallow of your actual ancestor and you embraced it from the start it doesn't call to you?" Sirius theorised out loud. "It doesn't need to call to you. You're resisting the stone and the wand, and even if it was the family magic that created them, they're once removed in familial terms."

Harry bit his lip. "I guess."

Sirius shrugged and smiled. "Remus will have another theory if you don't like that one. Now," he said redirecting the conversation, "we are supposed to be looking at wands." He pointed towards a small trunk labelled 'Wands' that they'd seen on their last visit with unerring accuracy.

They opened the trunk together and looked at the arrangement of wands with surprise. The trunk was a specialist model, Sirius realised. Small trays neatly labelled with each generation, and as Harry pulled out the uppermost tray, neat rows of leather loops held each wand separately with a label underneath denoting whose wand it was.

Harry reverentially ran his fingers lightly over his father's and mother's. Remus must have arranged for them to have been removed from the Godric's Hollow trunks and stored correctly.

Sirius felt a hard lump in his throat form; a weird mix of pain that Harry had never had the opportunity to know such wonderful people, that they had never had the opportunity to know him, and jealousy that as much as he was Harry's father, in one important respect he wasn't.

He pushed the thoughts away angrily – he was there as moral support for Harry – and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "There are two possible ways to do this; one, you work your way up your family tree testing each one to see if it works for you, and start with theirs…"

"Or?" prompted Harry, gruffly.

"Or see which ones resonate with you by passing your hand over the tray and only test the ones that give you tingles." Sirius completed.

Harry looked at him fully with askance. "Tingles?"

"It's a technical term." Sirius defended his description briskly. "Either way while Gringotts do allow a wizard to use their magic within their own vault, they do get antsy if they detect a lot of magic since they do have the whole no wizard magic rule within the bank itself. So…"

He saw Harry draw in a long breath and breathe out again as he considered his options; weighed the prospect of using his parents' wands against the need to find the wand that worked for him quickly.

"Option two then?" Harry murmured.

Sirius acknowledged his choice with a tilt of his head.

Harry spread out his hand and moved it slowly across the tray. He sighed and shook his head.

"No tingles?" teased Sirius gently, hoping to alleviate the disappointment he saw glistening in Harry's eyes.

Harry smiled at him lightning fast and moved onto the next tray.

And the next.
And the next.

They were on the last tray, and Sirius was getting very worried they were going to have to bribe Ollivander into making them a second wand and giving it to Harry in some way to get around the illegality of it, when Harry's hand paused over a wand.

Sirius glanced at the name. Ignotus Peverell.

Merlin. Well, not Merlin but it was close enough.

"That one?" Sirius asked, proud that his voice came out calmly enough.

Harry slid it out of the loop and closed his eyes briefly as the wand fitted into his hand. Holly, Sirius realised, recognising the wood. He watched amazed as Harry swished the wand and lifted the trunk, levitating it without any problems. He lowered it and straightened his shoulders.

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry said clearly.

Prongs clattered out of the wand in a stream of silver light. He snorted as he looked around for the threat and saw none. He trotted over to Harry and nudged his shoulder.

"I know," Harry said, "I've been calling you when there's nothing around but I have to practice."

Prongs seemed to agree with that, carefully nuzzling into Harry's chest and accepting the petting of his creator with apparent relish.

Sirius ached to touch the stag but he held back. It wasn't really James, he reminded himself, any more than his patronus was his alter ego, Padfoot. Sirius's eyes slid to the innocuous box that Harry had picked up before and shook away the temptation. The box had been locked by Albus at Bertie's request – and Sirius had since realised Albus had locked it using the Elder wand. He doubted that any wizard excepting Harry had the power to unlock it.

Harry patted the stag's nose gently one last time and dismissed it. It disappeared in a whirl of light. He examined the wand with a frown. "It's colder than my wand."

"Colder?" questioned Sirius.

"When I use magic with my wand, it's warm." Harry shrugged. "I wonder what the core of this wand is?"

"We could take it to Ollivander." Sirius suggested. "He'd be able to tell us, I would think."

Harry shuddered minutely. "But not today?"

"But not today." Sirius agreed. He examined Harry's pale face with concern. "Are you sure you want to visit Godric's Hollow today? We can go another time."

"I'm sure. It just feels like something I have to do." Harry said softly. "I mean, I don't…I've never been to their graves and I want to know where we lived and…everything really."

Sirius nodded in understanding. So much had been kept from Harry before he'd taken guardianship that he could understand Harry's need for the knowledge; to see for himself where he had lived with his parents, where they were buried. But Sirius also believed that Bill had been right to warn them against returning and facing the scars writ large in the shape of a cottage that had once been a home; in headstones that took the place of living breathing loved ones.
Harry slid the tray door shut and closed the trunk before sliding his second wand into the deep inner pocket of his coat. He glanced himself towards the Resurrection stone box before turning away again and making for the door of the vault. Sirius fell into step beside him.

Remus was waiting for them as soon as they got out of the carts.

"I've arranged for us to portkey from a Gringotts transportation room." Remus explained, holding up a wooden key. "Word got round that we were here and...well, something of a crowd's gathered at the front of the bank. Gringotts won't let them in as they don't have business with the bank but...I don't think we want to fight our way through and try to apperate."

"Good idea." Sirius said, placing an arm around Harry's shoulders protectively. "Lead the way."

Even as they crossed the main floor of the bank, the babbling chatter fell to a hushed rush of whispers as wizards and witches turned to peer and stare at them, specifically Harry. Sirius wanted to glare back at them but he knew most of the attention wasn't malicious but simple curiosity since Harry had been hidden away at Hogwarts for a few months.

"Good luck with the tournament, son!" shouted one old wizard, brandishing his cane. "You go and win it!"

"Yeah!" Another witch called out. "You win it, Harry!"

A smattering of applause started, growing in strength until most were clapping, whistles and cheers echoing through the large hall. Sirius noted the few holdouts – an older witch with a face like a dried-up old prune pretending nothing was happening, a glowering rotund man with a purple face, and a couple of youngsters who sneered at the display as obviously uncool.

Harry slowed their progress to a halt as he stopped to acknowledge the outpouring of support with a wave and a shy grin. "Thank you!" He said loudly. "I need all the luck and good wishes I can get!"

There was a delighted outbreak of laughter at Harry's words. Sirius smiled sharply at the crowd, tightened his grip on Harry and nudged him along. They were too exposed. Thankfully, Remus must have felt the same because he slipped into position between Harry and the crowd, providing a shield on the other side of him.

The transportation room was a blessed sight. Sirius was pleased when the goblin guard shut the door behind them and they were safely inside.

Remus held out the key and they all gripped it. Sirius kept an arm around Harry who still had problems keeping his feet during a portkey. Remus muttered the trigger word and Sirius felt the pull behind his navel. He bent his legs and landed heavily, only just managing to keep Harry upright; Remus staggered and only just managed to keep his balance.

"Well," Remus said brushing down his black woollen jacket, "that wasn't one of my better landings."

"Mine either." Sirius admitted.

Harry shrugged. "I never have a good landing but I didn't fall on my face this time."

Sirius grinned at him. "It's an improvement."

Harry was about to respond but his gaze was snagged by a tree swaying to his right. It drew his attention to the cottage – to the ruin of the cottage. "Is this..."
"Yes." Sirius managed to get the word out. He breathed in deeply and shifted to look fully at the house the way he'd done the night he'd escaped Hogwarts. He moved to stand behind Harry who was staring at the cottage, drinking it in. He placed his hands lightly on Harry's shoulders. "It's a bit rundown now but you should have seen in its prime."

"It was a wonderfully cozy and welcoming home." Remus supplied gently.

Sirius pointed at the front of the house. "Your Mum planted those window boxes. They were full of herbs and flowers she used in her household potions."

"The front garden was filled with honeysuckle and lavender." Remus added. "You can't tell now but in the Summer the scent of it filled the house."

"The knocker was a present from your Granddad when they moved in, well, really the whole house was a present but he got the griffin knocker especially because Lily loved the griffin knocker at Potter House." Sirius picked up the reminiscing as though he and Remus had practiced.

"Is that why we have the griffin knocker at home?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Sirius confirmed softly, "it is." And there was so many things they still had to tell him about Lily and James, Sirius mused; so many little things that were forgotten and only remembered in remembering.

Harry tensed under his hands. "Can we go inside?"

"Structurally, it's a mess." Remus warned. "You'll need to keep a tight rein on your magic or it may bring the whole house down. Do you think you can do that?"

There was a pause while Harry gave Remus's words serious consideration and Sirius was pleased with Harry's cautionary nod. Sirius also nodded at Remus who waved his wand at the ward stone.

Sirius took a deep breath, his hands cramped into fists as they began the slow walk up the path. It was important he kept control too; he knew that. But memories bombarded him with every step… Lily gardening and planting the border, James opening the upstairs window to shout something down to him, Harry on a blanket in the front garden during the Summer after he was born, Remus resting one day on the stoop tired from the full moon, and Peter…

No.

He wasn't thinking of the rat.

Not then.

Not ever.

Sirius dragged his mind back to the present and cast a look at Remus. Moony wasn't doing any better than him, Sirius determined, taking in the tensed jaw and grim expression. He moved his attention back to Harry; his son stood in front of the door; pain and heartache, hope and curiosity written blatantly across every inch of his being.

And it made all of Sirius's angst melt away like a snowflake caught in a beam of sunshine.

He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "We're right here with you, Pronglet."

And they would be. They would take every excruciating step with him.
The door swung open.

Harry stepped inside, his heart pounding so loudly he was surprised that Sirius and Remus couldn't hear it…or maybe they could.

He took two hesitant steps forward. The stairs were against the wall to his right, ascending upwards in a straight, steep line; wooden and bare, white paint peeling from the skirting boards and bannister. He placed a hand on the newel post and wondered if his father had ever placed a hand on it; his mother.

There was no hallway per se, just a few square foot of space which would have been used for a coat stand and a table. Harry pictured it so clearly that he wondered if it was a memory.

"Coat stand and table?" He asked quietly, gesturing to where they might have stood.

Sirius's grey eyes flashed with surprise. "Yes. Alice bought them a pine stand as a present when they moved in. It used to grab your coat from your back if you didn't hand it over straight away."

Remus cleared his throat. "You remember?"

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know," he said, "I just see it in my head and…"

"It might very well be a memory buried down in your subconscious." Sirius said. "Apart from a couple of months at Potter House, you lived here."

"Yes, babies do formulate and store memories as far as cognitive scientists can determine," Remus said, falling into his lecturing mode, "but they believe that the memories are encoded differently as babies are still developing speech, visual and auditory acuity and that's why we struggle to recall the memories as adults. Well, there are competing theories and…"

Harry stopped listening and moved into the main living area. The fireplace wall was whitewashed brick; the fire place itself empty, the grate blackened and dirty. There were a few sticks of wood in front on the hearth that might have been part of a basket of firewood once. It wasn't a large room; only space for a sofa and a chair, maybe a coffee table and a sideboard at the back. Again, Harry wondered how much of the picture in his head was his own imagining, and how much was an actual memory.

Sunlight streamed through the front windows and cast the pattern of the window frame on the carpeted floor. It was a monstrosity; purple and yellow flowers meandering in a curving circular pattern. It looked like something his Aunt Petunia might have liked.

He frowned at it heavily.

"Your Mum's choice." Sirius said, seeing the direction of his gaze. "She thought the flowers looked pretty."

Harry grimaced at the notion that his Mum had something in common with his Aunt – but then they had been sisters, raised together, and perhaps that might account for it.

"James hated it. He wanted this geometric pattern that was just as horrendous in truth." Remus commented dryly. "But he never could refuse your Mum anything."
"It was the 'eighties." Sirius demurred.

Harry's gaze caught on the dark streaks across the wall; spell damage from the battle his father had fought against Voldemort; fighting to save his family, to save his wife and child, to save Harry. His breath caught at the back of his throat and he had to hold onto his magic hard as it threatened to surge up in horrified realisation.

Sirius followed his gaze and made a choked sound. His eyes darted to the front of the room by the staircase and Harry knew; he knew that was where his Dad had fallen. He slid his hand into Sirius's.

Sirius gazed at him through a film of tears but managed a small smile. He pointed at the door to the back with his free hand. "Shall we go through to the dining room?"

"Which is a grand title for what is a little cubby hole of a room." Remus said as they all made for the door.

Harry drew in a shaky breath as he entered. It was a tiny space, barely the size of his old bedroom back at Privet Drive. It would fit a dining table and some chairs but nothing more.

"They had this really large table that they crammed in here because Lily wanted to be able to entertain." Sirius remembered fondly, a chuckle escaping and driving back the tears Harry suspected had been threatening.

"They had us all round for dinner the first week, the Marauders, Frank and Alice, a couple of other friends of your Mum's, and nobody could move." Remus shook his head. "We all ended up laughing even your Mum and…I don't think it was ever used after that."

Sirius nudged Harry through the door to the kitchen. "This was really the heart of the home."

The kitchen was a good size in comparison to the cottage sized living and dining areas. It held an array of pine cupboards to the right, around an old Aga, and an empty space to the left where Harry guessed a table and chairs would have been placed.

"They had James's old sofa from the flat in London Street along this wall." Remus wandered over and splayed out his arms. "Just here. Merlin, it looked horrible."

"It was really comfy that sofa," grumbled Sirius, "all soft and squishy and…"

"Orange." Remus finished.

Harry felt his mood lighten with the banter.

"Your Mum hated it." Remus informed him in a conspiratorial tone.

"James and I had to sneak the damn thing in when she was out." Sirius reminisced. "Her face when she came back and found us both asleep on it…"

"Why'd she keep it?" Harry had gotten the sense that his Mum had been in charge of the decorating from what had been said before.

"Because she loved James as much as she hated the sofa." Sirius said simply. "And he had told me, well…" he went slightly red, "he told me that there was a real possibility that while they'd been waiting for me one time at the flat, you'd been, uh, conceived…"

Harry's hands flew to his ears. "Too much information!" He barked.
"I agree with Harry." Remus said, stepping back hurriedly as though the sofa was still in the room with them.

Sirius shrugged. "Well, let's just say I was much less interested in keeping it in the flat when he told me."

"And yet you fell asleep on it." Remus pointed out, poking Sirius with a long finger.

"It was bloody hard work moving the thing, Moony." Sirius rubbed his arm and pouted.

Harry wandered over to the kitchen window above the sink. His Mum had probably stood in the same spot, he mused with delighted awe. She'd probably washed dishes and looked out at the…at the very overgrown and untidy garden?

He frowned. It was a mess but he guessed it had been different back then. "Can we go upstairs?" He asked without turning around. In the window he saw Remus and Sirius exchange a look.

"The damage is worse upstairs." Remus said almost hesitantly. "Are you sure you want to look?"

Harry nodded and they filed back through the house to the stairs. The landing was small, a maroon and gold carpet covering it and disappearing into every room. It was marginally better than the carpet in the living room, Harry decided.

"This was my room." Sirius tapped open the first door in front of them.

"The guest room." Remus corrected.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at him.

"Right, your room." Remus conceded with a sigh.

"I was injured!" Sirius said brightly. "I needed help walking and stuff." He motioned at Harry. "There was a single bed, a bedside table and an old wardrobe. Nothing else would fit. But it was cosy."

"How long did you live here?" asked Harry, curious at the wistful nostalgia in Sirius's voice, the faraway memories that glimmered in his eyes.

"Well, I was released from the hospital beginning of July, stayed put after your Granddad died and your folks moved to Potter House with you in the Winter, and didn't return to London Street until your parents moved back in here to hide." Sirius listed out matter-of-factly. "It was awkward sometimes with all of us here, I won't deny that. I mean your Mum and Dad loved me and I loved them, but they were a couple and things…well, let's just say it wasn't fun when they'd had an argument especially about something, and I had to have breakfast with them. But we muddled along and I think they were grateful for an extra pair of hands when you were born."

Harry slipped out of the room and into the next which turned out to be a tiny old style bathroom with a clawed-foot bathtub, a square sink and a water-heater in a cupboard. An old-fashioned loo with a cistern up high and a dangling metal chain to use to flush the toilet was in the next small room beside it.

He meandered into the next room which was obviously his parents' bedroom; it was large with a fireplace and he could see the alcoves had been turned into built-in wardrobes. He ambled over to the window and looked down at the front garden.
"I wasn't allowed in here." Sirius said from the doorway. "Your Mum's rule. Neither were you for that matter. She was quite strict that bedrooms were private spaces and you had your own room and so you wouldn't be in theirs."

Another similarity that sent a shudder through Harry since his Aunt Petunia had been the same about hers and Vernon's room – even with Dudley. Maybe it was something Harry's maternal grandparents had instituted, Harry thought wonderingly.

"My room?" Harry questioned.

Sirius gestured for him to follow. Remus hung back near to the staircase and Harry understood when he stepped inside the final room.

It was about the same size as the room Sirius had used and there wasn't a great deal of space but it would have been large as a nursery with only a rocking chair, a cot and a dresser for clothes. The damage was evident; the cracks in the inner wall and one outer wall missing completely.

His gaze caught on the mural.

He headed over to it and a flash of how it would look through the bars of a cot zipped through his head so fast that he almost staggered. And another image on the heels of the first lodged in his mind's eye; his mother in front of his cot, her back to him as she defended him against the shadowy figure in the doorway…

"Not Harry! Please...have mercy!"

He stopped abruptly, breathing heavily and feeling his magic surge to simmer at the surface.

"Harry." Sirius murmured.

And Harry simply turned and buried his head in Sirius's shoulder as though he could hide there from his memories. Harry's eyes were dry as he sobbed, trying to catch his breath, to breathe past the pain and the horror that they were in the room where his Mum had died saving him...where he had destroyed Voldemort's body in return…

Sirius hugged Harry to him, his arms strong and tight around Harry's back. "It's alright, Pronglet." He said softly. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Harry didn't protest.

They stumbled down the stairs with Sirius's arm locked around him and a moment later, they were out of the house and standing outside of the front garden, breathing in gulps of fresh air as the skies opened up and the rain started to pitter-patter down.

Remus erected an impermeable charm over them, keeping them dry. He looked up at the grey sky doubtfully. "Do you still want to do the cemet…"

"Yes." Harry cut him off rudely and flushed. "Sorry...just...I need to do this. Please."

"Then we'll do it." Sirius agreed soothingly.

The walk to the cemetery was short, down the lane and back through the village square. Sirius cast a notice-them-not charm to keep anyone from looking too closely at them but in truth Harry didn't see anyone on their walk through the sleepy streets.
The graveyard was fenced in with some kind of prickly hedge with an old kissing gate allowing entry from the street rather than the side entrance from the church driveway.

Harry and Sirius followed Remus through the meandering pathways of tombstones. Harry's gaze took in the names on some of the tombstones with interest. There was an Abbott, a Corner and a Goyle. He almost stumbled at the sight of a Dumbledore.

So many names he recognised, he mused. If he had lived in the village, would he have made friends with other kids? Had siblings? Not for the first time, the weight of his loss, the life he could have had, pressed down on him. He kept walking though, his focus on getting to see his parents' grave for the first time.

"Here." Remus said. He brushed some dead leaves from the top of the tombstone.

Harry's heart seized in his chest as he read his parents' dates of birth. He hadn't known his Mum was older than his Dad – only by a couple of months but…her birthday was January.

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death."

He read the inscription with a growing scowl. "Who the hell came up with that?" He pointed at the words.

"The Headmaster." Remus answered grimly. "He arranged everything."

"It sounds so Death Eater-ish." Harry complained, pushing his glasses up his nose. It wasn't what he wanted on his parents' tombstone that was for certain.

"Bible." Remus replied. "Corinthians, I think."

Like Harry would know what that meant.

And suddenly, he realised Sirius had been silent since they'd stopped.

Harry's eyes immediately went to check on Padfoot. His heart almost broke at the pain on Sirius's face; his pale complexion seemed pure white, skin stretched taut over his high cheekbones, and his eyes had filled with tears he was holding back with sheer force of will.

Guilt surged up and washed over Harry like a tidal wave. He'd never thought about how his trip to the grave might affect Sirius. Or Remus, Harry mused, as he checked on the other man and noted that Remus looked particularly grim too.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Harry berated himself internally, mentally kicking himself for good measure. How had he forgotten that the two men had lost people they loved too? Or not forgotten but just not thought about it. While a part of him wanted to argue that he had lost the most (his parents, his life with his parents), he knew Sirius and Remus had arguably lost more since they had known his parents for longer, loved them for longer.

And maybe it wasn't a competition.

They'd all lost his parents.

But at least they'd found each other.

Harry slipped his hand into Padfoot's. "You OK, Padfoot?" He warmed under the approving glance Remus sent his way.
"Just…" sniffed Sirius, brushing away a stray tear, "just makes it real. I didn't…I mean I knew…I saw…" his voice cracked, "but…I didn't get the chance to say goodbye and…"

Harry hugged him so hard he thought his arms might break but then Sirius was hugging him back and it took a moment for Harry to realise that his own face was wet and he was crying. Sirius lifted an arm and murmured 'Moony' and Remus was there too; holding onto them just as they were holding onto each other.

He had no idea how long they clung to one another.

The sky was clearing by the time they eased away; Remus separating from them completely to shove his hands deep in the pockets of his coat and wander away to collect himself while Sirius and Harry simply shifted positions.

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry. "It's a bloody awful quote."

And Harry was irrationally pleased and relieved that Sirius agreed with him about it.

Harry kept a hand tight on Sirius's coat. "We should change it."

Sirius reached out and touched the tombstone, the etched writing transforming under the insistence of his magic.

"Where there is love there is life."

Harry looked at him, startled.

"No good?" questioned Sirius, fidgeting a little.

"No, it's great but…"

"It's a quote from a muggle leader called Gandhi." Sirius explained a little self-consciously. "Your Mum made me read his biography once." He flushed a little. "The quote stuck with me."

"It's perfect." Harry declared.

"I think it's perfect too." Remus said, surprising them as he walked back up to them. "I remember that book. She made us all read it when we were thinking about joining...well, the fight against Voldemort."

Harry nodded. He bit his lip. "We should have brought flowers or something."

Remus drew out his wand and conjured a bouquet of gold and red chrysanthemums. He handed it to Harry solemnly and Harry carefully placed it on the ground, tucked up against the white stone.

Sirius breathed out in an audible rush. "I wish..." he said as he gathered Harry back to his side.

And Harry didn't need to know what he wished or if it was the same thing as Harry. He was pleased he'd seen where they had lived and where they were buried. But his life wasn't with them and as much as he regretted that, he loved Padfoot too much to wish for anything different anymore. He put his own arm around Sirius's waist and squeezed.

"Let's go home."

o-O-o
My darling Severus,

I can't believe it's been so long since we last talked like this. Our sojourn in Hogsmeade was wonderful though and it was good to finally see you in person.

My Father was dismayed about the potion you're working on being ready in May rather than June. Are you sure you can't delay it just a teeny tiny month? He wants your help on another potion but he won't need that until June either.

I believe I may need you Christmas Day – or should I say during the Yule Ball you will be attending no doubt? I have a surprise for a friend of ours and I may need you to help bring him to where I'll be waiting. You'll understand better when you see my present to you tomorrow!

All my love,

B."

Severus frowned at a twinkly-eyed Albus as the Headmaster reread the damned the letter out loud.

The rest of the hastily gathered War Council were blatant displaying their amusement with the exception of Moody and Black. Thankfully, Cornelius was absent, tied up with Ministerial duties.

"Well, this is a wonderful end to supremely fuck awful day." Black muttered.

His words managed to drain the amusement out of the others.

Black did look drained, Severus realised, wondering what the other wizard had been doing all day.

"How was the visit to Godric's Hollow?" asked Bertie almost gently and Severus felt the shock of the question charge through him like electricity. Black had gone back there? No wonder he looked like he'd been crucio'ed. He'd probably have preferred to have been crucio'ed.

"Upsetting for all involved." Black replied tersely. "That's why Remus stayed back with Harry tonight."

Amelia poured him a cup of tea, sweetened it, and pushed it into his hands. "Drink your tea, Sirius." She said sympathetically.

Black drank his tea.

"Well, the letter does reveal a couple of things other than young Bartemius's obsession with Sirius." Albus said, placing it down on the desk. "Firstly, that Tom is worried about you finding an antidote. He fears being found or something that the elf or Miss Summers might tell us."

Moody grunted in agreement.

"The other potion he mentions could well be the ritual potion." Bertie said. "He may have decided not to leave it in the hands of someone like Pettigrew."

"If I assist him, I may be able to sabotage the potion." Severus murmured.

"I would rather we didn't help Tom regain his body." Albus replied evenly. "But sabotaging the potion may do more harm than good. Necromancy is difficult and draws on some quite dark arts, my boy."

"I agree." Bertie said. "Sabotaging the potion is not the way to go. Hopefully we'll stop him before
he gets a chance to use it but the potion itself is better created well and to specification rather than anything else. All of the research Bill and Caro have done suggests that sabotaging it will simply create a monster so…"

"Rather the Devil we know than the one we don't." Amelia gave a firm nod. "Agreed."

Severus inclined his head. The thought that they might create something worse than the Dark Lord was terrifying.

"And the last thing the letter confirms is that Barty has something in mind for tomorrow night and something to do with me." Sirius sighed heavily.

"Clearly he's expecting me to deliver you to him in some way." Severus mused out loud.

Sirius sighed again. "How? He knows we're not exactly friends and it's not as though I would let Harry out of my sight after what happened at the World Cup."

"And if someone were to suggest Greyback had Lupin at his mercy?" Severus rejoined. "Or perhaps he'll even take one of the students under the protection of the House of Potter or Black, and tempt you away from Potter that way."

He knew his words had hit home when Black dropped his glare first.

"We do have an opportunity here to take down Junior." Moody pointed out with ruthless efficiency. "He thinks he's baiting a trap for Black but we could turn the tables on him and bait a trap for him."

"Not without revealing Severus's true loyalties." Albus said sharply.

Severus shrugged. "I might be able to argue with the Dark Lord it was Crouch's incompetence that led to his arrest, not any action on my part. Removing Crouch may even give me that direct access."

"Or it could lead to your death when Voldemort decides it was your fault." Black said baldly. "We don't know how he would jump."

"I'm prepared to take the risk." Severus argued, trying to keep his temper from seeping into his voice. "I'm not prepared to let you." Black retorted. "You're much more valuable to us alive."

Ignoring how Albus beamed at Black like he was the second coming, Severus wondered at what Black exactly meant by that. Possibly no more than the face value, he determined. If Severus died within the next few days, there would be nobody to complete the antidote for the elf after all, and while Pettigrew seemed intent on slipping bits of information to his former friends there was no way they could trust it so they needed Severus as a trusted spy gathering information.

"I hate the thought of letting Crouch walk if we're going to know where he is at an exact time." Amelia complained. "The longer he stays at large, the more it makes the Aurors look incompetent. It's bad enough with Pettigrew."

"And either way we need to ensure that his surprise for you, Sirius, is thwarted." Bertie added.

Sirius held up his hand. "I agree we need a plan but giving up our only real spy in Voldemort's camp isn't it. Snape should do exactly what Barty tells him to do."

"Even if that means delivering you to your death?" asked Severus scathingly, because how Gryffindorish of Black to acquiesce to being delivered to his death. He might have known. It was
fine for Black to be in danger and heroic but not Severus.

"One," Black said holding up a finger, "thanks so much for your faith in my ability not to get dead. And two, we'll be planning a whole thing to ensure you don't deliver me to my death, and three…” he paused, "I'm not sure I have a three." He rolled his shoulders. "It's been a long day."

"Three, you would do it if it was going to keep your boy safe and there was no other plan." Moody said grumpily, folding his arms over his chest and glaring at him.

"I've been reminded with ample evidence today that sometimes there's no choice." Black shot back. "Can we move onto the part where we plan how I won't end up dead?"

Amelia jumped in. "There are too many variables for a real plan, Sirius. We have no idea what the surprise is. It may be him, it may be some kind of monster he's created or called forth, it may be a physical trap to harm you without you even seeing him."

"Not knowing the location is the sticking point." Moody grumbled. "If we knew we could have men in place to come to your aid as though by chance but if we don't know, there's no way we can guarantee being able to get to you before anything happens."

"And maybe even a woman or two." Amelia said pointedly.

Moody rolled his magical eye in her direction.

"The details may be in the present he promises to deliver to you tomorrow." Bertie commented.

Severus raised his eyebrow. "It doesn't leave a lot of time for planning even if he does give a location away."

"It has to be here or close by though, right?" Black said, tapping his fingers in an annoying rhythm against the china cup he held.

"Good point." Moody said gruffly. "It's probably somewhere on Hogwarts' grounds or in the Forest." His lips twisted his face into a more ugly shape. "They probably won't use the Durmstrang ship since that would draw unwanted attention and it's probable that they know we suspect it of harbouring them because of Karkaroff."

"So, regardless of the present tomorrow, all the patrols are informed to be aware of a potential situation," Black said authoritatively. "We already suspected something would happen and the extra caution isn't going to be suspicious. It's entirely possible he will grab someone else to force me into leaving Harry."

"You wear a tracking charm." Amelia stated in a no-nonsense tone that had Black bowing his head in agreement.

"And I suggest you prepare for the unexpected, Sirius." Albus said. "I can't believe that whatever he has planned will be pleasant."

There was a beat of silence as they all absorbed that.

"Will you tell Harry?" asked Amelia.

Black sighed and nodded. "I don't want him running after me to save me from Snape and the best way of ensuring that is to tell him the truth."
"You actually imagine he'll be content to simply let you confront Crouch or Crouch's surprise without him?" demanded Severus.

Black just looked at him. "I know you need to be a good liar to be an effective spy, Snape, but sometimes honesty really is the best policy."

Severus glared at him.

Black stood up effectively ending the discussion. "I'm going to go and enjoy what's left of Christmas Eve with my son. Snape, send word when you receive Crouch's present."

He departed with muttered goodbyes to the others.

"I wish I could do more to relieve Sirius of the heavy burden he carries." Albus murmured.

Amelia sighed, shifting back in her chair and lifting her cup. "It's obviously not a good day for this news to emerge given their visit to the house at Godric's Hollow."

"I believe they also intended to visit the cemetery." Bertie sighed. "I'm sure today has been a very hard day for both Sirius and Harry."

Severus hid behind his usual impassive mask as he inwardly agreed with Bertie. He had only ever visited the cemetery once and that had been just after Lily's death. He had not visited again and doubted that he would ever again. It was too stark a reminder that she was gone. Sympathy swelled up for Black and Potter that he quickly suppressed.

"And we had to go and make it worse." Amelia said softly.

"Are we certain that he's after Black?" Moody asked suddenly.

Albus frowned at him as did Severus.

"As certain as we can be given he's insane." Severus replied caustically.

"Don't get your panties in a twist, lad." Moody said brusquely. "I'm just wondering if he's dangling Black like a red herring. If we get too focused on protecting him tomorrow…"

"It may mean we miss protecting the actual target." Amelia grimaced.

Severus inclined his head, his dark hair falling forward as he considered Moody's point. "The mutual friend does limit the candidates to either Black or Karkaroff. We spoke of no-one else."

"I believe we shouldn't try to over-complicate this." Bertie commented, rearranging his robes, and gesturing at Moody. "We suspected Riddle would want to make some kind of statement at Yule. We know his focus and obsession is Harry. If he's given Crouch a mission to do something that weakens Harry, the most obvious target would be Black…"

"But truthfully it could equally be one of Harry's close friends. Hermione would be the other obvious target." Amelia pointed out. "Alastor's right. We can't simply assume that it is Sirius who is at risk."

"I believe Severus is right to point out the mutual friend allusion refers to those they've spoken about and Sirius is Bartemius's own obsession." Albus nodded sagely. "These things suggest we are on the right track."

Severus hummed. "I also think Crouch wants to make Black suffer. Whatever it is, I don't believe he'll kill Black quickly or painlessly."

Amelia set her cup down. "All we can do is plan for the worst."

Moody grunted. "Damn right."

"And possibly hope for the best." Albus said brightly.

Amelia shot Albus an 'are you for real?' look that Severus wished he could. She stood up. "I need to leave. Richard's expecting me for a family drinks thing."

Bertie followed her lead. "I should be heading out myself. I wanted to visit Lawrence in Saint Mungo's."

"How is he?" Albus asked the question on the tip of Severus's own lips.

Severus had tried his best to stave off the curse that had inflicted Lawrence Appleby with the potion he'd created but the Dark Lord's curse on the old Gaunt ring had been too strong in the end and it had only led to a short delay of the inevitable.

"The healers believe he'll be gone by New Year." Bertie said sorrowfully.

Moody moved once Amelia and Bertie had departed through the floo, and Severus got up too. He had no wish to be trapped into spending time with Albus. He respected the older wizard but he wasn't in the mood for one of his lectures on bonding with Black or protecting Potter.

"Drink?" Moody asked as they clear of the staircase leading the Headmaster's office.

Severus nodded stiffly. They made their way without discussion to the staff room. Moody conjured glasses and poured them both a drink from his flask.

The aroma was a familiar peaty smell that had Severus lifting an eyebrow. "Whiskey?"

"Balvenie." Moody confirmed. "My mate Gilbert swears by it."

Severus sniffed appreciative and took a sip, savouring the taste and the kick of alcohol. He found himself slowly relaxing as the crackle of the fire warmed him in the comfortable silence.

"Are you going to be able to handle tomorrow?" asked Moody abruptly.

It was a good question. In the first flush of being a Death Eater he had never questioned whether what he was doing was morally right or wrong. And when he had questioned it, he was already installed within Hogwarts on the Dark Lord's order and distanced from doing anything as a Death Eater, other than spying and passing information – which he could ignore would lead to deaths and violence – that might be constituted as morally ambiguous. But…if he was to assist Crouch in delivering Black to him, Severus himself would have a hand in whatever happened to Black.

Severus grimaced.

There had been a time not so long ago, he mused, where he would have leaped at the opportunity to hand Black over to Crouch regardless of his promise to Albus. Only somehow since then he'd come to appreciate that Black meant to end the Dark Lord; was as fervent in his desire as Severus was, and they had agreed a truce that somehow made Severus already feel partially redeemed for his part in what had happened to Lily.

"I shall handle whatever happens." Severus said simply. Because truthfully there was no other choice.
"It has all the makings of a clusterfuck." Moody said. "I hope Potter stays out of it."

Severus inclined his head and didn't say anything, allowing them to lapse back into blissful silence, because he had a feeling Potter would be doing anything but staying out of it.

o-O-o

25th December 1994

The wet cold nose pressing into his hand roused Harry from his sleep. He blinked blearily at the Grim sat beside his bed, tongue hanging out and tail thumping loudly on the floor. He yawned. "It's so early, Padfoot." He complained. And he knew that because the room was very dark with the only light filtering through from the open bedroom door, and Hedwig hadn't moved an inch from her perch; her head firmly tucked under her wing.

Padfoot reached forward and gripped the edge of Harry's pyjama top cuff dragging him slowly but inexorably out of bed.

Harry managed to grab his glasses and his dressing gown as he grumbled under his breath and allowed the Grim to pull him out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Remus sat in one chair, wrapped up in an old dressing gown. A grumpy expression creased his face and his usually neat hair was askew. Minvera sat in the other chair, her hair in outlandishly large rollers. She wore tartan slippers and a tartan dressing gown over what looked to be a full length nightie. Harry coloured slightly. He'd glimpsed Minerva in her nightwear when she'd stayed with them at Griffin House but it always felt slightly wrong to see his Professor in such clothing. Padfoot herded him to the sofa.

"What time is it?" asked Harry as Dobby popped in and placed a tray of tea on the coffee table. The elf sank to sit beside it at Padfoot's bark.

"Early." Minerva stated briskly. "Too early but someone couldn't wait."

Padfoot shifted and Sirius stood there in his usual warm maroon dressing gown. He grinned at them and clapped his hands. "Merry Yuletide!" He motioned at them all. "And here we all are!" His grin got even wider. "We can do the presents now!"

All of their grumpiness subsided, draining away in Sirius's enthusiasm. Harry smiled up at Sirius, pushing the last of his sleepiness away in an effort to join in and make sure Sirius wasn't disappointed.

"How long do you think he's been awake?" asked Remus in a side-whisper to Minerva.

"I don't think he actually went to sleep." She replied dryly. She sighed at Sirius's overtone pout. "Very well, Sirius; continue. I'll pour the tea."

Sirius clapped his hands again with a gleeful exuberance and bounded over to the tree which suddenly had a stack of presents under it that hadn't been there before.

Harry accepted the cup of tea Minerva handed him and settled back, thinking how different that morning was to the previous Christmases he'd had. The miserable Christmases spent with the Dursleys seemed another lifetime ago but even the comfort of the previous Christmases at Hogwarts suddenly seemed like distant memories against the bright vivid joy that Harry could feel spreading through him.
It would have been nice if Hermione, Ron and Neville could have joined them, Harry mused, but he knew Ron wanted to open his presents with his family, and both Neville and Hermione had declined Sirius's invitation to the present opening first thing citing other plans. He suspected that both his friends didn't want to intrude on Harry's first Christmas with Sirius. They were all coming for a large family lunch though and he would see them then.

"You first, Harry." Sirius said, handing him a small package wrapped in tartan.

He knew immediately who it was from. His gaze darted to Minerva who smiled at him softly. Harry undid the wrapping carefully, ignoring Sirius's grabby hand motions to get on with it and one moment where he thought Sirius intended to take over himself. The box inside was a sturdy wood with a simple hinge. Harry opened it up and…he stared down as the golden Snitch inside unfurled, its wings stretching.

"It's a practice model used by the professional teams." Minerva said briskly. "We can't have you getting out of practice. I expect my star Seeker back on the Gryffindor team next year."

Harry moved to awkwardly give her hug before sliding back onto the sofa as Sirius solemnly handed Minerva her first gift which was from Sirius and Harry.

Minerva looked at the shiny gold and red paper with a pleased expression before ripping through it as though it was tissue paper.

"Make a note, Pronglet," Sirius said admiringly, "that is how you open a present."

Minerva shot him a chiding look before beaming at the door plaque that read 'Aunt Minnie.' It was styled in the same lettering as the other plaques in Griffin House and it was a present to underscore their decision for her to move in during the next Summer.

"Thank you both." Minerva sniffed and her eyes were suspiciously bright.

Harry was relieved when Sirius bounded up to Remus with a present, breaking the moment.

Remus sighed at the wrapping paper; dogs were running backwards and forward excitedly. "From you, Padfoot?"

Sirius nodded and sat down next to Harry as Remus took off the wrapping and revealed an old copy of a battered book with the title 'Growing up with Lycanthropy; A Wolf's View by R.J. Lupin.'

He'd told Harry the tale behind the book when he'd showed it to him before wrapping it. Remus had written the book back at school and had managed to find a small publishing firm to produce a handful of copies.

"My goodness!" Remus tore his gaze away from Sirius to stare at him. "Where did you find this copy? I thought the Ministry burned them along with the other pro-Werewolf literature a few years back."

"My vault." Sirius said, gesturing vaguely. "I kept a copy thinking it'd be valuable one day and it is, because it's the only one left. You should have it, Moony."

Remus's fingers trailed over the spine. "I only sold a handful but they were all recalled with the Ministry's edict. Of course, this one missed the magical recall because it was in a bank vault."

"Well, it's right you have a copy back." Sirius repeated.
Remus shot Sirius a grateful smile.

Sirius reached under the tree and pulled out a package which he handed to Dobby. "From me and Harry, Dobby."

Dobby's ears waggled excitedly. He also carefully undid the wrapping, setting it aside. He gave a squeal at the gift of a knitting basket filled with skeins of brightly coloured wool, different sizes of knitting needles and a package of patterns for different types of sock. "Dobby is pleased to be making socks." He said delighted.

Remus smiled brightly and caught Sirius as he moved back to the tree. "You, sit." He grinned when Sirius pouted again. "I'll get yours." He hurried over to the tree and pulled out a large present which he handed to Sirius with due fanfare. "From Harry."

Sirius threw Harry a questioning glance and Harry nervously smiled back, hoping Sirius liked his present. He immediately tore off the wrapping paper and came to an abrupt halt at the framed picture of himself and Harry.

It was a portrait of one of the candid shots that the photographer had taken during Harry's first press interview in the Summer. The photo had showed Harry and Sirius standing next to each other in his study, Sirius's hand on Harry's shoulder, and them both smiling at one another with so much genuine love and affection that Harry had initially been embarrassed by it. But he knew Sirius loved the photo and so Remus had helped Harry get it turned into a portrait, with the frame specially made and engraved with a small plaque at the bottom that simply said 'Padfoot and Pronglet.'

Harry knew that the portrait represented more than just a picture of the two of them though; it was magical and even after they were both dead, which Harry hoped wouldn't be for a long while, the essence of them painted into their portraitures would always remain together.

"This," Sirius declared, unable to stop looking at the picture, "this is perfect." His eyes were bright and shining when he raised his head. "Thank you, Pronglet." He reached out and pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, before ruffling his hair and letting him go. "I love it."

"It is lovely." Minerva commented softly. "The artist captured you both wonderfully."

Sirius didn't let go of his gift. Instead he hugged it to him and nodded at Remus. "Bring over Harry's present, would you, Moony?"

Remus grinned and hurried over to the tree, reaching behind it and pulling out a very familiar shaped gift.

Harry's eyes widened and he didn't take care with the wrapping as he tore it away to reveal a new broomstick – the Flaming Arrow.

"It's kind of a tradition me buying you a broomstick." Sirius murmured beside him as Harry's hand travelled reverently down the wooden body and over the tightly placed twigs. "I bought you your first broom that first Christmas. Lily wrote to tell me you'd fly around the room and scare the cat."

And the previous year, Sirius had gotten him the Firebolt.

Harry leaned over to hug him again. "Thank you. It's brilliant!" And it meant that he could retire his Firebolt and make sure that it didn't get destroyed or broken – something that had been bothering him with the 'prized possession' thing of the tournament clue. He couldn't wait to get outside and try the new broom out. Ron was going to go nuts about it.
Minerva sighed wistfully. "We would totally destroy Slytherin with you on that broomstick."

He grinned at her. "Next year." He promised.

And as Remus went to get the next present (Sirius still hadn't let go of the portrait), and Minerva threatened retribution for a gift of cat toys, Harry embraced the happiness bubbling up inside him and let all the other worries and anxieties about the tournament and Voldemort fade away.

o-O-o

Christmas morning found Neville camped out in the Common Room with the rest of the Weasleys. He'd eschewed Sirius's invitation knowing that it was Harry's first with Sirius and if it hadn't been for the Yule Ball and the tournament, all of them would have been spending Christmas with their own families. They both deserved for their first Christmas to be primarily the two of them. He had felt a pang of regret the evening before but Ron had dragged him down to sleep with the twins in the Common Room (after a plea not to be left alone with his pranking siblings), and come morning Ginny had joined them. They'd effectively taken over the space in front of the fire to open their presents.

Neville found himself forgetting his previous regret as he was swept up in the fun and joie de vivre that only the Weasley twins could radiate in waves. Ron was also making an effort to make sure Neville was included and Neville marvelled at the change in their friendship since the Summer when Neville had thought the youngest Weasley brother only tolerated his presence because of Harry – something that had been confirmed for Neville when Ron had pushed him after they'd realised Harry was with a mind healer. But since that had happened, he and Ron had slowly moved past the fraught start and built a friendship of their own. And Neville liked Ron with his affable manner and usually easy-going persona for all Ron could be a stubborn mule when he got an idea in his head.

By the time, they'd finished unwrapping the gifts, all the Weasleys were wearing their usual Molly knitted Christmas sweaters – big woolly monstrosities with their initial and in varying colours (Ginny had complained at pink, Ron at the vibrant lime green), and they were all surrounded by a heap of wrapping paper and untidy piles of presents.

Neville was also wrapped up in one of his gifts; the new black woollen cloak that his Gran had sent him. It went well with the new leather gloves and a black woolly hat with the crest of Longbottom embroidered on the front that he'd received from Sirius (clearly there had been a conspiracy between his Gran and Sirius).

Ginny sat down beside him and fingered the bottom edge of the cloak enviously. "This is really beautiful, Nev."

"Gran's gone all out this year." Neville said. He suspected some of it was that their finances were in a better place. She'd never said anything but he'd known for a couple of years that they were on a budget. He'd assumed that was one of the reasons why she'd been so insistent on his having his Dad's wand; that they couldn't afford a new one.

But he knew a lot of the gifts that she'd sent him were to make up for the previous years when she'd bought mostly stuff she thought he should have wanted rather than things that he actually wanted. He patted the book on underwater plants with fondness. She'd really taken note of his interests and bought stuff he could use this time, he mused. The best present though had been a photo album filled with pictures of his Mum, Dad and himself. It was something he treasured.

Ginny sighed beside him.
"You alright?" Neville asked quietly.

She nodded, her red hair falling forward. She tucked it back behind her ears. "Just missing home." She admitted. "It's not the same staying at Hogwarts." She glanced up, checking where her brothers were. "It makes me wish I hadn't said yes when Michael asked me to the Ball." Her fingers twisted together. "I was just so flattered and..." she bit her lip.

Neville frowned. He and Ginny had been friends of sorts during her previous Hogwarts' years. "If you don't want to go with him, you don't have to go."

"Oh, I know, and it really isn't about the Ball." Ginny smiled, but there was an air of sadness about her. "Just missing home like I said."

He returned the smile. "I know how you feel. I kind of wish I was back at home with Gran although I'm looking forward to taking Hannah to the Ball."

"It's your first 'real' date, huh?" teased Ginny, some of the sadness fading away.

Neville had a feeling he looked sheepish; he certainly felt sheepish. "We did do a lot of practice dates." He admitted.

Ginny snorted a laugh but she patted his hand. "I'm pleased for you, Nev. You're so much happier this year."

There was a hint of a question in her tone; a note of wistfulness.

"I am happier." Neville admitted. "Things have really changed for me since Sirius took over Harry's guardianship. Gran's...she's like a new woman. I look at her now and I think if this is the mother my Dad knew then it was no wonder he was brilliant because she's just great." He motioned at Ginny. "She sees me now, you know?"

"You're closer to Harry too." Ginny commented. She hunched in on herself as though expecting him to berate her for mentioning Harry.

"Yeah, I am." Neville said gently. And he couldn't deny his friendship with Harry had been a large part of the reason why things had changed for him. Harry's support had given him confidence and Neville wouldn't trade it for the world. He looked at her downcast face. "How are things going for you now?"

Ginny grimaced, her pretty face contorting for a moment. "You'd think Lydia and me had been the ones to attack Hermione." She sighed and rubbed her nose. "I know we went a bit overboard with following him around and OK, we talked about messing with Hermione and pranking her but... neither of us would actually have attacked Hermione and it's not like we told Jessica to do it either."

"I think Harry and Hermione know that." Neville said comfortingly.

"They do," Ginny confirmed, "they've even said so to both Lydia and me, and forgiven us for the other stuff." She pulled on the stretched cuff of her jumper. "It's just...you'd think nobody else knew it which everybody does and...it's just hard having most everyone else in the school treat us like pariahs for something that wasn't even our fault."

Neville nodded understandingly. In some ways, he sympathised. Jessica had been the attacker and neither Ginny nor Lydia had supported her actions. Lydia had run immediately to her brother for advice since it would affect the House of Inglebee, and Ginny had immediately confessed all to Hermione. On the other hand, he kind of felt they'd made a rod for their own backs in how they'd...
stalked Harry without any real regard for how he might feel about it and how it would look to others. Ginny's sigh pulled him back out of his thoughts.

"It's worse since Lydia went home for Christmas." Ginny admitted. "It's like it's all on me. At least when she's here, there's the two of us."

He picked up on the note of warmth in her voice. "You're really friends now, then?"

"Yeah," Ginny pushed a hand through her hair and gave a sheepish smile, "Lydia admitted after Jessica got expelled that they'd both befriended me because I knew Harry but...she asked for a second chance and well..."

With everyone else against them, Ginny hadn't wanted to refuse.

"But since then, we've been proper friends." Ginny said firmly. "We talk and...she's been great about the whole mind healer thing." She blushed furiously and darted a look at her brothers.

Neville followed her gaze; the twins and Ron were all wrestling over the tin of their mother's biscuits. He turned back to Ginny. "How's that going?"

Ginny shrugged. "It's...hard. But I think I'm...I'm facing what happened with the...the whole thing in my first year."

He wouldn't press her for details, Neville determined. If she wanted to tell him, she would.

"And I can see how Harry rescuing me didn't help my..." she winced, "crush." She waved her hand as though to wave away her words and admission, "I can see now that Hermione was right? I should have focused on being a friend to Harry rather than just...hoping he'd notice that I was more than Ron's little sister if he saw me around enough."

Her cheeks were bright red and Neville had no idea what to say.

"So that's what I'm going to do now; be his friend." Ginny stated with finality. "Lydia too. We've promised that if either of us slips back into fan-girl mode, we'll say something to each other."

"That's good." Neville said.

Ginny nodded, her teeth worrying her lower lip. "I just hate that it took Hermione getting hurt for me to see how silly we'd...that I'd been acting."

"But it's good that you saw it." Neville pointed out gently. "And I think you're doing the right thing seeing the mind healer and making sure you focus on being Harry's friend first and foremost."

Ginny nodded briskly and shifted position, tucking her legs beneath her as she got more comfortable.

"So you and Michael?" questioned Neville.

She shot him an irritated look. "I've already got six older brothers, Nev; don't you start."

"As your friend, you can't blame me for being concerned," Neville said, "it's not all that long ago you were head over heels for Harry and Michael asking you to the Ball and you saying yes kind of came out of nowhere."

"He used to be Ron's best friend." Ginny said dryly. "I mean, they were five years old at the time but..." she shrugged. "The Corners used to live just down the road but they decided to move to their London house because of Mister Corner's work. So we lost touch. Michael came and said hello at
the beginning of my first year and asked how I was, and…we do chat occasionally."

But from the defensive tone, Neville was guessing it wasn't that often.

"His asking me was just a friendly gesture." Ginny continued. "He'd stopped to see if I was alright after the first task and I was complaining about the Ball and so he asked me. We're just going as friends."

Neville didn't know Michael all that well. He hoped Michael had done it as a friendly gesture rather than taking advantage of Ginny's vulnerability after all her travails over Harry and the incident with Jessica. He also hoped Ginny wasn't subconsciously using Michael either as a way of showing Harry she was attractive; of feeling attractive.

He was so glad he'd decided to pursue Hannah and not pursue the tentative attraction he'd felt for Ginny in the Summer when he'd been thinking about potential girlfriends. He might have very well asked her to the Ball himself if Sirius hadn't turned all their worlds upside down and nothing had changed for them, Neville realised.

"Well, I hope you have a good time." He replied diplomatically.

Ginny nodded. "You too."

There was a sound from the girls' staircase and Hermione poked her head around and smiled at them all.

Ron managed to wrench himself free from his brothers and smoothed down his jumper. "Hermione! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas! Looks like it was a good Christmas for you all." Hermione commented as she joined them, already fully dressed in a jeans and a bright red jumper. She sank down to the floor and picked up the book on underwater plants. "Oooh! Can I borrow this after you've read it, Neville?"

Neville's lips twitched into a smile as he exchanged a knowing look with Ron. "Of course. I was thinking it might be useful for the research team."

"Definitely." Hermione nodded her head enthusiastically.

Ginny nudged her gently. "What did you get for Christmas?"

"Mum and Dad bought me some jewellery to go with my dress for tonight." Hermione's cheeks took on a red flush. "Nothing fancy just a necklace and some earrings."

Ginny smiled. "I'm sure you'll look beautiful."

Hermione put down the book and rubbed her arms. "I'm just hoping Harry and I manage to complete the first dance without tripping each other up."

"What did Harry get you?" asked Neville.

"We haven't exchanged gifts yet." Hermione admitted. "We wanted to open them together so we thought we'd do it at lunch."

"Talking of food," Ginny said, getting to her feet and brushing down her clothing, "we should get ready and head to the Hall for breakfast."

Neville figured her sudden want for breakfast had more to do with a desire to get away from hearing
more about Hermione and Harry than it had to do with hunger.

Ron patted his tummy. "I could eat."

"You've just munched…" Fred began.

"…through a tin…" George continued.

"…of Mum's biscuits!" Fred completed.

Ron grinned at them. "I'm a growing boy!"

"That…"

"…you are…"

"Ronniekins!"

Hermione burst out giggling at Ron's appalled expression at the nickname. Ginny gave a faint chuckle, grabbed her presents and made her escape.

"Come on…"

"…then."

The twins hustled Ron up the boys' staircase leaving Hermione alone with Neville.

"How is she?" asked Hermione bluntly.

Neville shrugged. He wasn't going to give away any confidences but he could answer Hermione's question. "Working through things, I think."

"I hope so." Hermione said, shifting with a sigh to tidy up the wrapping paper that the Weasleys had left strewn around the room.

"She and Lydia seem to be building a real friendship now." Neville helped her feed the paper into the fire. "And they're both intent on focusing on friendship with Harry for the time being. That's something."

"It is." Hermione said. "I just hope they're sincere. I think they are. They've both apologised to Harry and me." She brushed her hair back from her eyes. "I just hope her going to the Ball with Michael isn't the wrong thing for her to do."

"Me too." Neville said. He glanced around the room. There was no more wrapping paper left. He picked up his presents. "I'll just be a jiffy." He promised.

Hermione waved him off and Neville made his way to the dorm. Seamus and Dean were sleeping, the curtains pulled tightly on their beds. There was a faint hint of noise coming from the bathroom; water running and an off-key rendition of Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. He dumped his gifts on his bed, glancing over at Harry's old bed which remained empty. He missed Harry in the dorm but he had to admit that Harry having his own rooms with Sirius was the best thing with the tournament.

Remembering that Hermione was waiting downstairs, he picked up his towel, hastily made for the bathroom and was a half a step from a shower stall when Ron stumbled out from his, wet and bedraggled, a towel wrapped around his lower body.
They exchanged a nod of acknowledgement and Neville made to close his curtain.

"Neville..." Ron said, taking a step toward him and leaving a puddle of water behind on the bathroom floor where he had been standing. He looked a tad uncertain and that was what arrested Neville's movement more than anything.

Neville raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Ginny." Ron said awkwardly. "The twins and me noticed she was talking with you so…"

And so they'd left them to talk.

"Is she…" Ron struggled to get the question out and Neville took pity on him.

"She's alright, Ron." Neville said firmly. "Just…working her way through it."

Ron nodded briskly. "Right then." He grabbed hold of his slipping towel and pushed a wet lank of hair out of his eyes.

Neville couldn't resist asking. "You and Michael used to be best friends?"

The scowl on Ron's face was ferocious. "I don't know about best friends." He said. "We used to hang out as kids before they moved away, kind of how Ginny and Luna used to." He lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "He told the twins that he'd asked her to the Ball to cheer her up and Mum's told us to back off so…"

"Ginny said they were just going as friends but we can all keep an eye on them tonight." Neville promised.

Relief flooded Ron's face. "Thanks, mate." He gestured, almost losing the towel again. "I know I'm being an overprotective brother but…she's been through a lot." He coloured pink under his freckles.

Neville figured Ron felt a bit guilty about the hard time he'd given his sister over the whole thing with Hermione. Neville nodded and pointed at the shower behind him. "Best get on or Hermione will hex us for making her wait."

Ron grinned at him. "Right you are, Nev." He hurried out of the bathroom.

Neville closed the curtain.

o-O-o

There was an air of seasonal jollity permeating Harry's rooms that warmed Hermione from the inside out. She sat next to Harry on the sofa, her hand in his as she took in the atmosphere.

Part of it was the decorations – the bright red and gold tinsel, the deep green holly, and the twinkling Christmas tree bedecked with ornaments that were pieces of Harry's heritage. Some of it was the sense of family that shone out with every fondly exasperated smile that a casually dressed Remus and Professor McGonagall aimed at Sirius. Even Remus's werewolf friend Sian looked amused as did the Weasley kids crammed together on one sofa with grins on their faces. But as Hermione noted how Harry teased Neville, and how he and Sirius were decked out in matching Weasley jumpers, mostly Hermione attributed the ambience to the pure happiness which radiated from Harry and Sirius.

It was as though they'd set aside all the worries about a potential attack later, and concerns generally of the tournament and the situation with Voldemort, and decided to simply enjoy themselves and
enjoy being together at Christmas.

Her heart ached a little as she suddenly missed her own parents with a fierceness that took her by surprise. She pushed it away. She wouldn't spoil things for Harry and Sirius, Hermione thought determinedly. She would do the same as them; she'd just enjoy the moment.

She smiled brightly at Dobby who handed her a cup of eggnog. "This is great. Thank you for having us, Sirius."

Sirius beamed at her. "Happy to have you all!" He clapped his hands and bounced up and down on his heels. "We have a few surprises later."

"Merlin help us." Professor McGonagall said dryly, but her eyes were twinkling with humour.

Fred grinned. "We love…"

"…surprises!" George completed.

Sirius smirked at them. "Excellent." He motioned towards Harry. "Harry, why don't you and Hermione go into my study and do your present exchange now? We have a few minutes before everyone else arrives."

Hermione nodded her agreement to Harry's quick glance to check it was alright with her.

"I'll just grab your gift from my room." Harry said.

Sirius shooed her in the direction of the study and she rolled her eyes at him as she complied, picking up her gift from the arm of the sofa. She resisted the urge to frown as she caught Ginny ostensibly looking away from her. As much as Ginny had resolved to get over her crush on Harry, Hermione believed it was a work in progress.

The study was cosy. A fire crackled in the hearth and thin sunlight streamed through the window, bathing everything yellow. She waited anxiously, but it only took a minute for Harry to rejoin her, nudging the door closed behind him.

Harry grinned at her. "Hey."

"Hey."

He leaned in to kiss her softly and for a long moment she enjoyed the thrill of being with him before the reality that they wouldn't be left alone for long intruded.

She reached behind her and presented him with the box solemnly. "Here."

Harry set her present down and took hers. She pushed her hair back over her shoulder and bit her lip as he sat down on the arm of a chair and carefully opened it. He set aside the wrapping paper and examined the box with interest before undoing the clasp at the front. The thin brown strip of leather held a beautifully carved wooden rune – the Norse rune for protection.

"Oh wow." Harry said. "Noshi wore something similar to this."

Hermione nodded. "I don't know if you remember but you wrote about the leather necklaces that Noshi and his family wore in the journal. It was why I suggested braided leather for the tournament bracelets when the beads were ruled out. You really seemed to like them so I thought…and this rune…"
"Protection." Harry said identifying straight away.

She smiled at him widely, knowing that only a year before he wouldn't have known and if he had he would never have said. "Yes."

"Put it on me?" Harry asked, handing the necklace to her.

She took it and carefully tied it behind his neck before moving round to his front. Her fingers traced the rune and Harry leaned forward to capture her lips in a sweet kiss.

"Thank you." He said.

Hermione blushed and stepped back. She'd smeared her blood onto the rune and repeated the words she'd uttered during his blessing before she'd wrapped the gift. She didn't know if it would make a difference – the magical theory suggested it would but…she hoped it would. Any extra protection Harry had as he faced the rest of the tournament and, ultimately Voldemort, would be good thing.

Harry picked up his present to her and handed it over with a nervous smile.

She unwrapped it as carefully as he had unwrapped hers. The jewellery box took her by surprise. She opened it and gasped at the beautiful golden charm bracelet. "Oh Harry!" The design matched the earrings and necklace her parents had given her and she realised that Harry must have colluded with them. "It's so beautiful." She murmured, picking it up to examine it closer.

The thick gold chain had four tiny charms hanging off it. The first was a miniature potions bottle; the second a tiny mirror; the third was an egg timer or…what was meant to represent a time-turner, she realised her heart pounding as she suddenly made the connection; they represented the years she and Harry had been friends and the adventures they'd had. It made sense; the fourth charm was a tiny cute dragon.

"It's brilliant." Hermione said. Beautiful and sentimental. She smiled at him and offered him the bracelet and her wrist. "Put it on me?"

He grinned at her, the nerves she'd seen in his expression drifting away as he focused on the clasp. He made to step back and she quickly moved to kiss him softly.

"Thank you." Hermione said gently.

There was a gentle knock on the door and while they didn't spring apart as the door opened, they did settle into positions that had more space between them.

Sirius poked his head into the room. "All done?"

They nodded.

"Come on then." Sirius said with a grin. "Our first surprise is here." He opened up the door and winked at Harry.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously and Harry grinned back at her. "It's a good surprise."

And of course Harry knew what the surprises were. She walked through the study door and froze as she took in her parents sitting on the sofa.

"Mum! Dad!" She raced over to hug them as they stood up, wide smiles on their faces. She eased back and stared at them. "But how?" She was barely aware of everyone else in the room smiling
broadly at the reunion.

"Professor Dumbledore cast some kind of spell on us? It runs out at midnight." Her Mum replied. "I feel very Cinderella like!"

"So you're staying for the Ball?" She asked, torn between pleasure that they would see her dressed up in her finery and with Harry on her first official Ball, and horror that she would have her parents watching her all night. It wasn't that she and Harry intended to do anything but dance and enjoy the time with their friends but...

"No," her Mum gave her a knowing look, "we'll be here to take some pictures of you and Harry in your glad rags and then Andy and Ted will take us home."

Hermione belated saw Andromeda and Ted standing to the side. The Malfoys, Theo and his father stood next to them and were all looking distinctly uncomfortable about being in the presence of muggles.

She hurried over to greet them before she turned to Harry with an accusing frown she couldn't quite keep on her face. "You knew!"

Harry nodded and grinned back at her unrepentant.

The door chimed.

"And that will be surprises number two and three!" Sirius said gleefully. He bounded over to the door and opened it wide.

The first person through was Augusta Longbottom.

Neville got to his feet immediately, a wide smile lighting up his face. "Gran!"

And then…Molly entered.

"Mum!" The Weasley siblings chorused, racing over to greet her as their father and remaining brothers stepped through.

After that it was complete pandemonium for a long time.

It wasn't until they were all seated at the dining table – magically expanded to accommodate them all – that Hermione felt like she could catch her breath.

Sirius stood at the head of the table, Harry at his right and Remus at his left with Professor McGonagall at the foot of the table in the place of the hostess. Beside Harry, Andromeda and Ted sat together – Tonks was absent and on duty – and then Hermione and her parents. On the other side of the table, Narcissa sat between Remus's friend Sian and Lucius, with Draco next to his father. He kept staring at her parents as though they were strange creatures just as he had done every time he met them. Beside Draco, Neville and his Gran provided a buffer between the Malfoys and the Weasleys; Bill, Charlie, and Percy sat beside Augusta with Theo and his Dad rounding out that side of the table; Fred, George, Ron, Ginny and her parents on the other with Arthur beside Hermione's Dad.

Sirius coughed and raised his glass. "I'd like to thank you for coming and joining us for a special Yuletide luncheon. It is occasions like these that we remember how important family is and we are family, whether by blood or by friendship. It's also when we remember those who are no longer with us and who we miss, reminding us all that we should treasure those we have in our lives each
moment."

"Hear, hear." Augusta said quietly.

"And which is why sharing days like today is important and why we're all gathered here." Sirius continued with a smile aimed in Augusta's direction. "Merry Christmas!"

Hermione grinned at her parents and they all raised their glasses as they joined in the toast. "Merry Christmas!"
"We need a moment of your time."

Both Lucius and Nott looked at Sirius expectantly.

Sirius swallowed the urge to say something mean to them in response, and reminded himself it was Christmas and the season of goodwill. He glanced around the room where everyone else was pulling on outerwear in anticipation of heading out into the snow covered grounds. After Harry had spilled the beans about his new broomstick, the Weasleys had suggested an impromptu game of Quidditch and Sirius had agreed. It would be good to get out in the fresh air.

He signalled to Remus to take the crowd out. He motioned at the study door and went towards it without checking that the other two men were following. He wandered over to stand in front of the window as Lucius closed the door behind him.

"Wilkes contacted me just before I left to travel here this morning." Nott said. "Last night, there was an alarm triggered on one of his properties."

Sirius turned around with a frown. "And I would be interested in this because?"

"He had his elf check out the disturbance this morning. The property is in the North of England and unoccupied. There has been the occasional wildlife in the past that has triggered the alarm." Nott continued as though Sirius hadn't spoken. "The elf reported that it wasn't wildlife but four men."

Sirius straightened, his heart stuttering and then pounding in his chest. Had they found Voldemort and his cronies?

Nott held up a hand. "The elf recognised Crouch from his wanted poster and the other three as former associates of Wilkes; Oliver Mulciber Junior, Augustus Rookwood and Dennis Travers Senior."

"That's impossible," Sirius murmured, momentarily shocked, "they're all in Azkaban."

"Yes. Wilkes was surprised too." Nott said dryly. "Clearly, either they are still in Azkaban and someone is impersonating them, or a breakout has been affected."

"But you think the latter?" questioned Sirius intently.

"While Crouch used Polyjuice to impersonate his father, he had fresh hair samples. It is unlikely he had hair samples for those three individuals." Lucius said matter-of-factly.

"I believe the breakout is at Tom's behest." Nott said quietly. "If the rumours are true and he has tasked Fenrir to kill your steward before he can take his place beside Tom again, and with Crouch and Pettigrew focused on the tournament and your son, he needs another group of followers to help him. There is a rumour of something planned for this evening."

"He may view those who went to Azkaban as loyal and dedicated compared to those of us who escaped imprisonment." Lucius confirmed.

"They present less of a risk." Nott added. "They have nothing to lose in rejoining him unlike those of us who have maintained or grown our social, financial and political power in the years since."
It made too much sense.

"Where is this place that they're hiding?" Sirius asked.

Lucius brushed a piece of lint from his clothing. "The property was formally owned by the Mulcibers. Senior sold it to Wilkes just before he died and the Dark Lord was...injured in 'eighty-one. It's entirely possible that Junior doesn't know it's now owned by Wilkes."

"Very interesting. Where is it?" Sirius pressed.

"Unplottable." Nott replied. "I'm unaware of the exact location."

"I believe it's near Newcastle but I am in the same position as Benjamin; I don't know the exact location." Lucius lifted a hand from his cane. "Mulciber Senior offered it to me first and I turned him down as I had and have no interest in owning a property that far North."

"Wilkes is the only person with that knowledge." Nott said. "If he was to have the Aurors visit him and inform him of a rumour of a possible trespassing on the site, I'm sure he'd confirm the location for them to check it out."

Bloody Slytherins, Sirius bitched inwardly; they were always thinking of covering their own arses. And he was doubly annoyed as they could have told him before the lunch had begun.

"I'll be sure to pass that onto Amelia." Sirius said dryly. "I'm guessing Wilkes didn't report it because he doesn't want to tip his hand on his own position?"

Nott raised an eyebrow and neither man spoke but their silence spoke volumes.

Sirius sighed. "Any other rumours that we need to know about?"

"Not a rumour but a fact." Lucius said. "Severus Snape has been spending a lot of time with his old friend, Avery, lately."

Sirius harrumphed. He knew Snape had been spending time with Avery. Avery was an idiot and a wonderful stooge for Snape to inform the Death Eaters that he'd been in touch with Crouch and through Crouch, the Dark Lord. They'd all agreed that Snape trying to pass that information through Lucius as he had done in the past wouldn't work; Snape trusting Lucius when he under the House of Black primacy was impossible if Snape was truly to look like he was on the side of the Dark Lord.

"Snape informed Avery that he'd actually met with Crouch." Nott continued. His eyes were sharp as they met Sirius's guarded gaze. "You may think you know differently, but Snape spied on Dumbledore and spied for him at the behest of the Dark Lord. Whatever you believe of Snape's loyalties, you would be wise to watch your back."

"I can assure you that I don't trust Snape." Sirius said easily. He trusted that Snape wanted the Dark Lord dead; that he would protect Harry in that goal. But did he really trust him to save Sirius's life or not place it in danger? No, not really. Their truce was a thing of fragility and newness.

"Wise." Lucius said shortly.

Sirius glanced out of the window. "Unless there's something more, we should join the others. Tell them I'll be out shortly. I have to call Amelia."

"Nothing more." Nott confirmed. "And you're right; we should see who is winning the Quidditch match, although if they actually manage to get Theodore on a broomstick I'll give a galleon to
whoever persuaded him."

Sirius ushered them out of the study and picked up the Ministry issued communications mirror Amelia had given him for emergencies. "Black to Bones."

The mirror suddenly flared and Amelia's head appeared. "Sirius?"

Sirius cleared his throat. "There's a possible Azkaban prison break from Azkaban involving Travers, Mulciber and Rookwood."

"What?" Amelia asked sharply.

"Wilkes had an alarm triggered on a property that was once owned by Mulciber last night. His elf identified all three plus Crouch. My sources say they don't know where the property is just somewhere North near Newcastle. Since it's unlikely that the advanced Polyjuice would work without current hair samples, and that Voldemort may have believed that he needed extra hands for whatever he has planned next, and may feel the Azkaban lot are the most loyal or least risky to trust..."

"Bugger." Amelia snapped. "Well, there goes the rest of my day. I'll have to go to Azkaban and verify myself before I can confirm."

"Figured." Sirius said. "It was suggested Wilkes might give up the location if the Aurors were to visit and say there was a rumour of a trespassing making the rounds."

"I'll send Rufus." Amelia promised. "Bugger." She said again before her gaze narrowed on him. "Has Snape received the present from Crouch yet?"

"Not as far as I know but it sounds like Crouch has had a busy time." Sirius said dryly. "If I were him, I'd leave it to the last minute and make it difficult for anyone to plan anything to counter."

Amelia stared at him through the mirror. "Take care of yourself, Sirius. I'll call if I have news from Azkaban."

The mirror blanked out and Sirius picked up the mirror, made it smaller and tucked it into his jeans' pocket. He hurried into his warm woollen coat and leather gloves, and headed out to join the others.

There was quite a crowd by the time he got to the stands. He took the stairs two at a time and squeezed down the seats to a seat next to Remus and Minerva. Albus stood on the other side of her, beaming with benevolent happiness at the sight of so many students either playing or watching.

Sirius pointed out at where a line of students waiting on broomsticks hovered, waiting for their turn. Hooch was in the centre of the pitch and as she blew her whistle, one Chaser on either side veered off from the game to join the end of the line while two of the students at the front moved to join their teams.

"What's going on?" He asked.

"Tag Quidditch." Minerva replied enthusiastically. "We had so many students wanting to join the pick-up game that the Weasleys suggested it instead. Two teams; team one plays for the North hoops, team two for the South. If you're the first in line you're playing for team one, second for team two - regardless of which team you were in when you started. When the whistle blows, one team member from each team has to leave. Regardless of your position preference, when you join the team, you play the position just vacated unless another member of the team switches with you. It's very exciting. The Seekers are the only players allowed to remain in the game without a changeover.
Harry and Draco are the Seekers; team one and two respectively."

Sirius scanned the sky for Harry and found him circling the North hoops.

"He does look good on that new broomstick, Sirius." Albus commented.

"It is a shame he won't be able to play until next year." Minerva murmured.

Albus chuckled. "I'm sure Miss Weasley will do marvellously." He glanced over at Sirius.
"Everything alright, my dear boy? Remus said you'd been delayed." His twinkling eyes darted to
Lucius and Nott further along the row at the end.

Remus and Minerva looked at him expectantly too.

"I'll tell you after the game." Sirius promised.

He felt a chill on the back of his neck and shivered. It was cold out. He stomped his feet and rubbed
his gloved hands together.

"Oh for…" Remus cast a warming charm on him.

"I guess Nott managed to keep his galleon." Sirius said dryly, nodding towards where Theo and
Hermione had settled, her parents watching enthralled at the broomstick acrobats. Theo was chatting
happily away with Hermione's Dad. Actually meeting muggles had intrigued the Slytherin into
intelligence gathering and Sirius knew that Theo was undergoing something of a mind shift. It was
what was needed throughout the wizarding world, Sirius mused. He'd have to talk with Cornelius
and Arthur about that.

Arthur stood chatting away to Ted, arms waving excitedly about whatever the subject was. The only
two Weasley boys on the ground, Bill and Percy were chatting with Sian, and Sirius was glad that
someone was keeping her occupied. Percy had remained quiet through the day, almost shy with his
family as he slowly repaired the damage between him and his siblings. His relationship with Arthur
seemed closer and Sirius was glad to see they'd made progress.

Sirius's lips twitched at the sight of Molly huddled together with Augusta, Andromeda, Hermione's
mother and Narcissa. A snatch of conversation drifted over to him and he suddenly understood how
they'd found common ground; they were discussing Narcissa's pregnancy.

Remus met his eyes in perfect understanding. They both gave a delicate male shudder at the topic of
water retention and decided they were best ignoring the group.

Merlin, Sirius thought as he felt another chill run through him, it was freezing even with the warming
charm.

Minerva suddenly grabbed his arm. "Look!"

And Harry was diving. He shot forward on his Flaming Arrow, gracefully diving to the ground.
Draco followed but everyone could see it was too late; Harry was going too fast for Draco to catch
him up. The Snitch was Harry's and he grabbed it inches from the ground, lying flat on the broom to
make the catch. He flew upwards as everyone but team two cheered.

Albus clapped enthusiastically. "Oh, wonderful game!"

Sirius cheered and whistled some more but he was glad when they started to make their way down
the stands to the ground. He arranged to meet with Albus in his office and went to collect his son
who was surrounded by a group of teenagers all cooing appreciatively over the broomstick.

Harry disengaged himself as soon as he spotted Sirius and greeted him with a wide smile. "It's fantastic!"

"Bloody brilliant!" Ron agreed cheerfully.

"Glad you like it, Pronglet." Sirius ruffled his hair, and Harry dodged him to nod a greeting at Hermione who slid her hand into Harry's while ostensibly ignoring her smirking parents behind her. "Well, I don't know about you all but I think getting inside out of this cold is a good idea."

Harry frowned. "It is chilly."

Hermione shrugged. "I'm fine but I just saw Lavender and she said most of the girls are heading in to start getting ready now so I should go too I think."

"Yeah, Susan and Hannah have left to get ready." Neville commented.

There was a flurry of goodbyes and a promise to meet up with her parents for photos later once Harry had collected her from the tower.

Ron watched Hermione leave with a frown. "I don't get it! I mean, the Ball isn't for another three hours! Why are the girls all getting ready now?"

Sirius patted Ron's shoulder comfortingly. "We are men, Ron. The mysteries of womankind are not for us to know."

"And don't you forget it, Sirius!" Andromeda said laughing.

Molly poked Ron in the ribs. "I can explain why the girls need more time to you in great detail if you'd really like to know, Ronald." Her face was lit up with a mischievous smirk so like the twins that Sirius almost did a double take.

Arthur was grinning at his wife, love shining out of his fond gaze at her teasing their son. "She would and all!" He commented.

Ron's face was a picture of horrified terror. "No, that's OK, Mum! Really!"

They were all laughing as they entered the castle and Sirius attempted to forget the possible prison break-out and the potential attack later that day as he focused on soaking up the feeling of family and contentment.

It was so different to the previous year when he'd spent the day skulking about the edges of the Forbidden Forest, avoiding the Dementors and trying to catch any kind of a glimpse of Harry, for a second Sirius couldn't catch his breath.

Harry nudged him, a questioning look of worry in his eyes and Sirius shook away the bad memory and smiled at him. He slung an arm around Harry and hugged him as they walked.

o-O-o

The new dress robes looked good. They reminded Harry of the morning dress suits that he'd seen some men wear for weddings and in old Fred Astaire movies that his Aunt had watched in the afternoon sometimes; tailored in the body before flaring from the waist into tails at the back. His robes were a deep emerald, tightly buttoned over a matching stiff dress shirt; they were almost black
with their only embellishment the embroidered crests of his Houses on his upper right arm. Harry wore a matching cumber band teamed with tailored black dragon hide trousers. New dress shoes, polished black leather, completed the outfit.

Harry looked at himself critically in the mirror, noting that his hair was fashionably ruffled. His spectacles were the same gold that Hermione's jewellery was made from and would match. He smoothed a hand over his chin, noting the absence of bristles and stubble. Sirius had taught him the charm for shaving in the Summer but Harry hadn't needed it back then unlike most of his dorm mates. It seemed like his body had started to catch-up with the others though, and he had made the decision to get rid of the barely there facial hair when he'd started getting ready for the Ball.

He checked his appearance one last time and did a quick tempus charm. He was picking Hermione up early and bringing her back to the rooms for the photos her parents wanted to take. Ron, Draco, Neville and Theo were similarly bringing their dates.

He had time though so he took a deep breath and checked on the corsage that Neville had helped him put together. It was a wrist band of white carnations set onto a deep emerald green band. He had no idea of the colour of her dress but he knew she knew what colour he was wearing and Andromeda had hinted they would be coordinated.

A soft rap on the open bedroom door had Harry glancing towards it.

Sirius smiled at him. "You look good."

His father looked good too; dressed all in black, he looked dangerous and deadly. Sirius was ostensibly escorting Minerva although Harry knew he was a way for Sirius to be close in case there was an attack directed at Harry.

"Thanks." Harry felt a rush of nerves at the thought of the actual Ball. As many times as he'd rehearsed his dance with Hermione he was still anxious about it.

And about what could happen while he was dancing…

"You're going to be really careful, aren't you?" Harry blurted out. "About going off with Snape?"

Sirius walked into the room and placed his hands on Harry's shoulders, meeting his eyes firmly. "I will be very careful. You just try to enjoy the Ball and remember; your job is to keep an eye on your baby ravens, OK?"

Harry rolled his eyes at the nickname Sirius had coined for the Heirs of the Potter alliance and his other friends – any of the students who could feasibly be targeted by Crouch. He suspected Sirius had given him the task of watching over them as a way of keeping him from away from whatever was going to down with Crouch through Snape.

In some ways, he was relieved to be kept out of it. He knew Sirius had agreed a kind of truce with Snape but Harry didn't trust him and never would. If the mind healing had helped him understand and come to terms with the Dursleys abuse of him, it had also helped him understand that Snape hadn't been all that much better in how he'd treated Harry. He recognised that Snape had been much more civilised towards him since the start of the year but it didn't change Harry's distrust of him.

"I'm not sure it's worth putting yourself at risk." Harry said out loud.

"No, you're not sure Snape is worth putting myself at risk for." Sirius countered, his hands squeezing Harry's shoulders gently. "Spying is hard, Harry. It's hard and it's dangerous and it's necessary if we're going to be able to anticipate Voldemort's end game. Snape…” he sighed, "as much as I dislike
him, he's invaluable to us as a spy, and as a spy, our spy, he deserves a measure of protection and support for the risk he's taking which means we do our best to make sure his cover isn't blown until it absolutely has to be blown."

Harry flushed a little at Sirius's words but they were simply an explanation, lacking the note of chastisement that Harry felt should have been there – because Sirius was right. Snape was taking a big risk with the spying and they should be supportive. And if Harry was supportive of Draco and Theo who were in a similarly risky place – supporting Harry from within the heart of Slytherin – then he would be supportive of Snape.

"You're going along with him to protect him as much as to protect his cover, aren't you?" Harry mused out loud.

Sirius looked at him with amusement. "I was a Hit Wizard once upon a time. Some of the instincts don't go away." He admitted ruefully.

And the Grim animagus form would reinforce Sirius's protective instincts, Harry considered with a nod of understanding.

"Moody and Remus are backing you up, right?" Harry asked, not for the first time.

"And half of the Auror department who are patrolling." Sirius said firmly.

Harry nodded again. "Has Amelia been in touch again? Wasn't the Rat Squad going to check out the hideaway?"

"She has been in touch but unfortunately to confirm Travers, Rookwood and Mulciber are in the wind." Sirius sighed. "The Rat Squad verified that the property looked like it had some squatters overnight but was empty again. I figure one of them, probably Mulciber, realised the wards didn't respond to him anymore."

"I can't believe that they broke out of Azkaban so easily!" Harry commented. Crouch had impersonated the Minister to get them released into his custody and the Azkaban warden hadn't checked his identity. Amelia had apparently fired him on the spot.

"Frankly, I'm more worried about the five missing Dementors that went with him to ostensibly guard the prisoners." Sirius commented.

Harry grimaced. "Yeah."

"Look," Sirius said, "go and have a good time. We're as prepared as we can be. I have more tracking charms on me than a three year old and good people backing me up if Crouch does stage a confrontation."

Harry's throat closed up as words crowded at the back, eager to be spoken and yet he didn't want to speak them because he knew Sirius couldn't promise not to die…

"Hey, hey." Sirius waited until Harry met his gaze again. "He won't kill me, Harry." He said with quiet authority. "He hates me. I killed his lover and he wants revenge. A quick death won't give him the satisfaction of hurting me. It's more likely that he's going to try to capture me and I'm going to do everything I can to deny him getting his hands on me; alright?"

Harry reached forward and hugged him. "Just…you have to promise to be really, really, really careful and don't go haring off or anything."
"Careful will be my new middle name," Sirius said, hugging him back tightly, "I promise. Now you'd better get going or Hermione will think you're standing her up."

Alarmed, Harry shifted to perform another tempus charm. Sirius was right; it was almost time to leave but he still had plenty of time and he breathed out with relief.

Sirius went to ruffle Harry's hair and stopped at Harry's glare. "No ruffling?"

"Do you know how long it took me to get it like this?" asked Harry as he picked up the corsage and they made their way downstairs.

"I really don't want to." Sirius joked.

"Oh my!" Molly clasped her hands to her chest. "You do look very handsome, Harry!"

Miriam Granger beamed at him. "Oh I can't wait until you and Hermione are both here. It's going to make a wonderful photo!"

Harry smiled at her. "I'm going to get her now."

The walk to the Fat Lady seemed unusually long.

The Gryffindor portrait took one look at him and sighed. "Do you know the trouble this is causing me? Young men of all houses just turning up with the password? And where did they get it? Hmmm?

"Professor McGonagall gave it to me?" offered Harry nervously.

"A likely story." The Fat Lady harrumphed. "Well? What is it?"

"Ladybugs." Harry answered promptly.

The portrait swung open.

Harry hurried inside to find a group of guys already waiting in the Common Room staring at the girls' staircase, an anxious looking Michael Corner included. He was stood beside Anthony Goldstein who waved Harry over.

"Hey, Harry." Michael was holding a corsage of pink carnations and Harry couldn't help but think that they were going to clash with Ginny's Weasley hair despite the message of friendship in the flowers.

"Hey." Harry greeted him and nodded at Anthony. He took out his wand and conjured his patronus, causing a few of the boys to hustle backwards as the patronus stampeded out of the wand and into the room. "Go to Hermione and let her know I'm here, Prongs, please."

The patronus went off to carry Harry's message and he found himself the centre of attention. He went red but smiled sheepishly.

"I don't suppose you can resend your stag to get Gladys Kidd for me?" Anthony Goldstein grinned at him.

Gladys Kidd was in Ginny's year but she and Ginny had never been close. Harry grinned at Anthony. "If he comes back before she comes down, I'll send him." He promised.

His heart sank a little as he saw calculated eagerness start to enter the rest of the guys' faces but
luckily their attention was arrested by footsteps on the staircases.

Ginny appeared first.

Harry had to admit that she looked stunning. She wore her red hair loose and it fell in a gentle wave to rest on her shoulders. Her dress was modest; long sleeves and a square neckline with a high waistline in a beautiful cornflower blue that showcased her colouring. She had fastened a matching blue satin choker with a pretty cameo clasp. For the first time, Harry recognised that she was an attractive girl rather than simply thinking of her as Ron's little sister with the unfortunate crush on him.

Ginny's face lit up as her gaze fell on the sight of the three boys waiting. Harry surreptitiously kept back as Michael took a hesitant step forward. If Ginny's gaze lingered for a moment on Harry, he wasn't going to draw attention to it. He was dimly aware of Anthony moving to greet Gladys who had followed Ginny down the stairs.

Michael finished fastening the corsage on Ginny's hand and Harry finally thought it was alright to approach.

"You look lovely, Gin." Harry said sincerely, resolutely ignoring the blush that rose on her cheeks. "Are you and Michael going to wait for Ron before heading over to your folks at my place?"

Anthony cleared his throat. "Neville and Ron headed out for their dates just before you got here."

Ginny glanced at Michael. "So we should make our way then?" She turned back to Harry. "Unless you want us to stay and wait for Hermione with you?"

"That's OK." Harry said. "You know the way and Molly would kill me if I delay you." He grinned at her.

He caught Michael darting an apologetic look at Anthony, and Harry suddenly understood the two friends had intended spending the evening together as they were buddies under the protection system that the heirs of the Potter alliance had devised.

"Oh, hey, you can go along too, Tony," Harry invited him quickly. "Sirius won't mind and I'm sure your parents will want the photos he's bound to take of you and Gladys."

Both Michael and Anthony gave him pleased smiles. Anthony looked as though he was about to say something but before he could, Harry heard footsteps on the staircase and turned to see Hermione step into the Common Room.

She took his breath away.

Her hair was piled high on her head in a complicated do that left tendrils dangling, framing her face and drawing attention to her graceful neck. The dress was a figure hugging floor length sheath of dark green satin; there was one shoulder strap and her arms were bare. The gold jewellery of her Christmas presents glinting at her wrist, neck and ears. She was wearing green satin high heels, and had a small gold evening bag in one hand which he figured contained her wand.

Harry walked up to her without even realising he was closing the distance between them, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. "Hi."

"Hi." Hermione said.

They grinned at each other for a long moment, Harry absently keeping hold of Hermione's hand. He
eventually remembered the corsage and offered it to her.

"You look so beautiful." Harry said softly. If Ginny's appearance had helped him to see Ron's little sister as a girl in her own right, Hermione's had given him a heads up on the beautiful woman she was becoming.

Hermione smiled widely at him. "Thank you." She let him slip the corsage onto the wrist which was bare and patted his arm. "You look great too."

"Shall we?" Harry offered her his arm and she happily took it.

He turned around and was pleased when he didn't see Ginny and Michael or Anthony and Gladys. It would give him more time alone with Hermione as they walked to Harry's quarters.

o-O-o

Hermione was relieved when Andromeda shooed all of the kids out of Harry's and Sirius's rooms to the Ball. As much as she loved her parents, she wasn't sure she could take one more photo. She glanced at Harry and returned the shy delighted smile he gave her. He always made her feel special when he gave her that smile; as though he couldn't quite believe he'd been lucky enough to be going out with her rather than the other way around.

They both slowed with trepidation as they approached the doors of the Great Hall where Professor McGonagall was presiding over the entry way.

Ron clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed sympathetically. "Rather you than me, mate."

"Thanks, Ron." Harry said dryly.

Luna tugged Ron towards the hall. "Good luck with the Dancing Gibbydallies!"

Hermione rolled her eyes but decided it was a good name for the nerves fluttering in her belly at the idea of dancing in front of everyone.

Neville smiled at them softly, his hand clasped tightly in Hannah's before he followed Susan and her date, a fourth year Hufflepuff called Oliver Rivers, through the doors.

"Good luck with Obroski, Potter." Draco drawled as he passed them with his date hanging off his arm like a limpet. Although, Hermione inwardly conceded, the dark haired, dark eyed, Moira Selwyn, was a stunning contrast to Draco's light colouring. And despite the limpet tendencies, she also had enough gumption to be able to carry off a poised and articulate performance in being introduced not only to Draco's parents but Sirius and the rest of the House of Black.

Theo and Jeremy wished them good luck as the rest of the Weasleys clattered past, Fred and George had snagged fellow Quidditch team members, Katie and Angela, as dates. Ginny was presumably already in the Hall having left with her date ahead of the rest of them.

"Ah, good." Professor McGonagall smiled at Hermione and Harry as they brought up the rear. "We now have all our Champions. Just wait here." She nudge them into position by the door.

Cedric grinned at them. Cho looked stunning in a yellow Chinese dress, beautifully embroidered in bronze and turquoise with black accents; the colours of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw combined. Cedric, in black, looked debonair. "You two look amazing."

"Thanks," Harry said, "so do you both."
"I love your new broomstick." Cho said. "Can I join your next practice session? I'd like to see it in action again?"

"The Flaming Arrow is a good choice." Viktor chimed in. He looked distinctly uncomfortable in his dark purple formal wear but his date, Natalie Warren, looked stunning in a contrasting shade of lilac.

It was funny that the Head Girl and Head Boy had ended up being the dates for the visiting Champions, Hermione mused, as she caught sight of Robert Ogden smiling happily at Fleur. Robert had kept to classic black too but Fleur looked princess like in shades of pink.

She let the conversation drift over her since it centred on Quidditch and took in the Great Hall. The ceiling was swarmed with a thousand candles casting a soft glow over the changed school dining room. Instead of the usual tables, small round seating areas filled the edges of the room, leaving a dance floor in the centre.

The band, tucked away in the corner, gave a trumpet call and the Headmaster glided up to the centre of the dance floor. He was dressed in a vibrant sherbet lemon colour with a matching cap. He beamed out at them all.

"Welcome honoured guests..." there was a wave towards the VIP table where the Minister and other Ministry dignitaries sat...

"...the members of the press, professors and students all!" Dumbledore smiled warmly. "And a very Happy Yuletide it has been here at Hogwarts today! Let us enjoy this Yule Ball and our Christmas feast just as much!" He flung an arm out toward the Champions. "To begin, our Champions will perform an opening dance! Give them a warm round of applause and encouragement!"

The Headmaster sidled off the dance floor as the music started.

"Off you go, Mister Krum!" McGonagall said briskly. "Now, you Miss Delacour! And you, Mister Diggory!" She gave Harry an encouraging look. "Try to enjoy it, Harry!"

"I think I'd rather face the dragon again." Harry muttered as he pasted a smile on his face and led Hermione onto the dance floor.

She gave a breathy chuckle as they separated to bow and curtsy at each other before moving into a classic dance hold. They moved slightly stiffly, too aware of the audience to relax, but they performed the steps perfectly, finding the pattern immediately thanks to all the practice they'd done.

"At least you're with me this time." Harry whispered.

She smiled at him happily, giddy from the comment. "I would have been with you fighting the dragon if I could have been."

She wasn't aware of relaxing nor of Harry doing the same, their feet continuing the moves as their bodies began to subconsciously match the rhythm and sway of the music.

Harry smiled back at her. "I know."

She sighed as she caught sight of Sirius sneaking into the Hall to stand beside McGonagall as her escort. Her grip on Harry tightened and he drew her closer to comfort her automatically.

Hermione really wished they could have one night of not worrying about Voldemort or Crouch. But the Yule Ball was too tempting a target and the likelihood of nothing happening was remote. The best they could do was plan and hope they thwarted the attack.
Harry had confided in her that they were worried that Crouch was targeting Sirius and Hermione just knew Harry would have preferred to have had Crouch go after himself rather than Sirius. He had also said that it was an additional worry to the on-going concern that someone from Harry's group of supporters would be targeted.

The Potter alliance and Harry's friends were all paired up in a buddy system to ensure everyone's safety. Ron and Neville had organised everything; briefed Harry and told him not to worry. Still, Hermione knew Harry felt a responsibility to everyone who was in the alliance; to his friends. As much as she wished that they were going to relax and enjoy the evening, she knew the truth was that they would spend most of it watching out for everyone.

She couldn't really complain about Harry's protective tendencies; she wouldn't be alive if Harry hadn't spotted she was missing and tried to find her when the troll had invaded Hogwarts in their first year. But the part of her that was a fourteen year old girl simply yearning for a romantic night with her boyfriend was a tad resentful and disappointed. Hermione could admit that to herself but she never had intention of letting Harry know; he'd be hurt and that was the last thing she wanted.

The music ended and they separated to bow and curtsy again before making their way to the Champions' table. Each table had ten places; eight of the places were assigned to the Champions and their dates while the other two had been assigned to Professor Dumbledore and Madame Maxime. Karkaroff didn't look too happy being consigned to the Ministry VIP table.

She absently noted that Sirius and Professor McGonagall were sitting on the same table as Dean, Ron, Draco and Theo along with their dates. Snape was on the table next to them with Neville, Seamus, Blaise and Daphne, all of their dates and Doctor Jordan.

Dumbledore picked up the menu in front of him and smiled. "I will have soup to start." Immediately a bowl of soup appeared in front of him.

The Champions all followed Dumbledore's example and it wasn't long before they were eating and chatting away.

"I am looking forward to ze duelling tournament starting in ze New Year." Fleur said, responding to a question Dumbledore had asked her. "My friend Claire, she is very good."

"My cousin Eric is entering." Viktor confirmed.

"It's just as well Harry isn't eligible." Cedric joked. "According to our duelling instructor, he could be professional."

"I prefer Quidditch." Harry commented with a flush. "Hermione's planning to enter though, aren't you?"

Hermione nodded. "Me and quite a few of the others in the duelling clubs." She gave a self-conscious shrug. "I think Daphne has a good chance of winning it. She's very good."

"Greengrass?" Cho sniffed. "She's very young."

"So's Harry but he's leading the tournament." Robert pointed out dryly. "Greengrass is ruthless in the duelling ring. She put Harry through his paces the last time we had a practice session."

"What about you, Madame Maxime?" Harry asked politely. "Did you duel professionally?"

"Alas, no." The French Headmistress smiled at him approvingly. "I was never any good at ze duelling."
"Nonsense, Olympe!" Dumbledore said chivalrously. "Why I remember a certain European School Championship where if I remember rightly, you just missed out on a medal position!"

As Natalie asked to hear the story, the table settled into a comfortable atmosphere and it wasn't long before they'd coaxed a tale out of Dumbledore as they moved to the main course. The subject meandered after that through a variety of topics and everyone was enjoying dessert when an owl entered the Hall causing a commotion.

"Who would send mail at this hour?" Viktor said grumpily as the owl swooped down to land beside Snape.

Hermione frowned as Harry tensed and glared at the gift. "It's probably a late Christmas present?" She theorised.

"Who would be sending Snape, uh, Professor Snape a Christmas present?" Cho demanded with a cautious look at Dumbledore over the slip of respect.

Dumbledore raised his thin white eyebrows at her but gave her a mischievous smile. "Ah, sometimes I forget that students don't think we have lives outside of school!"

Cho blushed prettily. "I'm sorry, Professor."

"Not to worry, my dear." Dumbledore said, his blue eyes landing keenly on the gift-wrapped package that Snape had taken from the owl. "I believe Professor Snape was particularly looking forward to this gift. I am relieved it has arrived finally."

Hermione shot an anxious look toward Harry who managed to dredge up a smile for her. But then, he darted a glance toward Sirius who nodded at him slowly.

The game was afoot it seemed, Hermione mused with exasperated worry, wondering what was the deal with Snape's present.

She was aware that there was more going on with the situation with Voldemort than Harry had told them. There were secrets from the Summer that he hadn't shared; a trip to the Ministry that had upset him for weeks afterwards; the mind healing which Hermione figured had something to do with that than either the lingering damage of his childhood with the Dursleys or the newer death threats.

It was also clear to Hermione that while the official story was that Bill and Caro were providing extra security for the tournament, they were in fact searching for something in Hogwarts – something that they'd thought they might find in the Chamber of Secrets or Godric's Hollow but hadn't.

Then there was the matter of the Headmaster's wand. Harry had told her that the wand ownership was a bit of a mess having once belonged to an old ancestor of Harry's before being stolen, although because the Headmaster had won it in a duel, he had a legitimate claim to it and so there was apparently an on-going question of who the wand belonged to. Again, Hermione thought she wasn't getting the full story.

She would be annoyed with Harry – was annoyed with him deep down if she was honest – but she understood that whatever he was keeping secret, he was probably keeping secret for a reason. And in all probability that reason was probably protecting her and his other friends who he hadn't confided in either – she knew Ron had no more clue of the things she felt Harry was keeping from them than she did.

But the present and Snape's reaction was the latest thing and now she was Harry's girlfriend, Hermione felt she had a right to know. She turned to ask Harry but the words faded as she realised
Harry was doing a review of the Hall – checking that everyone was accounted for and safe.

She didn't need to ask him, Hermione thought with sudden blinding clarity. They all knew Snape had been a Death Eater, ostensibly a spy for Dumbledore, but still a Death Eater. If Snape hadn't truly changed his loyalties and had been in touch with Voldemort or Crouch somehow…

The present was a signal, part of the anticipated attack; Hermione was sure of it.

But why hadn't Harry confided in her, Ron and Neville if he suspected Snape of being a traitor? Maybe he was trying to protect them…or…

Or Harry knew what the present represented because Snape had told them; had been in touch with Voldemort and Crouch because Snape was spying.

But Harry didn't trust Snape. She was sure of that. And she didn't trust him either. She knew the Headmaster trusted him and perhaps before the Summer Hermione might have accepted the Headmaster's word on it but not since his involvement in placing Harry with the Dursleys and his part in denying Sirius a trial had emerged.

It was no wonder Harry was worried, Hermione concluded. He couldn't trust Snape and knew something was going to happen. Oh, she wished he had confided in her!

Dessert was finished.

Professor Dumbledore moved to announce the feast was over and the dance floor was open. The band struck up a cheerful tone.

"Would you like to dance?" asked Harry, offering his hand.

She managed a smile. "I'd love to."

The music swept over them and Hermione was pleased to see other people heading for the dance floor. She kept tight hold of Harry. She had no intention of letting him out of her sight the entire night.

Harry's steps faltered and she followed his gaze to where Snape was slipping out of the Hall.

"Harry?" Hermione prompted him gently and he gave an apologetic smile as he started them dancing again. "I guess Snape's gone to open his present somewhere private." She said briskly, hoping Harry would take the opportunity to open up to her.

He nodded but didn't say anything and Hermione sighed, swallowing down her irritation at his continuing silence. She didn't want anything to spoil their evening. Instead she leaned into him and wasn't surprised when he drew her closer, accepting the silent offer of comfort where he wouldn't accept the invitation to confide.

o-O-o

The staff room had been closer than going to his own rooms and Severus knew it was empty since all the remaining professors, except for the patrolling Moody, had been in the Great Hall when he had left. The fire crackled in the staff room but Severus was oblivious to it as he focused on unwrapping the package.

It was a book, a muggle book. There was a note in the cover.
"To my lover,

B."

Severus flipped through the pages and found a photo tucked between the pages. It was a picture of Crouch standing in a clearing in the Forbidden Forest – the clearing where the dragon pens had been, he realised with a frown. There was writing on the back.

'Bring Black. 10pm.'

Severus made a quick check of the time – there was just over another hour before they were supposed to make rendezvous. The feast had just finished but the Ball was anticipated to last until midnight so Crouch's time made sense. Everyone would be milling around by ten. Some students would no doubt be wandering the grounds rather than in the Hall; the professors and the patrols would be distracted. Crouch had chosen wisely.

He tucked the picture into the inner pocket of his dress robes and frowned at the book. It was a muggle book called 'Danny, Champion of the World' by Roald Dahl. Severus had never read it but he knew of it. He was the story of a boy and his father getting the better of a rich arrogant landowner. He wondered if Crouch believed himself to be the hero; the tenacious Danny? With the Dark Lord cast as William and Black as the landowner? Had Crouch even read the book, Severus mused; Crouch was a pureblood wizard with little exposure to the muggle world – how would he have even known about the book?

And if Crouch had not read it, Severus mused then the choice must have been someone else's…

He remembered the Dark Lord had kept an extensive library filled with muggle and wizarding books. He had been one of the rare few allowed to see it.

His mind slipped back to that meeting…

"I understand from Bella that you are almost ready for your interview with Albus Dumbledore." The Dark Lord said.

Severus bowed his head. "I am, my Lord."

"Hmmm." The Dark Lord twisted his lips in a semblance of a smile. "You avoid my gaze well, Severus. A good defence against a Leglimens but if you avoid his, he will know you have something to hide."

And Severus knew this was the test. He breathed in deeply and raised his dark gaze to meet the red-tinged eyes of the Dark Lord.

There was no time for preparation as the Dark Lord immediately attacked. For once, Severus was actually thankful of the pain Bella had caused him in her constant attacks on his mind because, damn her, the barrier had he had built in fury to keep her out helped.

The pressure on his mind had been immense and for a second Severus thought he would falter and allow the Dark Lord inside. But then the panicked realisation that if the Dark Lord got inside his mind he might see how utterly disgusted he'd been at Bella and Rodolphus, at their violence and the abhorrence of their political views, had him slamming the Dark Lord out of his head with a furious push.

"Good, Severus." The Dark Lord said with a thoughtful gaze. "You are a natural as am I." He turned suddenly. "Come with me." He moved, his robes billowing out behind him dramatically.
Severus followed because there was no other course of action available to him. He was surprised when the large room he was led into was a library – wall to wall shelves filled from floor to ceiling with books.

"Muggles do have one area of superiority over wizards," the Dark Lord said thoughtfully, "imagination. The ability to create and weave worlds out of nothing but words. Do you read, Severus?"

"Occasionally, my Lord." Severus murmured, although his reading was mostly potions related.

"You will need imagination in your role as my spy, Severus." The Dark Lord said quietly as he moved to a bookcase and began to peruse a shelf. "You will need to create a character; one that is remorseful of his past choices and deferent to the old fool. You will need to live this character every day, Severus, until it is as comfortable as your own skin and never allow the real you to be shown ever again."

In hindsight, Severus wondered if the Dark Lord had given away more about his philosophy on life than advice on spying. Because wasn't that what Thomas Marvolo Riddle had done? Hadn't he reinvented himself as the Dark Lord? Worn the character of Voldemort until the Heir of Slytherin had been the skin that encased him?

Which meant…

Severus sat down and carefully started to page through the book. He found what he was looking for on the page where Danny suggested using the sleeping pills in the raisins to capture the pheasants. The writing transformed as soon as Severus touched it.

"Severus,

You and I know the truth of your loyalty. Only a Prince can inherit the crown and understand that in sacrificing a rival Queen, the reward is the gift of her King’s loyal dog.

What kind of father would I be if I did not give my son and heir a present at Christmas?

I trust you’ll find a way to keep the pheasants asleep."

There was no signature but there didn't need to be.

Severus swallowed around the tight lump of panic in his throat. Dear Merlin! The Dark Lord had cast Severus in the role of Danny and...

And it was all a ruse; a manipulation to ensure that Severus was loyal and assured of his position, despite the presence of Crouch who seemed to have the Dark Lord's favour.

Severus might even believe that there was a kernel of truth in the words; he and the Dark Lord shared some commonalities which disturbed him – a disinterested muggle father being the primary one, with the need to be the consummate Slytherin another. And what better way to assure Severus of his place as the one true son than to offer him a false promise of paternal pride and inheritance of the Slytherin title?

He would have fallen for it when he was a young Death Eater; when he had craved the Dark Lord's acceptance and approval; when he had believed in the cause; when he had been as angry at his own father as Crouch no doubt was of his. But even on his darkest days he would never have exchanged Lily’s life for an opportunity to kill Black.
And the Dark Lord had never understood that.

Wood popped loudly in the fire bringing Severus back to himself. He called for a house elf. "Take this to my quarters." He instructed brusquely.

He checked the time again. Forty minutes.

Crouch thought the Dark Lord was giving Black to him but the Dark Lord's words were clear; he meant for Severus to have him. There would be an opportunity when they were alone for Severus to kill him…

And Severus could easily hide the body in the Forest and blame Crouch. He had the Dark Lord's backing for any upset Crouch might feel at being denied his prize.

Of course, he wasn't actually going to kill Black.

There were a number of excuses at hand; no chance of a surprise attack with Black suspicious of him and that it was too risky for his cover among them. Then there was always the 'Bartemius needed the reward more than him' excuse because wasn't serving the Dark Lord its own reward?

Yes, any number of ways to demur over the gift of Black's head on a platter.

Of course, the gift was only to sweeten the order of keeping the elf and the Summers woman asleep.

Severus tapped the book lightly. The Dark Lord was absolutely determined that they remain asleep which meant that they knew something, something important. And it probably wasn't where the Dark Lord and his minions were located. Severus doubted that they were in the same place that they had been staying in immediately after the Crouch residence. All of which meant that the reason why the Dark Lord was worried was not about the location being known so much as something else; something important – something the elf or the Summers woman had overheard or seen.

Moody stepped into the staff room. "Snape! I thought I saw you skulking back here." He closed the door with a slam and Severus admired the tactic that would give the impression to anyone lingering outside that he was confronting Severus not meeting with him.

He also wasn't surprised that Moody did a quick sweep of the room to check it was empty. He erected a privacy bubble.

"Well?"

"Ten o'clock in the clearing that was used for the dragon pens." Severus said succinctly. "You can't place Aurors within the Forest in that area without something like dragons to scare away the Acromantulas on the East and without the advance permission of the centaur herd to the West. Anyone following us to close the gap between the Forest and Hogwarts will be easily spotted."

"So you'll be alone?" Moody grimaced, his scarred face creasing in unexpected ways.

"I'm sure Black and I are capable of handling things." Severus said with more confidence than he actually felt.

"There'll be a patrol by your position at ten-ten." Moody said gruffly. "Tell Black."

Severus nodded.
Moody harrumphed and stomped away to the door, yanking it open. "Go and dance, Snape! Stop skulking in rooms!"

Severus rolled his eyes but when he swept out of the staff room he was surprised to see Karkaroff hovering at the end of the corridor.

"Are you lost, Igor?" Severus asked, allowing his disdain full reign.

Karkaroff glanced around wildly as though he was expecting Crouch to jump out of a tapestry as he hurried to Severus's side. "It's a trap!" He hissed.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Of course it's a trap, Igor."

Karkaroff glared at him. "For you!"

Oh.

And Severus hadn't actually considered that part of it with the Dark Lord's missive because the Dark Lord clearly still trusted him. Whereas Crouch did not and Severus had almost forgotten that part of Crouch wanting Severus's help to deliver Black was as much about testing Severus's loyalty as it was about actually getting his hands on Black.

"Igor, do you think I'm stupid?" Severus snapped, irritated that he had almost forgotten to be wary.

Karkaroff tossed him a disgusted look and raised his hands. "Go ahead then. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"If I do say anything," Severus pointed out dryly, "it would no doubt lead to your death." He sniffed and whirled away.

He checked the time again. He had twenty-five minutes to get Black and be at the rendezvous point. He hurried down to the Great Hall. Black sat on a table conversing with the Bulgarian and French Ambassadors, Cornelius hanging on his every word like an eager puppy.

Severus caught Black's eye and slipped back out of the Hall, waiting impatiently in an alcove. He caught sight of a dozen young couples meandering through the school and out of the door without coats as though it wasn't December. He mused that in normal circumstances he'd probably be prowling through the rose garden checking to ensure that the couples weren't alone long enough for anything to happen; Hogwarts hadn't been home to a teenage pregnancy for over a hundred years and the staff took pride in that record.

It wasn't long before Black exited the Hall. He immediately made his way to Severus.

"Lay on, MacDuff." Black said brightly.

Severus wondered at the use of Shakespeare; wondered if the reference had meaning. Possibly, he was seeing symbolism where there was none after the wordplay in the Dark Lord's message. He sighed and motioned for Black to follow him.

This was going to be a disaster, Severus thought, because Karkaroff was right; it was a trap and he was leading them right into it.

o-O-o

The greenhouse was filled with the perfume of the flowering blue and white Winterbell plants. The
rushing sound of the watering system provided a constant backdrop to the chimes and echoes of the bells.

"It's so beautiful here, Nev." Hannah sighed. "I'm glad we came here rather than the rose garden."

The rose garden would have been freezing. Neville had suggested the greenhouse with its beautiful scent and array of flowers – a heated greenhouse no less – instead. It was a suggestion that had met with approval by Hannah, and by Susan.

Harry's rules; no couple in the alliance or Harry's friendship circle went outside of the Great Hall without another couple in attendance. The rule had been met with a chorus of complaints when Harry had announced it at the last Heirs' meeting, but Harry had been insistent. The couples didn't have to stay together all the time but they had to be within yelling distance of each other. It had been that, Harry had said, or nobody went outside of the Great Hall.

And those in the alliance had felt it then; the hard tone of an order backed up with the power of the magical oath they had sworn. Harry was protecting them; they were honour bound to follow his lead.

Neville shook off the memory as he focused on Hannah. She looked incredibly pretty in a dress of pale sunshine yellow that played up her blonde hair and blue eyes. The tight bodice flared into a bell-shape skirt that fell to the floor. The white carnations corsage he had presented her with was wrapped around her wrist.

He stopped her in front of the small rock garden that took up the far right corner of the greenhouse. The trickling sound of the water running over the dark stones was a perfect backdrop for their first proper kiss on a real date. Of course, they'd kissed plenty of times on their practice dates but this was special…

Hannah smiled at him brightly, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "We should kiss, Neville, before we're late getting back and Harry gets all worried about us."

Neville rolled his eyes. But it was a fact. He'd said they'd be back in twenty minutes and if they were a minute late, he was fairly certain that Harry would come looking for them.

"You look beautiful." Neville said, taking hold of Hannah's hand.

"You look good too." Hannah grinned at him. "Mum is going to be stoked with the pictures your Gran took."

"I can't believe you charmed her into taking extra copies!" Neville said, pulling her closer.

"I'm very charming." Hannah said with a grin, rising up on tip-toes to brush her lips against his…

A scream tore through the bell chimes and babbling water.

Hannah wrenched herself away from Neville. "Susan!"

Neville went after her immediately, following as she ran towards where they'd left Susan and her date Oliver. Oliver was in their year; another Hufflepuff. He was quiet but personable enough. They ran around the corner and found Susan alone, her hands covering her face as she sobbed.

"Susan!" Hannah ran over to her best friend, panicked.

Susan lowered her hands and threw herself into Hannah's arms. "Oh, Hannah!"
"What did he do?!" Hannah snarled, morphing from the sweet girl Neville had been kissing to a fiercely furious female in a heartbeat. "Did he try something? If he did, I'll hex his balls off!"

Susan burrowed closer into Hannah's shoulder and carried on sobbing.

Neville floundered helplessly. Should he go after Oliver and hex him himself? A part of him wanted to at the sight of a clearly upset Susan sobbing her heart out. Harry was going to be furious with Oliver and with him for letting Oliver do whatever it was that had upset Susan. Wasn't the whole idea of the buddy system making sure none of them got hurt?

"What happened, Suse?" Hannah said in a low voice, rubbing Susan's back sympathetically.

Susan lifted her head just enough to shoot Neville an embarrassed glance before she shook her head and lowered it again.

Hannah frowned and made a shooing motion at Neville. "Can you wait outside of the door or something?"

He wanted to protest but Susan was already upset and clearly his presence wasn't helping.

"I'll be just outside." Neville promised. He could guard them from there. He went outside, shivering as the cold air hit him hard after the warmth of the greenhouse. He closed the door just enough that the girls wouldn't feel the cold but he could still hear them.

"What happened?" hissed Hannah.

"He tried to kiss me!" Susan blurted out. "And when I said no, he just grabbed me and…"

Neville was going to kill Oliver.

He glared out into the darkness and frowned when his eyes caught on movement in the dark. Two figures dressed in black were walking swiftly across the grass to the forest. He squinted and he realised that it was Sirius and Snape.

Strange.

His heart beat a little faster. Maybe they'd gotten some information on whatever Voldemort had planned? Should he follow them or tell Harry or…

"He said that it was obvious that because I'd dragged us along with you and Neville that I must want to kiss him!" Susan's distressed voice drifted through the partially open door to him. "He said it was my fault!"

"It was not your fault!" Hannah assured her heatedly.

Oliver was a dead man walking, Neville thought.

"I told him I'd only agreed to come to the ball with him as a friend!" Susan replied, her words still thick with tears. "He wouldn't listen!"

"Did you hex him?" demanded Hannah.

"I kicked him!" Susan replied. "Then I screamed and he ran off!"

"Coward!" Hannah muttered. "Wait till I get my hands on him!"
There was going to be a line, Neville considered wryly. Susan was very popular. Oliver was going
to find himself very unpopular for trying to force her into a kiss she didn't want.

A noise to the side of the greenhouse caught his attention. It had sounded like scuffling. Was it
Oliver? If it was, he was going to hex him into the back end of beyond! He frowned and walked
slowly over to peek around the corner.

There was nobody there.

The side of the greenhouse stretched out in front of him, empty and dark.

He shivered again as a brush of wind reminded him he was without any outdoor clothing. He should
go back inside the greenhouse and persuade Hannah and Susan to return to the castle. If they waited
any longer Harry was bound to come looking for them anyway. He rubbed his arms and turned
around.

The sight of something swinging towards him filled his vision for a split second before the side of his
head exploded and everything went dark.

o-O-o

"Neville's late."

Harry frowned and checked the time again. He hadn't been keen on any of the alliance leaving the
Great Hall – something a lot of them had picked up on and so they hadn't moved – but Neville had
said that he'd promised Hannah a real first kiss and Harry had understood immediately that Neville
could hardly do that in front of everyone in the Great Hall.

Hermione lowered her glass of punch and did her own tempus charm. They’d danced off and on
since the end of the feast; retiring to a table where Ron had set up camp since he and Luna had
apparently agreed that he was only obligated to give her one dance. Luna had spent the rest of the
evening dancing with a host of others. Ron had quietly assessed each guy who'd wandered up to
invite Luna with the practiced eye of a big brother. Harry's best mate had spent an inordinate amount
of time glaring at Michael Corner for the first part of the evening.

He hadn't needed to, Harry ruminated briefly. Michael and Anthony had stuck together with their
dates – heading to the dance floor together, stopping for a drink of punch together, and wandering
over to sit with Ron even. They hadn't left the Great Hall and slowly over the last hour Ron had
started to relax about Ginny's date.

"You're right." Hermione said as though it had been in doubt.

Ron tore his eyes away from where Luna was being whirled around by Fred on the dance floor and
joined Harry in frowning. "Neville's never late."

Which was worrying because it hadn't even been ten minutes since Harry had seen Sirius leaving
with Snape.

Every single thing in him was screaming that something was wrong.

Only he really didn't know whether it was worry about Sirius or whether it was Neville being late.

"Maybe he and Hannah are just taking their time?" Hermione offered awkwardly. "It's a special
night for them since this is the first 'real' date they've been on."
And Harry hadn't really made it all that special for Hermione since the feast had ended; since he'd seen Snape take the present.

Harry gave her an apologetic smile and slipped his hand into hers. "I'm sorry. This is supposed to be a special night for us too and I know I'm being a worrywart about everyone but I can't help it." He didn't want anyone else getting hurt because of him.

Hermione squeezed his hand lightly. "I understand."

Ron cleared his throat, drawing their attention. "So Neville, mate?"

Harry bit his lip. "I think we should go look for them. Neville said he was going to the greenhouse with the Winterthingies."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Winterbells! We just wrote an essay on them!"

"I can't remember what they're called either." Ron said leaping to Harry's defence.

"I have a lot on my mind right now." Harry added.

"Such as what's going on with Professor Snape?" Hermione asked pointedly.

Sometimes, Harry reflected, he really hated that Hermione was so smart. "Yes," he said tersely, "and no; I can't explain."

He saw Ron and Hermione exchange a shared look of frustration at that.

"Look, you know there's some stuff I can't tell you." Harry said defensively, rubbing the back of his neck. "Sirius agrees and it could put you in a lot of danger to know it." And it could put people like Snape in danger if they knew and Voldemort got his hands on them.

"We just want to help." Hermione said, folding her arms over her chest, a familiar stubborn tilt to her head. "We understand the danger."

Ron nodded enthusiastically.

But they didn't understand, not really, Harry thought tiredly. Because as much as he claimed they'd been with him through his adventures, they'd never faced Voldemort the way he had. And he never wanted them to face Voldemort the way he had; the way he was going to have to eventually.

"We should go and find Neville." Harry said firmly, getting up.

He felt rather than saw the exchange between them but Hermione skipped a few steps to catch up with him and slip her arm around his while Ron fell into step on the other side of him.

Theo materialised from somewhere just as they got to the doors of the Great Hall. "Problem?"

"Neville's late." Harry said. "We're going to look for him. Can you keep an eye on things here?"

Theo simply nodded. "Consider it done."

Harry left without another word. He felt something pushing him, pulling him, forcing him to walk and find Neville, to hurry.

The greenhouses looked benign as they approached; only one was lit up and Harry assumed it was the one Neville had gone into with Hannah. The outside of it looked deserted. Nobody else was
around and Harry shivered violently in the cold. Hermione tapped him with her wand and Harry felt the rush of warmth as the charm took hold. He sent her a grateful smile.

Voices drifted out of the partially open door as they got closer; Hannah and Susan, Harry recognised as he started to distinguish them. Where were Neville and Oliver?

Harry released his wand into his hand and carefully nudged open the greenhouse door. He poked his head around it and his eyes widened at the sight of Hannah and a very upset Susan sitting in the corner. He pushed open the door fully and hurried inside, Hermione and Ron at his heels.

"What's happened?" Harry asked bluntly.

Susan bit her lip and looked away from him, clearly embarrassed.

"Oliver tried to kiss her!" Hannah replied angrily. She tucked a lock of Susan's hair back behind an ear. "He wouldn't take no for an answer and Susan had to kick him and scream for Neville and me!"

Anger swept over Harry in a rush.

"Oh, Susan!" Hermione hastened to Susan's other side and placed an arm around her. "That's terrible! Are you alright?"

"Where is the bastard?" Ron snarled angrily, voicing the question Harry wanted to ask.

"He ran off!" Hannah said.

Harry grimaced as he started to have a suspicion about why Neville was late. "Neville went after him?"

Hannah's head shot up and she shook it emphatically. "No!" She pointed at the door. "You didn't see him? He just went outside to give me and Suse a bit of privacy and…" she blanched, "he should be out there!"

Harry's heart stuttered in his chest. Neville had been outside of the greenhouse on his own?! There had been no-one outside the greenhouse. He was missing!

"Maybe he went after Oliver anyway?" suggested Ron, nervously.

Harry didn't think so. Yes, Neville was more confident now to have gone after Oliver over what had happened with Susan but not if it meant leaving the girls unguarded.

Hermione's eyes met Harry's frantically in silent agreement with his assessment. "Harry, the map might show…"

He lifted his hand. "Accio Marauders' Map!" He called. Stupid, he berated himself. He should have had it on him all evening.

The map zoomed through the door and smacked into his hand.

He opened it quickly and tapped it with his wand giving the password in a muttered half-breath that was too low for Hannah and Susan to overhear.

The map unfurled and Harry's eyes darted around trying to see where Neville was as they all crowded around him. Oliver, Susan's date, was back in Hufflepuff tower…the rest of the alliance was in the Great Hall…a few of the Durmstrang students were on their way back to the ship…Hagrid and Madame Maxime were in the rose garden along with Rita Skeeter…
He shook his head. There was no sign of Neville anywhere. There was also no sign of Sirius and Snape – they must have gone beyond the Hogwarts' wards.

"No Neville." Hermione confirmed.

"Where is he?" Hannah demanded, clearly frightened. "He was right outside the door! I swear!"

"I don't think he's in Hogwarts anymore." Harry said tersely.

"Is there some way his presence could be hidden from the map?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know." Harry admitted.

"We should ask Sirius." Ron said. He frowned. "Where is Sirius?" he asked puzzled, pointing at the map. "Why isn't he on the map?"

"He went to check on something with Snape." Harry almost growled in frustration as he collapsed the map.

There was no doubt in his mind that Voldemort's Yuletide attack had begun; Neville had been taken, and Sirius was walking with eyes wide open into a trap.

He had to find some way of telling Sirius about Neville, Harry thought frantically. He could send his patronus but then…if Prongs arrived in the middle of the confrontation with Crouch and distracted Sirius at the wrong moment…

No. He had to go himself. But he still had the job Sirius had given him to do, (and which he had already failed at since Neville was gone, Harry reflected with bitter disappointment), and he had no idea where Sirius had gone with Snape.

"Harry…" Hermione murmured, reading him with ease. "This isn't your fault." Her hand rested gently on his arm.

Harry swallowed down the urge to snap at her.

"No, it's mine." Hannah said in a small voice. "I was the one who told him to wait outside."

Her self-loathing kicked Harry into action.

"Hannah, it's not your fault." He said firmly. He took a deep breath. The map had shown him Moony was on patrol by the Forest with Tonks and Moody. Moony would be able to answer the question about the map and might know where Sirius was headed. "All of you go back to the Great Hall. Get everyone gathered together in my quarters and make sure nobody else is missing." He handed the map to Hermione.

"What about you?" She asked anxiously.

"I'm going to find Remus." Harry said. "He can help with the map so we can find Neville." And help Harry locate Sirius so he could tell him.

She bristled immediately. "You can't go alone! That could be exactly what Crouch wants!"

"She's right, mate." Ron backed her up. "I'll come with you."

"Why you?" Hermione asked tartly. "I'm just as capable of backing Harry up as you!"
"But I'm his best friend!" Ron retorted.

"I should go with him," Hannah piped up. "Neville's my boyfriend!"

"Enough!" Harry shouted. "We don't have time for this! You're all going back to the Great Hall." His magic swirled around them and he yanked it back under his control. "We still have the rest of the alliance to protect. That's your job now."

But they had a point about him going off on his own. It was how he'd almost got caught at the World Cup by Crouch. If Neville hadn't turned up that time…

"Accio my invisibility cloak!" Harry said, lifting his hand. A moment later, there was a firm smack as the cloak landed in his palm, a pool of silvery material. "See; I'll use this and I'll be fine."

Hermione sighed but nodded, giving in.

Ron's jaw firmed. "Just be careful, mate."

"Look after everyone, Ron." Harry ordered, ushering them out of the door.

Hermione paused beside him and kissed his cheek. The swirling emotions in her eyes gave away her unhappiness but there was nothing for it, Harry determined, as he watched them leave the greenhouse. He owed it to Neville to find Remus as soon as possible. He headed out as soon as he was under the cover of the cloak, heading for the last position he'd seen Remus on the map.

o-O-o

Sirius shivered violently and wished he'd thought to delay Snape enough to grab a cloak. Being outside in Scotland in mid-December without a coat or a warm wool cloak was stupid. He resisted the urge to turn into Padfoot to gain the benefit of his form's thick furry coat and instead did another warming spell.

Snape looked as frozen as Sirius felt. His usually sallow face was white with cold. And perhaps Sanpe's lips were turning blue, Sirius mused; it was hard to tell when the only light was the starlight falling through the tree canopy.

"Have you done a warming spell?" demanded Sirius.

Snape stared at him with blatant confusion.

"It's freezing out here." Sirius said. "Neither of us have coats. Do a warming spell before you freeze to death." He rubbed his arms.

"Perhaps you should take your own advice." Snape carped as he removed his wand and tapped his robes.

"I've already done three." Sirius huffed. "They're not making a dent."

Snape frowned. "Then you're doing them wrong." He huffed out a breath, a silvery mist that drifted in the cold air. "You always were hopeless at Charms."

"I was in the top three." Sirius shot back.

"Lily was top."

"James was second."
"And Lupin was third." Snape said dryly.

"Huh." Sirius rubbed his upper arms furiously and wondered whether he had lost feeling in his fingers. "Fine. I was in the top five."

Snape made to open his mouth.

"What the hell time is it and where the hell is he?" Sirius demanded before Snape could correct him on class order again.

"A good question." Snape said.

Suddenly, Sirius felt a bad chill at his back and his mind slipped into a flash of memory…

_James lying dead on the floor…_

_The cemetery and the tombstone that made it all real…_

Sirius shook himself furiously and whipped around, his wand pointing out towards the advancing cold. "Dementors!" He called out as his back bumped into Snape's.

It was no wonder he was bloody cold!

"We're surrounded!" Snape hissed out.

"Can you make a patronus?" Sirius asked tersely.

"Yes." Snape snapped back. "You?"

"Yes," Sirius said darkly, "but after so many years of exposure, I don't do well around Dementors. I'm not going to last long."

Snape breathed in sharply at Sirius's admission. "Would Crouch know that?"

Sirius bit off a swear word. "Probably. It was all over the Ministry that I had a bad reaction to the Dementors at the tribunal set up for the Death Eaters caught at the World Cup."

"There will be a patrol here in ten minutes." Snape said brusquely. "We just need to last that long."

"Right." Because he'd lasted all of one second in the courtroom.

Sirius swallowed down his panic. It had no place in a fight. He needed to focus. He needed to fight the Dementors and get back to Harry.

The dark shapes by the trees glided closer.

Sirius thought of Harry; of opening his presents with Harry that morning. "Expecto Patronum!" His silvery Grim erupted from his wand and ran toward the Dementors.

He heard Snape cast his own patronus.

For the next five minutes, Sirius cast patronus after patronus. But as one Dementor would be occupied another would glide forward to take its place. His strength was weakening; his focus futzing in and out as memories flickered through his mind as the Dementors drew out the worst of his life.
Behind him, he could hear Snape's voice grow hoarse as he called out another patronus. Snape's breathing was laboured and Sirius didn't think Snape was going to last much longer.

Sirius dragged in a sharp breath of air; his mind was going foggy but he knew there was one option left open to him and he took it. "Familius magicus protectus!"

The gold and silver magic of the Potter and Black families swarmed around him, wrapping him and Snape up into a protective blanket while at the same time tendrils spread out to shove the Dementors back. But it was draining and Sirius was already weakened. He could feel his hold on consciousness slipping away and tried desperately to hang on. If he was out of it, he couldn't prevent a follow-up attack.

But it was no use.

As the chill of the Dementors faded, his eyes closed and didn't open as he fell to the floor of the Forest with a soft thud.

O-O-O

The sound of Black falling would have usually had Severus spinning around but he was more focused on remaining upright as the tendrils of the family magic Black had called faded away. He felt as weak as a kitten. Summoning a patronus was advanced magic and took a lot of power. Summoning several in a short space of time had used up a lot of magical energy.

A slow clapping had him lifting his head defiantly to assess the new threat…or rather the threat they'd thought they would face: Crouch.

He was disguised again – as Cornelius Fudge of all people. A gold talisman hung around his neck and Severus recognised it as a Ministerial artefact. There were several of them in existence and all had the same purpose; to protect the wearer against the effects of the Dementors and to be able to order them around. He assumed Crouch's had once been his father's. Crouch Senior had been the Director of the DMLE at one point.

He put together the facts that had emerged that day quickly. Crouch had affected an escape from Azkaban pretending to be Fudge the night before for three Death Eaters and in doing so had taken a number of Dementors with him. Clearly, he was putting the Dementors to good use by weakening Black before he took him or killed him.

The latter was more worrying especially since Severus knew he would struggle to put up a fight to save Black with his current energy levels. He could barely lift his wand.

"My, my, my." Crouch smirked at him evilly which just looked so wrong and out of place on Cornelius Fudge's face that Severus's stomach turned. "You delivered!" His eyes glittered. "Well done, lover."

Severus shivered and he knew the Dementors were drawing close again, sapping what little was left of his energy. He inclined his head. "What do you intend to do with him?"

Crouch grinned. "I guess there's no harm in telling you." He dug into a pocket and drew out a collar. "I found this in the family vault. Shall I show you? Let me show you!" He practically skipped over to Black and placed the collar around his neck before Severus had drawn breath enough to lift his wand.

Black morphed in front of his eyes into a Grim.
Severus frowned heavily. That was bad. If Crouch kept the collar on him Black wouldn't be able to transform into a wizard and escape. Of course, Black might be able to escape as a Grim. Severus was hardly an expert where the animagus was concerned.

"I always wanted a dog." Crouch said gleefully. "And now I have one!" He looked over at Severus. "The collar will keep him obedient too. It delivers quite a sharp shock if he disobeys me!" He clapped his hands together. "I'm going to love our training sessions."

Severus shivered again at the anticipatory gleam in Crouch's eye.

"Well, I must get the puppy home. I do mean to give him a home for life and not just for Christmas after all." Crouch said abruptly, turning back to Severus with a smirk. "And we must provide you with some reason why you don't stop me from leaving, hmm?" His wand snapped up so fast Severus wondered if he'd blinked and missed it.

He tightened his own hold on his wand, sensing that an attack was imminent. "I'm more than capable of maintaining my cover, Crouch." Severus snarled.

"Tut, tut, lover. I'm only thinking of you! But I am afraid I will need to leave the Dementors here." Crouch smiled nastily. "I'm sure someone will have come looking for you before they feed, lover."

He was so focused on Crouch that the spell hitting him from behind took him by surprise. His body snapped into paralysis and fell heavily to the Forest floor, crushing the dead leaves and grass beneath him.

He could see everything; could see Crouch and another man, Rookwood – his mind supplied helpfully – take hold of Black, and produce a portkey. They disappeared in a whirl.

The descending cold told him the Dementors were closing back in.

Fear crept into his belly.

Black was captured and immobilised.

Severus was surrounded by Dementors and paralysed.

The odds weren't looking good that either of them would survive the trap Crouch had set for them and they had willingly walked into.

o-O-o

Remus strode purposefully towards the Forest. It wasn't quite a march but it was a fast walk. One that Moody was having trouble keeping up with. Tonks had started to lag too, her innate respect for the retired Auror seeping into her performance as she allowed her pace to match his. Remus respected Moody but he wasn't willing to sacrifice a moment in reaching Sirius and Snape.

He had agreed with Harry when Sirius had first told them of the anticipated trap, Remus thought furiously; Sirius going with Snape into a trap was a really, really bad idea.

The decision to wait for ten minutes for a patrol to trip over them in the Forest meant that there was ten minutes when Sirius would be alone to face whatever Crouch had thought up because Merlin knew Remus didn't trust Snape to want to back up Sirius and in stark terms, to protect his cover, Snape might choose not to back up Sirius too.

"Go on with Lupin, girl!" Moody snapped. "Don't wait for me!"
Thank Merlin, one of them had their heads screwed on, Remus thought as Tonks ran up to join him, abdicating her place at Moody's side finally.

A twig snapped up ahead of him and Remus caught the scent of something. His wand was out and pointed at thin air as he came to a sudden halt.

The air shimmered and suddenly Harry's head and neck emerged from his invisibility cloak. "It's just me, Remus."

Remus's heart sank. He'd so hoped Sirius's ploy of giving Harry the job of watching out for his friends and alliance members would mean that Harry wouldn't attempt to interfere with Sirius's decision to go with Snape. No matter that he agreed with Harry, he didn't want Harry getting caught up in whatever was going to go down between Sirius and Crouch anymore than Sirius did.

"Harry…" he opened his mouth to berate Harry for delaying them.

"What the hell are you doing here, lad?" Moody snapped out.

"Neville's missing." Harry explained briskly. "I need to tell Sirius. Do you know where he is?"

"I'll tell him." Remus said swiftly. "We're on our way to back him up now. You get back to the school and make sure nobody else is missing."

For a second, Harry's jaw tightened in a manner that Remus recognised all too well from his friendship with James but Harry nodded abruptly, perhaps sensing Remus's inner urgency. Harry reached for the hood on the invisibility cloak but before he could pull it up, the sound of hooves racing over the ground had them all turning to meet a young centaur who halted just in front of them, rearing up as he stopped.

"I come to warn you, Raven!" The centaur said breathlessly. "Dark Ones that feed on the souls of others are in the Forest. Our weapons are useless against them."

"Dark Ones?" questioned Harry.

Moody grunted. "Dementors! Bloody hell!"

Harry's eyes widened in horror and Remus had a feeling his own face reflected the same. Sirius was incredibly sensitive to Dementors…his friend stood no chance if faced with a number of them!

"Where?" Harry's question yanked Remus out of his thoughts.

"Where the pens of the firebreathers were placed…" The centaur had hardly stopped talking when Harry took off running.

Remus swore and followed him. From the pounding footsteps he could hear, Tonks was just behind him and so was the centaur.

They entered the Forest at speed; the trees looming up in front of them only for Harry to dodge them with ease, finding the path as though he'd travelled it before. They broke into the clearing and Remus felt his entire body go cold.

Five Dementors circled a dark figure on the ground – Remus couldn't tell who it was – and one of the five was reaching for the man's head…

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry yelled.
Remus stared at the sight of him. Harry looked every inch a powerful wizard. He stood proudly; his back straight, his wand pointed firmly without a hint of shaking or tremors…his face was white with tension but his green eyes were dark with grim determination…

Prongs clattered out of the wand – a silvery stag that charged immediately for the Dementors chasing them away with ease, sending them tumbling into the Forest – into Acromantula territory. An unholy scream ripped through the air and there was a cacophony of chittering.

Dear Merlin! The Acromantula were eating the Dementors!

His stomach rolled uneasily and Remus ignored the surge of nausea as he followed Harry as he hurried over to the fallen wizard.

It was Snape.

Remus's heart sank with disappointment and he didn't have to look at Harry to know he was devastated.

The Potions Professor blinked up at them a flush of humiliation filling his cheeks.

"Finite Incantatem!" Harry snapped out.

Snape sagged onto the ground for a moment before he rolled and got unsteadily to his feet. Remus repressed the urge to help him, knowing his assistance would be unwanted.

"Where's Sirius?" Harry demanded as soon as Snape got vertical.

"Crouch took him." Snape bit out.

And even though he'd prepared for those words, they hit Remus like a sucker-punch. He closed his eyes briefly.

"I'm sorry, Potter." Snape's uncharacteristic words had Remus's eyes snapping open.

Merlin! Remus flushed with shame. He'd forgotten in his own pain about Harry.

Again.

He was an idiot, Remus rebuked himself harshly. Sirius would expect him to be there for Harry. He turned to say something comforting or reassuring or…something to Harry and stopped before a word passed his lips.

Harry looked as though he'd been carved from granite; hard and unyielding. His expression was shuttered; closed down, giving away nothing of the emotions that had to be running through him.

"There was nothing I could do to stop Crouch taking him." Snape sounded disgusted with himself.

"The Dementors…they weakened us both and…"

Harry held up his hand and amazingly Snape followed the silent command to stop. "Was Neville with Crouch?"

Snape's face flickered with surprise. "No. Was he meant to be?"

"He's missing. We should get back." Harry started walking back towards the school but paused by the centaur. "Thank you for the warning."
"You are welcome, Raven." The centaur said quietly, shifting restlessly like a nervous foal.

Harry continued walking.

"The lad's not wrong. We need to get back and round up the cavalry." Moody huffed as the rest of them all hesitated in the clearing. He turned around and started to limp after Harry.

Remus sighed as Tonks fell into step beside him and offered him a grim smile.

"He'll be OK, Remus." Tonks said determinedly. "I know he will."

He wondered who she meant; Sirius…or the boy walking up ahead of them looking as though the weight of the entire world rested upon his shoulders.

o-O-o

Sirius snapped into wakefulness with an inner sense that his very life depended on it. He stopped himself from opening his eyes though and took deep careful breaths to continue the impression he was out for the count while he assessed his circumstances.

Firstly, he wasn't human.

He'd sometimes slip into Padfoot when he was asleep – particularly if a dream involved him running around as Padfoot – but those instances were rare. They had been even in Azkaban if he'd been stupid enough to fall asleep in human form and tempt the Dementors with his dreams. Add to that that he'd been battered unconscious by magical exhaustion not asleep and he ruled that out as a reason for his sudden change in form.

Which meant his turning into Padfoot hadn't been by choice.

He assessed his physical state.

Tired.

Achy.

His body was pained as though he'd been back in Azkaban for a year. The exposure to the Dementors had done its work. His mind was cobwebby but clearing up fast though thanks to his Occlumency.

He wasn't injured – or not much anyway. All his limbs felt intact but there was a solid bruise along his left flank – possibly from hitting the deck when he'd passed out. Otherwise there was no sting of scratches or pain to indicate an injury.

There was something around his neck. A heavy cold feeling like a necklace…or a collar. Well, that was disturbing.

There was a heavy metal circle around one ankle that he remembered all too well from his days in Azkaban.

So, turned into his animagus form, collared and chained.

He breathed in deeply to take in the scents around him. He wasn't in the Forest anymore. He scented dust and concrete beneath him; wood burning – a fire at the other end of the room maybe since he couldn't feel its warmth anywhere close by.
There were the underlying scents of Azkaban; unwashed bodies and hair, systematic decay that couldn't be eliminated with a quick wash and scrub after only a day outside of the prison. He was wherever the escaped prisoners were then.

Maybe another Mulciber property.

Maybe.

Would they be in the same place as Voldemort? His heart beat a little faster at that thought.

Maybe not. He couldn't see Voldemort allowing the prisoners close to him while he wasn't at full strength. He'd keep them once removed like he'd done with Snape.

Sirius spared a thought for the spy. He hadn't a clue what had happened after the family magic had driven the Dementors back – driven them back but perhaps not away. Hopefully, it had given Snape a chance to get away.

Someone close stank of fear; sweat mixed with too much cologne…it was familiar something he had already scented earlier that night.

He let one ear flap open and listened carefully. The drag of a chain on the ground near to him meant that the other person was a prisoner just like him and his heart stuttered in his chest as he realised it meant someone else had been taken.

He needed to open his eyes. He opened one cautiously. His vision was fuzzy but cleared as he blinked a couple of times.

Neville filled his gaze. Pale and scared, curled up in a corner and tied to the wall with chains.

Crap.

Neville's frightened gaze was fixed on something on the other side of what looked like a large and empty room and Sirius followed his line of sight until he saw Crouch with two other men. He vaguely recognised one as Mulciber and the other looked like Rookwood. From what Sirius could make out, the two were getting their instructions on guarding Neville and himself.

Crouch glanced in his direction and Sirius wasn't quick enough to look away or close his eye.

"Oh look! The puppy is awake!" Crouch skipped over to Sirius.

Sirius moved because he was damned if he was going to lie on his side in the presence of a threat like Crouch.

Plan, thought Sirius hastily; keep Neville safe, get them both back to Harry who would be going out of his mind with worry, hopefully kill Crouch on the way…

And the first order of business was to change back into his human form. It only took a second for him to realise his mistake.

Sharp pain flooded through him like needles all over his skin.

It left him panting and shaking, belly to the floor as he tried to regain his breath and his senses. Dimly he became aware of Neville shouting.

"You're a monster!"
"Now, now. That's no way to speak to your new father, my boy." Crouch said, smoothing a hand over Neville's hair.

Neville yanked his head out from under Crouch's touch. He glowered at the wizard despite the fear that lurked in his gaze. "You're not my father! My father is worth ten thousand of you!"

Crouch went to hit him and Sirius moved, his animal instinct surging forward…

His jaws snapped around the other man's wrist and he bit down, heedless of the pain that flooded him again.

Crouch howled and tried to shake him off to no avail.

Sirius clamped down until he tasted blood, heard the snap of Crouch's arm beneath his teeth.

And suddenly, a spell impacted his body and sent him scuttling back, impacting the wall with a smack.

He was hurt, he could feel a slash across his flank, the blossoming bruises on the side that had hit the wall, but his Grim form was resilient – more resilient than his human form in truth. Padfoot was immediately on his feet, snarling and growling.

The three Death Eaters surrounded him.

Crouch grimaced as he took in the damage to his arm. "You'll pay for that, Black!" He gestured with his uninjured limb. "Don't touch the boy! Play with the dog as much as you want; just don't kill him." His smile was malevolent. "That honour is mine." He started to walk away to a door on the far side of the room. "I'll be back."

Sirius watched him go dispassionately. He didn't relax though. There were two Death Eaters remaining and he knew they wouldn't hold back.

Mulciber laughed, a high reedy sound. He wasn't sane, Sirius determined, taking in the other man's darting eyes and sweaty, trembling demeanour. He looked like a drug addict, jonesing for a fix.

Rookwood was as still as a rock in comparison. And Sirius knew he was the more deadly even before he spoke. "You take the dog. I'll take the boy."

Mulciber at least paused at that. "Crouch told us not to touch the, uh, boy."

"Crouch isn't the boss the last time I checked." Rookwood said harshly. "And until I see the Dark Lord myself and get told Crouch should be listened to, I'm not taking his orders." He motioned with his wand for Mulciber to get to his task.

Sirius really didn't like the way Rookwood was looking at Neville.

Neville was doing his best to look defiant but his eyes gave away exactly how scared he was. Sirius wasn't going to let anything happen to Neville. Frank had been his friend; Alice had been his schoolmate. He might not be Neville's godfather but he owed them both the simple duty of protecting their son just as much as he was sworn to protect Harry.

Rookwood advanced towards Neville. "Deal with the dog!"

But Padfoot wasn't a dog. He was a Grim, and Grims were magical guardians who protected the souls of the innocent; they were portents of death for evil. And without hesitation, Sirius made a
conscious decision to sink completely into Padfoot; allowed himself to be submerged by the instincts of the Grim because his intuition told him it was the only way he could protect the boy beside him.

And as Mulciber raised his wand and Rookwood took another step toward Neville, Padfoot *moved*.

The chain holding him to the wall broke under Padfoot's Grim strength. Mulciber fumbled his wand in shock and it was satisfying to chase him away with a threatening snap of his already bloody jaws.

Neville yelled for Rookwood to leave him alone and Padfoot leaped up to land on Rookwood's chest, using his paws and the force of his momentum to push Rookwood away from the young wizard. Rookwood was thrown backwards and Padfoot twisted so he came down on all four paws. He stood between Rookwood and Neville, facing Rookwood with a lowered head and an angry growl.

Rookwood lifted his own head and got the message. If Rookwood wanted Neville, he'd have to go through Padfoot to get him.

Rookwood brought up his wand and Padfoot snarled in satisfaction.

The fight was on.
Padfoot snarled and launched himself at Rookwood, heedless of the brandishing of the wand in the hand of the wizard.

The first spell caught him on the flank – a cutting hex; a second on the shoulder – a burning hex. He paid no attention to either hit nor to the others that landed as he focused on his target; Rookwood's throat.

He was vaguely aware of Neville, huddled further into the wall, eyes wide taking in the fight in front of him. Neville knew about Sirius's animagus form; but Sirius had always been careful to ensure that no-one had ever seen Padfoot as anything but a friendly, affable dog, not the full-on magical Grim with the strength and power that the creature was fabled with possessing. He only hoped Neville knew that he would not hurt him.

Padfoot's jaws snapped in the air by Rookwood's neck as the wizard finally threw himself backwards to evade the attack and sent a weak blasting hex to push Padfoot away.

He yelped as the spell hit him and sent him flying but he ignored the pain in his chest from the blow and leaped up as soon as he hit the ground. He rushed at Rookwood again; dodging spell after spell, ignoring those that had landed.

He was forcing Rookwood backwards towards the fire; further and further away from Neville.

Rookwood aimed a deadly purple coloured spell towards him and Padfoot jumped…

He landed on Rookwood, sending them both crashing to the floor.

Before Rookwood could recover, Padfoot attacked – not going for the man but the wand, it snapped in two as Padfoot's teeth clenched around it and he spit out the wood and the taste of something vile.

Rookwood scrabbled back, panting hard, his eyes wild as he realised that he was losing.

Padfoot stalked after him and sprang; he landed on the other man's back and his jaws closed on Rookwood's head, teeth sinking into the scalp as he bit deeply; satisfied as the bitter iron gush of blood soaked his tongue.

Rookwood howled and screamed as he bucked wildly, sending Padfoot flying. But Padfoot recovered quickly and jumped on him again; this time Rookwood was on his back, his eyes wild and shocked as they registered the reality of his situation.

Padfoot used his magical strength to pin the wizard to the ground, some part of him – the Sirius part – still arguing that he could render Rookwood unconscious; give him mercy; see justice done with the return of the Death Eater to Azkaban…

But Padfoot was a Grim and Rookwood had threatened an innocent, was still a threat if Padfoot were to let him up…

He growled and sank his teeth into Rookwood's throat.

Rookwood gurgled as he tried to scream. The Grim kept hold of his prey. Finally, Rookwood stilled and Padfoot let go, his jaw aching, his mouth and muzzle soaked with blood.
Malciber was cowering in a corner of the room; arms and hands over his head, mumbling as he rocked himself back and forth.

Padfoot staggered off Rookwood and slowly crawled back to Neville. They had to get away, escape, but his wounds were finally making themselves known and his body hurt in a way that he didn't think was a good thing. He slumped to the ground in front of the boy he had protected and whined helplessly; desperately trying to keep conscious.

He had tracking charms.

Neville was safe and someone would come soon.

The pain of his injuries cascaded through him in waves of agony.

And all Sirius could do was hope help was on the way and try to hold on…because the truth was that his strength was gone.

o-O-o

The Headmaster's office was filled with people all yelling at each other.

Harry had wandered over to Fawkes as soon as he'd entered the office and he figured people had forgotten that he was there as it had filled with others. Dumbledore, Bertie and Amelia, Snape and Remus, Moody and Tonks were all gathered around the Headmaster's desk. Minerva, Bill and Caro had been sent to watch over the Potter alliance kids all gathered into Harry's quarters.

Augusta Longbottom had been called back to Hogwarts and she'd arrived white-faced and anxious. She was currently arguing with the Headmaster over how someone had managed to get Neville on Hogwarts' grounds. Harry kind of thought she should be yelling at him for that one. He'd been the one who had allowed Neville to go out to the greenhouse with Hannah; who'd taken his eye off the Snitch by not even thinking of having the map with him.

The map was currently spread out on the Headmaster's desk and continued to show a complete absence of either Sirius or Neville. Everyone else was arguing over how the tracking charms Sirius had worn were being magically blocked somehow, each putting forward their own theory and trying to argue for it.

All of the back and forth wasn't getting them anywhere though.

And why they were more focused on the map of Hogwarts then on actually finding Sirius and Neville elsewhere wasn't something that Harry was going to understand any time soon. What did it matter about the map? Sirius and Neville weren't in Hogwarts. Snape had seen Sirius portkeyed away and he'd told everyone that before the arguing had broken out.

Harry rubbed the side of his temple where a dull throb of a headache had set up home as soon as he'd realised Neville was missing. He felt his magic stir in anger and frustration. It had been almost an hour since Crouch had grabbed Sirius. They were wasting time – time Sirius and Neville might not have.

And with that thought his magic slipped out of his control and lashed out in a violent whip, shattering the window behind him and silencing the room.

"Harry." Remus said hesitantly as Harry fought to regain control. "Deep breaths."

Fawkes flew over to Harry, crooning at him gently. Harry felt the waves of the phoenix's empathic
calm settle over him. His magic stopped churning a touch.

"Perhaps you should…" The Headmaster began.

"What?" snapped Harry, his control on a knife edge despite the warm weight of Fawkes on his shoulder. "Go wait with the other kids while you lot continue arguing about something that isn't helping to find THEM?"

They all flinched back from him. Some adopted sheepish expressions though as the truth of his words swept away the embarrassment of being called out on their behaviour.

"This isn't helping!" Harry said. "Crouch has them and…"

A strong feeling of déjà vu rushed through him, halting the words in his mouth, and for a moment it was as though he was suspended in another time, the memory so strong it replayed in front of his eyes…

His mother standing with magic swirling around her in a room in the Ministry as others had argued about finding Sirius, and Harry assuming control to find him…to find him with the family magic…

And the moment he became Heir…the silver snake of the Black family magic promising him that they'd brought Sirius home to Harry once before…

Harry’s hand was out before he consciously registered the decision to call the magic, the pooling swirls of gold and silver on the floor of the Headmaster's office a testament to his inner decision.

"Oh," Bertie said in gleeful comprehension, "good thinking!"

And from the corner of his eye, Harry could see Remus sagging against the edge of the desk as he too remembered the memory they’d been shown of how Sirius had been found when he’d been captured by Death Eaters in the war.

Harry wasn't surprised to see the Longbottom bear appear as the griffin and snake took form – he'd known instinctively that the bear would come because of Neville – but Augusta's gasp gave away her shock.

"Find them and bring them home!" Harry ordered urgently. "Hurry!"

The griffin spread its wings, taking the bear in one claw and the snake in another before it lifted up and flew out of the open window.

Harry felt a flutter of embarrassment at the damage and with a wave of his hand and a muttered 'reparo' the window repaired itself.

"What…" Augusta began to ask.

"The family magic will find them and bring them home." Harry explained quickly.

The Headmaster reached for his chair and sat down with a thump. He looked pale.

"Are you alright, Albus?" Amelia asked.

Dumbledore glanced at Bertie before nodding. "Yes. Just an old memory making itself known."

The obliviation must have broken, Harry mused.
Augusta frowned. "Are you certain…"

Harry nodded. "I've done it before." He muttered.

"He has, Augusta." Bertie confirmed. "He brought Sirius back once. I'm sure it'll work again."

"I should have thought of it earlier." Harry said apologetically, guilt surging through him again.

"Since you were only a baby the last time you did it and have no memory other than the memory Arcturus left behind of the incident," Remus said walking over to him and placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, "it's a wonder that you thought of it at all."

"I should have remembered." Bertie said with a sigh. "I was there."

Something flickered at the edge of Harry's awareness; a pull on his magic. "They're coming."

And they were.

The totems suddenly appeared in the centre of the office, the bear dropping his burden of a pale but apparently unharmed Neville onto the floor before the griffin and snake relinquished their burden; a bloody and battered Padfoot.

"SIRIUS!" Harry wasn't aware of taking the few steps to gather the Grim into his arms but he must have done because the next thing he knew he was gathering the whimpering animal up heedless of the damage to his own smart dress robes.

Padfoot whined deep and low but he burrowed into Harry's embrace.

"He needs a healer!" Remus said anxiously, hovering beside them.

Tonks moved to kneel beside Harry and put her hand on his shoulder. "He's alive though. That's good, right?"

"I'll get Doctor Jordan." Dumbledore confirmed swiftly.

Neville raised his head from his Gran's relieved embrace. "I'm sorry, Harry. He got hurt saving me."

Harry figured Sirius preferred that he had gotten hurt over Neville. "'S OK, Neville. He would have hated it if you'd gotten hurt on his watch. I should never have let you go outside of the Hall…"

"No, no!" Neville said hurriedly. "It was my fault for going outside the greenhouse on my own! I got distracted and…I was knocked out before I could get my wand or call for help and…"

Doctor Jordan hurried out of the floo and towards them, cutting off their conversation. She raised her wand and…

"Stop!" Bertie caught hold of her wrist. "Wait! He's wearing an obedience collar."

"A what?" Harry made to touch the heavy leather object around Sirius's neck.

"NO!" Bertie shouted. "Do NOT touch it! If you're not the person who put the collar on him, touching the collar will probably send a magical charge through Sirius causing him a great deal of pain."

"I think it did that when he tried to change back." Neville said thinly. "And when he bit Crouch."
"He bit Crouch?" Amelia prompted. "Perhaps you should tell us what happened, Neville, and we can work out a way to help Sirius."

"Well, I got knocked out like I said and when I woke up I was chained to this wall in a room – I think it was a basement? Sirius was there. Anyway, not long after I woke up so did Sirius. Only when Crouch spotted him, Sirius tried to turn back I think and the collar hurt him." Neville swallowed, his eyes shining brightly with repressed tears. "I said something to Crouch and he went to hit me and Sirius...he just grabbed Crouch's arm with his mouth and even though the collar was hurting him he held on. One of the others had to knock him away with a spell."

"And Crouch?" asked Amelia urgently.

"Left. One of the Death Eaters was going to hurt me but Sirius broke his chain and put himself between us." Neville brushed away the tear that had gotten free. "They fought and..." he gestured at the Grim. "He wouldn't give up and he won but he was in a bad way and then the totems arrived. I think the snake ripped apart the Death Eater that was, uh, dead. I, uh..." he looked bemused, "I don't know how but one minute we were there and then we were here." His face took on a downcast expression. "I didn't think to call the family magic."

Harry stroked a hand over Padfoot's head. "Are you sure we can't start healing him?" He asked anxiously to the room.

Bertie shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry, but any magic but that done by the master of the collar will simply cause him pain."

Jordan pushed Tonks away to sit beside Harry. "I can start a visual examination at least." She placed a hand on Harry's. "You'll need to set him down, Harry."

Padfoot whined unhappily.

Harry's hold tightened on him but he slowly lowered the Grim to the floor. He kept a hand stroking across Padfoot's head though. He was vaguely aware of Amelia moving Neville and Augusta to the side of the room and Moody following; snippets of her questioning Neville about the location drifted over as Harry watched Jordan carefully make a tally of all the hurts Sirius had suffered.

"Bertie," Dumbledore said, "what do you know of these collars?" The Headmaster had crept closer while Harry had been distracted and had made a visual examination of the collar while Jordan had examined Padfoot's wounds.

"Not much." Bertie admitted. "Just that an animagus wearing one shouldn't be subjected to magic from someone other than the owner of the collar, and that they cause a great deal of pain when set off."

"Perhaps then we should try to banish it?" Dumbledore said.

"It would be risky." Bertie said. "It could set it off."

Padfoot gave a bark.

"You want to try?" asked Harry, looking into the unhappy grey eyes of the Grim.

Padfoot barked again.

Harry looked up at the Headmaster eagerly. "Please?"
Dumbledore nodded and motioned for Harry to move away from Padfoot. "Stand back, everyone."

Harry stood up but didn't move too far. He kept his eyes on Padfoot's.

Dumbledore raised the Elder wand and without saying the spell aloud, light burst from the tip, arced across the room and hit the collar.

Padfoot howled, his body shaking furiously.

"STOP!" Harry ordered, not even aware of how the wand responded to him, cutting the spell dead, he was so intent on falling to the floor again and gathering an unconscious Padfoot up as though his physical presence would keep the Grim safe.

"I'm going to ask Minerva to join us. She may know something being an expert on being an animagus." Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry nodded and stroked a hand over Padfoot's head. "It's going to be OK, Padfoot." He murmured.

Minerva came through the floo and paused at the sight in front of her. "Merlin!" She breathed. She walked over and crouched down, examining the collar carefully without touching it. "It is an animagus control collar. They were once used in training animagus to maintain their forms but they were outlawed a long time ago."

"How do we get it off him?" Harry asked bluntly, frustrated that they hadn't come up with a way to help Sirius.

"They were usually designated for family use only." Minerva explained quickly. "If this is the Crouch collar, only someone related could touch or interact with the animagus without it setting off the magical charge."

"It's allowed Harry to touch Sirius without any problems." Remus said slowly.

"Of course, both the Blacks and the Potters are related by marriage to Crouch." Bertie said with a sigh of relief. "Harry, maybe you would be able to unlock the collar."

Harry drew his wand nervously. He didn't want to hurt Padfoot again if it didn't work. He positioned himself carefully. "Alohomora!"

The collar shook but it didn't unlock.

Harry frowned and tried again, pushing more of his power through his holly wand. It didn't work.

"Maybe there isn't enough of a relationship." Remus theorised out loud. "Harry's related through marriage but the blood connection is very weak."

"Well, we have to find some way of getting this collar off." Minerva said briskly. "He'll remain in his animagus form otherwise."

Harry turned the problem over in his head. "It feels like it could work." He said. "I just can't push enough power through the wand to make it happen without burning my wand out."

Because his wand wasn't powerful enough.

His eyes flew up to meet Remus's knowing gaze as they both reached the same conclusion at the same time.
Dumbledore coughed politely. "Perhaps you would like to borrow my wand, Harry?" His gaze was nothing but understanding and compassionate as he offered the Elder wand to Harry.

The office had fallen preternaturally silent.

Harry reached up and took the wand. Its power sang through his veins as it settled into his palm; a heady rush of glee as though it was pleased to be with him, to belong again. He felt its presence wrap around his core, mutter about the Goblet binding and the scarring, and settle into him with a happy squirm like someone getting comfortable in a favourite chair.

"Harry." Remus said worriedly.

He'd closed his eyes, Harry realised opening them.

Magic was pooling around him like thick honey, gold dust swirling into the air. He swallowed hard against the sense of rightness as he aimed the wand and thought the spell. It leaped from the Elder wand immediately, diving across the small space.

The collar unlocked with a loud click.

And Padfoot became Sirius in a blink of an eye.

A bloody, battered unconscious Sirius.

Harry immediately fell to his side, his shaking hand landing softly on Sirius's head.

Remus kicked the collar into a corner of the Headmaster's office as Jordan hurried forward again, casting a diagnostic. She shook her head.

"We need to get him to Saint Mungo's." She said. "I'm going to need assistance healing all of the damage and..." her head whipped up and she looked directly at Minerva, "we'll need your expertise I think as the injuries were sustained while he was in his animal form."

"Of course." Minerva said immediately.

Jordan conjured a stretcher. She waved Harry off and levitated Sirius onto it. Dumbledore was already constructing a portkey which he handed to Minerva.

Remus pulled Harry away from the stretcher. "You'll need to stay here, Harry."

"But..." Harry began to protest.

"No buts." Remus said firmly. "It's too risky and Sirius would kill me for allowing you to go to Saint Mungo's. You'll stay here where you're safe." He placed a hand on Harry's arm. "I'll go with him and take care of him. I promise."

And Harry reminded himself that Remus loved Sirius as much as he did. Moony would take care of Padfoot.

He nodded jerkily.

Remus motioned at Tonks. "You'll stay with Harry?"

"Consider that your assignment for the rest of the night, Tonks." Amelia said crisply. "I'll go with Sirius and Remus. Hopefully when Sirius is awake, he'll be able to provide more information on where they were."
Tonks placed her hands on Harry's shoulders as they watched everyone gather around the stretcher.

"Madame Longbottom," Jordan turned to Augusta, "Neville needs to be checked out by Poppy."

Augusta nodded. "We'll see to it."

"I'll escort you to the infirmary." Moody said. "You need to come along too, lad." He caught Snape's arm as he manoeuvred them out of the office.

Snape bristled but Harry wasn't surprised when he went. Nobody refused Moody's orders for very long.

Remus caught his eye once again just before the whirl of the portkey had them disappearing.

And suddenly the office seemed incredibly empty.

Harry fingered the wand he held and slowly placed it on the desk. Something inside of him keened at the loss.

I need you safe for when I really need you, he thought at the wand, at the bonds it had already wrapped around him. Professor Dumbledore will keep you safe.

It quieted. A sleepy happy tingle around his core; it was being kept safe not repudiated. It belonged to Harry and there was no question of that now; it could stay with the old wizard until it was time.

Harry stepped back from the desk.

"Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore said softly. "I'll come with you and ensure that the students return to their own dormitories."

"I'll deal with the collar." Bertie grimaced. "And I'll drop by Cornelius and give him an update on the situation."

The walk to his quarters seemed long and all Harry could think about was how pale Sirius had looked; the blood matting his hair, streaking down the side of his face, long painful scratches across his body…

Hermione rushed to hug him as soon as he was inside. He hugged her back, all too aware of how many eyes were watching them.

Dumbledore clapped his hands. "Everyone! Lord Black and Mister Longbottom have been recovered."

"What happened to them?" Ron asked bluntly as the students shifted restlessly, relieved but not reassured by the Headmaster.

"Crouch took them." Harry stated before the Headmaster could say anything. "Neville's fine. He's getting checked out in the infirmary now. His Gran is with him." His eyes went to Hannah and saw her smile tearfully back at him and silently tried to convey just how OK Neville was.

"And Lord Black?" asked Draco pointedly.

"Sirius was injured protecting Neville." Harry didn't want to tell them about the collar and since the Headmaster shot him an approving glance he figured it was a good thing not to say anything about it. "He's been taken to Saint Mungo's." He lifted a hand before the questions could start. "He managed to injure Crouch according to Neville so it's unlikely anything else is going to happen tonight." His
eyes flashed. "We still haven't determined how Crouch got Neville without being seen so…make
sure you're with someone at all times for the next few days until we learn more."

"Wise words indeed, Harry." Dumbledore said smoothly. "Bill, if you could escort the Ravenclaws
to their tower? Caro, if you could take the Hufflepuffs? And if the Slytherins would like to follow
me? Tonks, if you could see to the Gryffindors before settling in with Harry?"

Tonks nodded.

They all started to traipse out and Harry let Hermione pull him away from the door into a quiet
corner, Ron following them less than discreetly.

"How's Sirius?" She asked, getting to the point remarkably quickly.

Harry shook his head. "He's…he was in bad shape." Tears pricked at the back of his eyes. "They
wouldn't let me stay with him."

Hermione squeezed his hand.

Ron patted his shoulder clumsily. "He'll be fine, mate."

"Hermione, Ron." Tonks called for them.

Hermione hugged him again. "Try not to worry, Harry. I'm sure Sirius will be up and about in no
time."

"I'm sorry tonight got ruined." Harry said.

"Don't worry about it." Hermione kissed him briefly, nothing more than a press of her lips against his
but it had Ron turning away in embarrassment. "We'll come by tomorrow."

And then they were gone.

Harry wandered listlessly into the living room. The bright cheerful decorations seemed out of place
with everything that had happened; without Sirius there. He touched a hand to the stocking with the
name 'Padfoot' stitched onto it and blinked back tears.

They'd had such a good day and…

He shook his head and tried to regain some composure. Sirius had been taken but Harry had gotten
him back. And Sirius was going to be fine. He was hurt but he'd get better.

Harry just had to hang onto that.

o-O-o

Another failed attempt to get to Potter's camp…another minion feeling the blunt consequences of
their failure, Peter mused.

Mulciber whimpered and tried to crawl away to safety but Barty's Crucio lanced across the room and
slammed him back onto the concrete floor.

Peter watched with detached interest. Barty had turned up at the new hide-out a couple of hours
before with his wrist a bloody mess and a request for help in healing his injury. It had been
heartening that while the Dark Lord had been gleeful at Barty's successful capture of Black and the
Longbottom boy, he had been just as unsympathetic to Barty's injury as he had been to Peter's.
Of course, the Dark Lord was going to be furious at what Peter and Barty had found when they'd returned to get Sirius and Longbottom for a brief meet-and-greet with the Dark Lord himself; namely, that both had escaped.

Peter let his eyes roam over the basement of the muggle house Rookwood had apparently bought years before as a bolt-hole. It was located in one of the central suburbs of muggle Birmingham. The entire house was magically warded by Rookwood himself to ensure the muggles never noticed it. Peter was grateful for the magical sound-proofing element of the wards as he was certain Mulciber's screams would not have gone unnoticed otherwise.

Rookwood's body lay sprawled by the fire. It looked like he had been torn apart by a wild animal; bloody rents and tears littered his torso; his face was a frozen rictus of terror. Bloody smears along the concrete floor and splatter across the walls gave away that the battle had been terrifying and difficult.

Peter knew he would have ran and hidden like Mulciber apparently had. They had found him cowering in a corner of the room and blathering about ghostly snakes and griffins and a bear of all things appearing from nowhere to spirit away the prisoners.

More likely, Peter mused, Sirius had killed Rookwood himself and found some way to get Longbottom out of the house and back to the wizarding world. Sirius was a formidable wizard.

"Bastard!" Barty snapped and Peter flicked his gaze back to where the other wizard was torturing Mulciber only to realise Mulciber had finally succumbed to unconsciousness.

Peter's gaze drifted to the body of Rookwood again. "The Dark Lord isn't going to be pleased."

"I'm not pleased!" Barty barked furiously. "I left them for an hour! An hour! And I left them specific instructions and did they listen? No!" He kicked out at Mulciber landing a blow in his stomach. "No! They did not!"

Mulciber had been very talkative about how Rookwood had decided to play with Longbottom causing Sirius to somehow find the strength to break the chain tying him to the wall in order to fight.

Typical Sirius, Peter thought almost fondly. It didn't explain the rest of Mulciber's babbling but Peter got the impression that Mulciber wasn't quite with it.

"AHHH!" Barty whirled around and sent a forceful blasting hex at Rookwood's body. "IDIOT! MORON!"

Peter watched dispassionately as the body blew into pieces. "This place is a mess."

Barty shot him a sneering look and whirled away. "How did this go wrong? It was perfect! Perfect!" He paced back and forth, gesturing with his wand. "I had Dennis and his father make sure Karkaroff grabbed a kid for me and Longbottom was a perfect, perfect choice! It was fate giving me back the son I would have had with Rabastan!"

Peter's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"You should have seen him as a baby, Peter." Barty stopped and simpered suddenly. "He was so perfect! Tiny little toes and fingers and so rosy-cheeked! Just perfect!"

He wasn't going to admit that he'd seen Neville Longbottom as a child, Peter decided firmly. With Alice and Lily being such a good friends, it hadn't been unusual for one to be found with the other, especially as they were both young mothers together.
"And Rookwood thought he could hurt my son!" Barty vibrated with fury again. He turned and paced back to the fire, his shoe squelching on some bloody portion of Rookwood's body.

Cuckoo, Peter thought with wearily, Barty was completely cuckoo.

"If he wasn't dead I would kill him again, bring him back to life and kill him again!" Barty snarled. Peter sighed. "We should return to the Dark Lord." He gestured at Mulciber. "Are we taking him with us?"

Barty glowered at him before a grimace made its way across his features and he shook his head. He flicked his wand. The Killing curse sang out in deadly green and Mulciber didn't even twitch as he lost his life.

They apparated back to the small holiday cottage in the Lake District which was their latest hiding place. The cottage was an old farmhand's dwelling. It was made of thick stone, had a thatched roof and nobody lived for miles around it. It was perfect.

Peter had idly wondered how the Dark Lord had found the property but he had decided long ago never to question the Dark Lord and it was working as a plan.

They entered the cozy kitchen by the back door. The Dark Lord sat at the table balanced on two large cushions. His appearance had deteriorated further with much of the small child's hair now gone completely bar a few wisps. His eyes glittered red and his face was as pale as sour milk.

"You have returned but without the guests I thought you were bringing me." The Dark Lord said evenly.

The tone of his voice meant bad news; Peter recognised it instantly. He immediately went to his knees.

"Forgive us, Master, but Mulciber and Rookwood have failed you." Peter said, prostrating himself.

Barty proved not to be stupid. He followed Peter's example and got to his knees, bowed his head and asked for forgiveness. "I should never have left them!" He wailed.

"SILENCE!" The Dark Lord ordered. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Barty hesitantly told the story Mulciber had told him; of Rookwood's disobedience, the fight with Sirius and how they'd been spirited away.

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed at the description of the snake, griffin and bear. "An unusual description."

"The totems of the family magic." Barty said dismissively. "But I don't believe Mulciber's ramblings…they don't have the ability to act independently and just show up! Black probably called for the protection element silently and my…the boy followed his example; Rookwood died; Black apparated them out."

The Dark Lord's fingers tapped restlessly on the arm of his chair. "I would speak to Mulciber about what he saw."

Oh, crap.

Peter darted a look at a suddenly very pale Barty.
"He, uh, I punished him with death, Father." Barty murmured, his voice barely raised above a whisper.

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed with anger. "And when did you decide that you were the arbiter of who should be punished and by whom?"

Barty lowered his head. "I'm sorry, Father. I was so angry at him for ruining your Yuletide gift that I simply acted."

"I warned you, Barty, that my indulgence would not last forever." The Dark Lord said tersely. "You have failed me tonight. You failed me when you allowed an injury to divert you from guarding your prisoners. You failed me when you failed to ensure Rookwood's compliance to your orders. You failed me when you killed Mulciber the only witness to what occurred before I had the chance to speak with him!" He pointed his finger towards a small door to their left which led to the cellar.

Barty looked at the Dark Lord with horror. "Please, Father! No!"

"GO!" The Dark Lord ordered. "Or it will be two nights you spend down there!"

The shout was enough to have Barty scuttling towards the door. He opened it and walked through it, closing it softly behind him.

A spell immediately impacted the wood, looking the door tight. Peter tried not to flinch.

"Idiots!" The Dark Lord snarled, slamming the small fist of the child he occupied onto the table. His gaze landed on Peter who immediately lowered his gaze to the floor. "This is a disaster!"

Peter decided to stay silent rather than risk drawing attention and being tortured.

"I need to know what happened!" The Dark Lord snapped. "I had Travers return to Hogwarts to get Karkaroff to report on what was happening there. Go and find out what is going on! NOW!"

Peter glanced at the cabinet with foreboding but bowed his head and went. He wasn't foolish and he knew it was more than his life's worth to disobey an order from the Dark Lord in such a mood.

The inside of the cabinet stank of mould and decay. Peter hurriedly opened the other side and stepped out into Karkaroff's private quarters aboard the Durmstrang ship. Dennis Travers and his father sat at Karkaroff's desk, playing cards.

"Where's Karkaroff?" Peter asked bluntly. "Our Lord wants the report now."

Dennis looked at his father and Peter had a brief moment of panic when the thought that the two had killed Karkaroff popped into his head.

"Well?" Peter demanded.

"He has one more minute to get back here before he loses a toe so…" Travers Senior said flatly.

As though to underline the point, Karkaroff chose that moment to burst into the room, sending the door flying as he hurried inside.

Dennis waved his wand absently to shut the door again, sealing the room in a privacy bubble. "Well?"

"Do you know how close I came to being apprehended by Moody again?" Karkaroff snapped, a dull red colour suffusing his cheeks.
"Do we look as though we care?" Travers Senior sneered. He pointed at Peter. "He's here for your report. You'd best give it to him since he was sent by Our Lord."

Karkaroff flushed again and sat in an empty chair, deflating. "I was able to sneak into the infirmary. The Longbottom boy was there with his grandmother, Moody and Snape. From what I managed to overhear, Potter managed to rescue him and Black with the family magic somehow, although Black was apparently injured getting in between Longbottom and Rookwood. Potter's in lockdown in his rooms and Black's been taken to Saint Mungo's by the werewolf."

"He was supposed to have a collar on him..." Peter began hesitantly.

Karkaroff shook his head. "Potter got it off him. He's distantly related to Crouch, isn't he? Maybe the collar responded to him."

Peter frowned but didn't argue. He'd never been overly interested in magical theory. "I should check out Saint Mungo's." He muttered. Merlin knew he'd do anything to delay his return to the Dark Lord with more bad news. "Do you have any of the Polyjuice left?"

Dennis was the one to reply with a nod. He moved to a small bureau and withdrew a vial. He also extracted a small bag of hairs. He made a big show of removing one with a pair of tweezers and adding it to the potion.

Peter's lip twisted into a grimace as Dennis handed him the glass vial. He accepted it and drank it down. The transformation into a non-descript brown-eyed brown-haired middle-aged wizard with a small moustache was quick.

"Here." Karkaroff handed him a portkey. "It's one of the emergency ones the Ministry gave me in case a student needed medical attention and we couldn't get to the infirmary for some reason."

Peter took it and said the trigger word written upon it. A moment later he appeared in Saint Mungo's emergency transport room.

A stern looking witch was manning the triage desk and she looked at him with a hard glare. "The nature of your emergency?"

"Oh my," Peter wittered, "I found this on a street in Hogsmeade and read the word by accident..." he handed her the portkey. "I'm so very sorry to have disturbed you."

The witch sniffed and Peter hurried out of the door into the main waiting area of the hospital reception. It was bustling with activity but he couldn't see anyone he could recognise. He was considering his options when he saw Rufus Scrimgeour arrive with another Auror. Peter followed them surreptitiously to the Magical Trauma ward.

He quickly darted into an alcove out of the way when he caught sight of a group of huddled wizards and witches by the nurses' desk. He could see a worried Remus pacing; McGonagall close by; Andromeda Tonks and her husband talking quietly together. Scrimgeour approached Amelia Bones and began a discussion that Peter could barely hear. Snippets drifted over to him of searching all of Mulciber's old properties...and Bones replying to begin searching the properties of Rookwood and Travers. Peter shuddered slightly at the close call. If the Dark Lord hadn't wanted to see Sirius and Longbottom immediately...if he and Barty had gone back at the wrong time...

Well, if the Aurors did search the house in Birmingham they'd find nothing of value there. They'd find the bodies of Mulciber and Rookwood and the evidence that it was where Sirius and Longbottom were held but it was a dead end otherwise...
Peter darted further down a corridor away from the gaggle of people waiting for news of Sirius. He pushed open a door and entered what looked to be a doctors’ locker room. It gave him an idea and he quickly transfigured his clothing into Healer robes. Confident that he would blend in with the scenery of the hospital, he quickly strode out and walked swiftly past Remus and company past the nurses’ desk and into the main patient area of the ward.

Nobody gave him a second glance. He was merely another Healer hurrying about his business.

Peter gave a quick smug smile as he began to search for Sirius's room. He dived out of sight when a door opened suddenly and a few Healers emerged talking excitedly about injuries sustained as an animagus. He watched them for a long moment and saw one of them break away to update Remus.

The open door beckoned to Peter and he went inside to verify that it was Sirius's room.

It was.

His old friend lay curled up and still on the hospital bed. Sirius had been dressed in a hospital gown and his injuries treated since, as far as Peter could see, there was no sign of bruising or blood on the visible parts of Sirius's face and arms.

He picked up the clipboard at the end of the bed and tried to read the notes.

Contusions and scrapes…

Spell damage…

Nerve damage…

Unresponsive to stimuli…

It looked like the effects of the collar and Sirius's fight with Rookwood had taken their toll on him. Sirius wasn't out of the woods, mused Peter, and their security was appalling. He could easily raise his wand and…

He hesitated, wand out and pointed at Sirius's still form.

The memory of Sirius's words both the day in the Shack and in the tunnel echoed in his head. Sirius had been his friend. He had loved Peter. Perhaps not as fiercely as he had loved James but Peter had never questioned the other man's friendship and loyalty to him. And perhaps once upon a time, Peter had felt the same friendship and loyalty towards Sirius…flashes of their time at Hogwarts tumbled through his head…of Sirius stepping in front of him to protect him, of conspiring gleefully on a prank, of Sirius helping him become an animagus and never giving up on him…

Peter lowered his wand.

He carefully unclipped a piece of paper from the clipboard, turned it over and wrote a warning on the back.

"Moony, you should be more careful with Padfoot's safety. It might not have been me who was sent to get news of him.

Wormtail.

P.S. Tell Harry Merry Christmas."

He poked his head out of the room and a quick glance saw the healer still deeply in conference with
Remus and the others. He hastened away in the opposite direction, taking the back stairs down to the main entrance.

He was almost out of the main door when he heard a commotion by the stair door he had just exited as it was thrown back against the wall and Remus ran out with the Aurors on his heels. Peter could see the crumpled note he left held tight in one of Remus's hands.

Remus's amber eyes met his across the busy reception and Peter knew, he just knew that Remus knew it was him. He gave a half-hearted nod and pushed the door open, hurrying into the bustling street outside and apparating almost immediately.

He apparated a few times more to hide his trail before finally returning to the cottage. The Dark Lord was where Peter had left him, sat at the table with an expectant and impatient look.

Peter knelt before him and ignored the whimpering sounds from Barty that were drifting up from the basement as he reported to the Dark Lord. Peter stayed still as the Dark Lord considered the news. He was half-afraid that he'd be crucio'd anyway.

"You have done well, my most faithful servant." The Dark Lord said finally. "Perhaps this was not the victory Barty had planned but we have dealt them a crippling blow if we have put Black out of action even for a handful of days."

He nodded his agreement with the Dark Lord's positive spin on events and was grateful when the next order was for him to put the Dark Lord to bed. He'd survived the day and maybe, just maybe, Sirius would too.

o-O-o

"Neville!"

Hermione turned at Ginny's shout – and the entire Common Room did the same. Neville was in the process of climbing through the portrait hole and had to hurriedly get himself straight as Ginny threw herself at him, hugging him tightly. Hermione was pleased Hannah wasn't there to see the embrace; she didn't think Neville's girlfriend would take too kindly to Ginny's way of welcoming Neville back from the infirmary.

Neville patted her awkwardly on the back and extricated himself as everyone seemed to gather around him.

Ron gave a huff of impatience and wrangled his way through the press of people, pulling Neville out of the huddle and towards the sofa Hermione had commandeered for them that morning. "Oy!" He shouted. "Let him have some space!"

Neville shot him a grateful look as the crowd dispersed, floating back to their previous positions in the Common Room. "Thanks for the rescue." He sat down next to Hermione as Ron sprawled in the chair beside them and Ginny followed him over and sat down on the floor in front of them. "Any news?"

Hermione shook her head, her curls bouncing against her shoulders. "Professor Dumbledore told us at breakfast that Harry's still in his rooms under guard but he didn't say anything about Sirius." Her teeth worried at her lower lip. "He told us to let Harry rest this morning and give him some space to come to terms with what happened."

Ron snorted which accurately conveyed his feelings on the subject.
Neville frowned. "I would have thought space was the last thing Harry needed."

"Exactly what I said, mate!" Ron agreed enthusiastically.

Hermione shot him an exasperated look. She didn't like not seeing Harry either but Professor Dumbledore had made it clear that his suggestion was more like an order. "What about you, Neville? Are you OK?"

"Fine thanks to Sirius." Neville said dismissing his experience with a wave of his hand, although Hermione could see a shadow lurking in his eyes. "It was scary and horrible but Sirius didn't let them touch me."

Guilt coated his voice and Hermione reached out to pat his arm consolingly.

"It's not your fault." She said softly.

"I shouldn't have gone outside of the greenhouse." Neville said miserably. He'd screwed up and allowed himself to be vulnerable; an easy target for someone to grab. "I don't even know who grabbed me."

"I doubt it was Crouch." Hermione said, thinking out loud. "It would have been too risky for him to have been on the grounds. He must have sent someone else."

"I overheard my Gran talking with Moody; Snape thinks it was Karkaroff." Neville said.

"Karkaroff was the only one who could have gotten close enough to have done it." Hermione nodded slowly. Of course, there was Snape himself. He could have suggested Karkaroff as a way of diverting attention from himself even if he'd done it as a spy…

But then the timing didn't add up.

Snape couldn't have grabbed Neville and gone with Sirius to the clearing. So maybe it really was Karkaroff.

Not that they were going to be told either way it seemed.

Hermione gave a huff of frustration.

"Neville?" Ginny asked gently. "What exactly happened? Do you…I mean, if you want to talk about…" she trailed off hesitantly.

Neville sighed and rubbed his head. He sketched a privacy bubble around them and Hermione was impressed at its strength. She could see the rest of the Common Room frowning as they found they could no longer earwig in on what they were saying.

"I remember going outside to give Susan and Hannah some privacy and I heard a sound and that's it. I woke up chained to a wall with Sirius beside me in his animagus form and Crouch and a couple of other Death Eaters guarding us." He swallowed hard. "When they noticed we were awake, Crouch came over and…he was hurting Sirius so I told him to stop and when he went to hit me, Sirius bit him. Crouch went to get himself medical attention and told the other Death Eaters they could play with Sirius but they were supposed to leave me alone."

"Only they didn't?" Hermione guessed.

"One of them didn't want to follow Crouch's order so he was going to…" Neville stopped abruptly
before breathing in sharply, his eyes not meeting theirs. "Sirius...he just went ballistic. He chased away the other Death Eater and started fighting to keep me safe."

"How did you escape?" Ron asked bluntly. "Dumbledore only said you were recovered but not how."

"Harry." Neville said simply. "He called on the family magic to find us." His face changed from relief to chagrin. "I wish I'd thought of that." He frowned. "I thought Harry would have told you."

Ron snorted again. "He didn't get a chance to tell us much of anything before they hurried us out last night and this morning, well, you know; space." The sarcasm on the last word was heavy and bitter.

"We've talked about this, Ron..." Hermione began.

Ron pointed at her. "No," he said sharply, "you talked and wouldn't listen. You don't honestly believe leaving Harry alone is best for him do you?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Professor Dumbledore..."

"Left Harry with the Dursleys for years so I don't think his opinion should count." Ron shot back. She couldn't refute that. She sighed. "And as I've said already, Professor Dumbledore was only the messenger. Remus no doubt has a good reason for keeping Harry under guard and not letting us see him, Ron." Maybe Harry was magically exhausted again after rescuing Neville and Sirius...but he had seemed alright the night before.

"But Remus is at the hospital." Neville said, breaking into her thoughts.

They all turned to look at him with varying expressions of confusion.

"Neville, we know Remus went to the hospital last night with Sirius..." Hermione said, folding her arms tightly across her chest. "Harry told us. But obviously he would have come back by now and..."

Neville shook his head furiously. "He's still there."

Her mouth dropped open and she snapped it shut again in a hurry. "What?"

"Nobody's returned." Neville explained. "Madame Pomfrey told Gran this morning."

"But then..." Hermione began worriedly.

"Who's with Harry?" demanded Ron forcefully, sitting forward and glaring at Neville.

Neville shrugged. "I think Tonks was with him last night?"

"But she left this morning to go to work." Hermione said. "I saw her leaving when I came down for breakfast."

They all exchanged a silent anxious look.

"Bollocks to this!" Ron proclaimed, standing up. "We should just go and see him." He glared at Hermione as though expecting her to argue.

"I thought Remus was with him." She said defensively. "If I'd known I would never have agreed to leave him alone!"
"Let's go then." Ginny said, getting to her feet.

Hermione felt a frisson of irritation skitter down her spine. She was Harry's girlfriend not Ginny. She got up and led the way out of the Common Room. They clattered out of the portrait hole and almost stumbled over Luna.

"There you all are!" Luna said brightly, twirling one long strand of blonde hair around her finger. "Are we going to see Harry now?"

"Yes." Hermione said firmly.

They trooped along to the rooms Harry usually shared with Sirius and rang the door chime. The portrait opened up to reveal Professor Trelawney on the other side.

Hermione stared at the Divination Professor who was decked out in layers of red and green.

"Professor Trelawney!" Luna cooed. "What a wonderfully festive outfit!"

The Divination Professor blinked owlishly behind her glasses before smiling vaguely at the group. "It is important to keep harmony with nature!" She declared and hiccupped.

Was she drunk?

Hermione glanced in horror at Ron who sported an impressive scowl.

"We're here to see Harry!" Luna said cheerily, moving forward into the rooms and forcing Trelawney to step back and allow them all to enter.

Trelawney swayed slightly as the portrait closed. "Children, I'm not certain…"

"Harry's upstairs in his room?" Luna continued, walking briskly to the staircase before Trelawney could utter more than a token 'but' as a protest.

Hermione ignored the ditzy Professor and followed Luna. "How could Dumbledore or anyone with half a brain think leaving Trelawney to guard Harry was a good idea?" She muttered under her breath.

"Well, who better to guard someone than a witch who can see the danger before anyone else?" Luna murmured, her eyes twinkling. She tapped lightly on Harry's door and entered as soon as Harry responded.

Harry got up from his seat on the bed as soon and made his way over to Hermione immediately. She hugged him back as his arms tightened around her.

Neville and Ron took seats on the bed while Ginny made her way over to the window ostensibly ignoring Harry's embrace with Hermione.

Luna wandered over to Hedwig's perch and started stroking the owl's feathers. Hedwig nuzzled into Luna's gentle touch appreciatively.

Hermione patted Harry's back and eased away gently. "How are you doing?"

"Nobody's telling me anything!" Harry proclaimed. A flash of anger stormed through his green eyes. "Dumbledore came by first thing this morning to tell Tonks that Remus wasn't coming back yet and that I wasn't allowed to go to the hospital. That's it!"
He lurched away from her and paced.

"Then Tonks goes to work and Trelawney turns up and tells me that she's going to be watching me for the rest of the day." Harry threw up his hands. "Trelawney!"

"I hear you, mate." Ron commented.

Hermione couldn't blame him for his incredulity; it was a weird and absurd choice.

"I know." Hermione murmured. "What was Dumbledore thinking?"

He pointed a finger at her. "Exactly! I mean, she's not exactly with it. In fact, she's even worse than the batty old woman who used to babysit me when I was a kid!" He slumped down into the chair by his desk. "And the worst thing is that Dumbledore wouldn't even tell me if Sirius is OK! He just gave some rambling answer that time would tell and a whole load of other stuff that tells me absolutely nothing!"

"Oh Harry!" Hermione went over and perched on the arm of the chair, placing her own arm around Harry's shoulders.

"I, uh, heard Madame Pomfrey tell my Gran that Doctor Jordan had sent word last night that Sirius was still unconscious and would be receiving treatment for at least a week." Neville said quietly.

Harry's head whipped up and he stared at Neville for a long moment. "Still unconscious?"

Neville nodded.

Harry's lips thinned but his eyes softened as they took in Neville's anxious expression. "What about you? Are you OK, Neville?"

"Yeah," Neville waved a hand at him, "Sirius never gave them a chance to touch me really. I just had some bruises and Madame Pomfrey sorted those out." He took a breath. "Oliver was imperiused. He was brought into the infirmary last night."

"It must have been a set-up!" Ron proclaimed loudly. "They had Oliver pressure Susan knowing she'd scream and cry and have to have a girly moment with Hannah!"

"Or that Oliver would run off and leave Susan alone." Hermione offered slowly, a shiver running through her. She was grateful when Harry reached over and took hold of her hand.

Neville nodded, understanding Harry's point. "I guess it didn't matter which of us they grabbed; they just wanted to engineer one of us being alone."

"Bloody clever." Ron complained.

Harry sighed and nudged his glasses up his nose. "I don't understand why they won't let me see Sirius!"

The sound of the door chime echoed through the room.

Harry immediately shushed them and moved hastily across the room to open his bedroom door enough that they could listen to whoever was downstairs.

"Ah, Sybill!" Dumbledore's bright cheery tone had Harry's face settling into a cold fury that Hermione hated seeing. "I just wanted to check on our young Harry."
Harry yanked his bedroom door open and ran down the stairs before they could stop him. Hermione went to follow him but Ron yanked her back and placed a finger on his lips, his blue eyes shooting her an anxious warning look. She looked around the others for support to join Harry but found none – Luna shaking her head emphatically. Hermione settled back and tuned back in to the confrontation downstairs.

"...I don't see why I have to be locked up here when Sirius is in hospital!" Harry's strident tone carried easily up the stairs.

Hermione winced and wrestled with her immediate thought that Harry shouldn't speak to Dumbledore in such a way when deep down she could understand his anger.

"Sirius would not want you putting yourself in harm's way, Harry." Dumbledore remonstrated gently. "Remus was very clear that you were to remain here and out of danger."

"Then why can't I speak with Remus?" Harry demanded.

"Alas, he remains at the hospital, and I am certain that you would not wish to deprive your father of the comfort of his oldest friend." Dumbledore continued.

"Manipulative old bastard!" Ron muttered in Hermione's ear.

She sent him a disapproving look but couldn't really argue with him.

"Well, why hasn't Remus called me on the floo to say how Sirius is?!" Harry snapped angrily. "He's my father! I'm the one who rescued him! I deserve to know!"

Dumbledore's sigh was heavy enough to travel up the stairs. "I am certain as soon as there is good news to share, Remus will let us know at once."

"But..."

"Now, Harry, I must have a quick word with Professor Trelawney so if you could give us a moment alone..."

Hermione wasn't surprised at the stomping sound of feet on the staircase a moment later as Harry stormed back up to them. He lifted a finger to his lips when she would have spoken and hovered outside of his bedroom, listening intently to Dumbledore.

"Now, Sybill..."

The words suddenly became muffled and Hermione realised that Dumbledore must have erected a privacy bubble. From Harry's sour expression, he'd realised the same. Only moments passed before their voices became audible again.

"...and so I shall leave Harry in your capable hands and take my leave!" Dumbledore said cheerfully.

The sound of the door closing echoed up the stairs.

"Elf! Elf!" Trelawney's shrill tone called suddenly breaking the silence.

"Dobby here, Professor!" Dobby said loudly.

"Eggnog! Bring me more eggnog and..." Trelawney stopped abruptly.
"Professor…" Dobby enquired hesitantly.

Harry took a step toward the stairs to investigate and Hermione followed him automatically, aware the others were also just behind them. They crept to the top of the stairs and peered out through the wooden bannisters. Trelawney stood swaying just in front of the portrait door, her eyes fixed and staring. Dobby hopped madly from one foot to another in front of her, clearly worried. His large round eyes sought Harry's and Harry had just opened his mouth to say something when…

"He who wore the cursed object finds eternal peace this day and the loved ones he has grieved for welcome him to their bosom. He who wore the cursed object finds eternal peace this day and the loved ones he has grieved for welcome him to their bosom…"

Trelawney suddenly snapped out of her trance and pointed at Dobby. "Eggnog!"

Dobby glanced upwards to Harry and Harry nodded almost imperceptibly before getting up, pushing past them all and racing back into his bedroom.

"Harry…” Hermione followed after him hurriedly. She found him pacing back and forth, furiously agitated. "Harry, she was probably…”

"She had a vision!" Harry snapped, whirling around and waving his hands passionately back towards the downstairs. "Sirius is going to die!"

"You don't know that!" Hermione countered. "She might not have been talking about Sirius at all!"

"Hermione is right, Harry." Ginny chimed in, folding her arms over her chest as she hovered by Hermione's side.

"Luna?" asked Harry, turning away from them to pin Luna with a fierce questioning gaze.

"I don't know if it is Sirius," Luna admitted quietly, "but her vision was truth."

"See!" Hermione eagerly seized on Luna's initial comment. "It might not be Sirius, Harry."

"But it could be Sirius." Ron stated loudly.

"Exactly!" Harry shot her a triumphant look, and darted a grateful smile in Ron's direction.

Hermione shot Ron a frown in response. "Harry…” she began.

"I have to go to him!" Harry interrupted her. "I have to go and see Sirius. Maybe I can stop him from dying!"

"How?" asked Hermione plaintively.

"I don't know!" Harry admitted passionately. "But I can't stay here and do nothing!" His green eyes met hers and Hermione felt her resolve to be logical and rational and not give in to Trelawney's wild meanderings weaken under Harry's pleading gaze for support.

"What do you want to do, Harry?" Neville's quiet statement had both of them finally breaking the intense moment between them.

Harry took a deep breath. "I want to go and see Sirius. Maybe her vision wasn't about him but I can't risk it! If there's any chance that I can save him…I have to take it."

"Well," said Hermione, forcing herself to focus on helping Harry rather than arguing against his plan,
"if you want to see Sirius there are a couple of obstacles…"

"Like the patrols," jumped in Ron.

"And Trelawney." Ginny added. "You are locked in here. The Headmaster's going to know if you sneak out through the front door."

"How are we going to get to London?" Neville asked, a crease forming between his brows.

"We?" asked Harry frowning.

"You don't honestly think we're going to let you go alone?" Hermione looked at him sternly.

There was a chorus of agreement from the others in the room.

Harry's expression softened and he shook his head. "I guess not." His expression sobered. "But you know it's going to be dangerous? Voldemort could be watching the hospital for me and…he won't hesitate to try and grab one of you again."

Neville nodded grimly. "We stick together and we protect each other."

"Agreed." Ron stated. He walked across the bedroom and plucked Harry's new broomstick away where it was leaning against the wall. "And I think I know how we get out." He pointed the broom at the open window.

"Ron, you're brilliant!" Harry slapped his best friend's back with gusto.

Hermione blanched. She was better at flying than she had been but the thought of flying out of the high window and all the way to London…

"I'll take the new broomstick," Harry said to Ron, "you can have my old broomstick and I'll get Dobby to bring up Sirius's broomstick." He nudged Hermione, drawing her attention. "You can fly with me; Ron can take Luna and Ginny can take Neville."

Luna beamed at Harry, twirling a strand of blond hair around her finger. "What about invisibility?"

"I can disillusion us so no-one can see us but we can see each other – Professor Flitwick taught me the spell." Harry said firmly. "And nobody's going to be looking up."

Harry called for Dobby and the elf's ears waggled unhappily as Harry gave him instructions to fetch food, another broom and outerwear for them all.

"Dobby bes coming too!" Dobby wailed.

Harry shook his head. "We need you to stay here and watch Trelawney, Dobby; keep her drunk and distracted."

Dobby's eyes took on a glint of mischief as he nodded wildly.

"And if we don't come back by midnight," Harry continued soberly, "you'll need to go and find Remus and tell him."

What seemed like only moments later, Hermione found herself bundled into her winter cloak, her Gryffindor scarf wrapped around her throat and thick gloves on her hands. Sandwiches and bottles of pop had been secreted into her pockets by Dobby.
Harry finished making them all invisible before he mounted his broom. Hermione climbed up behind him, vaguely aware that the others were doing the same.

The memory of the ride on Buckbeak flashed through Hermione's head as she wrapped her arms around Harry. She squeezed him tightly and Harry turned around to give her a reassuring nod. They'd been going to save Sirius that night too, Hermione remembered. She gave him one back and with a push, they were off – flying through the open window and into the thin Winter sunlight.

She set her lips in a thin line.

They'd saved Sirius then and they'd save him again. She wouldn't let Harry lose another parent.

The flight to London was cold and tiring.

Harry felt it in every one of his muscles and a quick look at the others showed the same physical stresses on their bodies. Luna was almost entirely curled into Ron's back and Neville's countenance was grim as he held onto a weary looking Ginny.

Hermione had helped navigate the city's landmarks to find Saint Mungo's. They landed on the roof with more speed than finesse, stumbling off the broomsticks and onto the concrete surface. Harry checked out Hermione's condition as soon as he could; his girlfriend looked cold and tired but her eyes were filled with determination. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Everyone alright?" He asked.

They all nodded but he noticed Ron was rubbing his upper arms, trying to get the aches out and Ginny's expression was pained. The sooner they got into the warmth the better.

Harry shrunk the broomsticks and placed them in his pocket. He pointed at the roof door and they all walked over stiffly.

It wasn't even locked.

Hermione made a moue of disapproval at the evident lack of security. "What are they thinking?"

"Easy access for the injured?" suggested Ginny, huddling inside her cloak.

"Doors like this are routinely locked and alarmed in muggle hospitals." Hermione informed her briskly.

"Well, this isn't a muggle hospital!" Ron hissed, bristling.

Harry ignored them. He checked for a trip alarm the same way he'd seen Bill do but his spell came back with a negative response. He frowned again. He had to agree with Hermione; the security was appalling even if it was making their lives easier.

"Where to?" Harry asked, waving down the stairs.

"We should probably try the Magical Trauma ward." Neville whispered. "It's on the fourth floor."

Harry nodded sharply in acknowledgement and started down the stairs. They all paused in the stairwell as they got to the right floor. Harry peered out at the bustling corridor and his heart sank. It was going to be nigh on impossible to sneak into Sirius's room. Sure, they were disillusioned but it wasn't a hard spell to break since an eye could catch the distortion in the visual field and all six of
them made it more than likely that someone would spot them.

"Now what?" asked Ron impatiently.

"Well, we can't just walk out there." Hermione pointed out logically. "There are too many people."

"We split up and go out in a staggered way." Harry said decisively. "Ron and Luna can take the right corridor; Neville and Ginny will take the left, and me and Hermione will take the corridor right in front of us. We go and search for Sirius; meet back in thirty minutes."

"Right you are, mate." Ron said.

Neville gave a nod of agreement as did Ginny.

"Good plan, Harry." Luna remarked with a bright smile.

Harry and Hermione went first. Harry caught hold of Hermione's hand and held it as they walked slowly and carefully through the open double doors and down the corridor, carefully keeping to the sides to ensure they didn't bump into anyone.

Hermione tapped Harry's hand and pointed to the nurses' station. He got her message straight away; hopefully they'd have some record of Sirius's room. The only problem was that it was very busy. Two nurses – one young, blonde and bubbly and one old grey and grim – stood behind the desk while three healers chatted in front of it, clearly debating something. An Auror leaned on the counter at one end, a cup in his hand and his eyes on the young nurse rather than on the corridor.

Hermione nudged him again and he mouthed the word distraction at her. Hermione's lips thinned as her eyes narrowed at the scene in front of them. She pointed her wand at a large picture on the far side of the station and whispered a spell.

The picture fell off the wall with a loud clatter, eliciting a shriek of surprise from the young nurse. Suddenly, they were all rushing away from the desk to the fallen picture.

Harry and Hermione moved swiftly. Harry kept watch on the crowd around the picture who were theorising about why it had fallen off the wall while Hermione looked through the records. The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps from further down the corridor heralded the arrival of another Auror – Tonks – and Remus.

Moony looked tired and drawn; he wore the same clothes he had done the day before, wrinkled and dirty. There was stubble along his jaw and his eyes looked bloodshot.

Harry moved to the back of the desk and pulled Hermione down. His heart pounded in his chest, fast and furious. The faintly antiseptic smell of the hospital had him feeling nauseous but he realised that it was probably helping to mask his scent from Moony.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Remus growled.

Tonks lay a hand on his arm, a gentle restraint. "Remus, calm down."

"I won't calm down!" Remus snapped. "We've just lost – and Sirius is…" he stopped abruptly, a choking sound lodged in his throat.

Harry's tripped over in his chest. Was Sirius…was Harry too late to save him?

Tonks' hair went from her normal pink to blue then black. "Remus…"
Harry cringed as Remus jerked away from Tonks and stormed back up the corridor.

More footsteps had Harry instinctively ducking back behind the desk as Bill Weasley arrived. Bill looked shocked, pale under his freckles.

"Tonks!" Bill called out. "Is it true about...?"

Tonks nodded sadly. "Caro took him down to the morgue."

Harry's whole body froze at her words.

Bill's face dropped and he shook his head, grief roughening his tone when he talked again. "This is turning into a right old day."

Tonks nodded. "Look, Remus and Croaker are back in Sirius's old room. Do you want me to take you?"

Bill nodded.

"Harry…" Hermione's shocked whisper pulled Harry out of his frozen state. Her eyes met his in stunned disbelief.

It sounded like Sirius was dead!

Harry couldn't believe it – he didn't believe it.

Sirius couldn't be dead!

He had to see Sirius. He had to see if his father was dead for himself…until then as far as he was concerned, he wasn't dead!

He stood up and Hermione snagged his hand. She kept beside him as they trailed Tonks and Bill up the corridor. Harry gave a sigh of relief as they left the room door open when they went through it.

Remus stood at the window and Bertie Croaker stood beside him. Both men were pale and silent, staring out into the wet weather that had turned the London skyline grey and foreboding. A stripped bed stood to the right of them; empty and ominous in its nakedness.

Bill cleared his throat. "Bertie, I just heard…"

Bertie sighed heavily. "It's a rotten day." He shook his head sadly. "The pain…the pain was just too much for him and we couldn't do anything for him."

"So Sirius..." Bill murmured.

"Sirius is gone." Remus replied without turning around. He lowered his head. "How am I going to tell Harry?"

Bill reached back and closed the door, shutting out the rest of the conversation.

Harry staggered back against the wall of the alcove and rubbed at his chest; his heart ached, clenched in denial and pain and so much sorrow he could hardly breathe. Sirius couldn't be dead…

He couldn't be.

Hermione's arms encircled him and he rested his head on her shoulder, accepting her comfort.
"We have to…we have to get back to the others." Harry whispered, fighting back his tears and anguish. He clung onto the thought that he wouldn't believe Sirius was gone until he saw it for himself.

Hermione nodded and the tears in her eyes fell. She brushed them away and the two of them walked slowly back to the stairwell.

Their friends were already there but their animation, their excitement from their adventures in exploring the hospital, faded as they took in Hermione's and Harry's devastation.

Harry let Hermione fill everyone in, lost in his own melancholy, he was only vaguely aware of the horror, pity, sorrow and guilt that flitted over Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville.

"I won't believe it until I see him." Harry said grimly. He wasn't going to believe it; he wasn't.

"You…you want to go to the morgue, mate?" whispered Ron, clearly horrified at the idea.

"I want to see him." Harry insisted quietly. "I don't…I can't believe it until I see him."

"If that's what you need to do, then you should do it." Luna agreed softly. Her eyes glimmered with an all too compassionate understanding. "When I lost Mummy…"

Harry reached out and stopped her talking, just folding his hand over hers.

"I'm…I don't know what to say, Harry." Neville murmured. "It's all my fault and…"

"It's not." Harry stated firmly. It wasn't Neville's fault. It was Harry's. He was the one Voldemort wanted to hurt and weaken; he was the reason why both Neville and Sirius had been targeted. "It's not your fault, Neville."

"The morgue is in the basement." Ginny said quietly. "I saw a sign…" she waved back at the door indicating the bustling corridor outside.

"Basement it is." Harry said.

Hermione nodded briskly. "It might not be him, Harry." Her tone was crisp and bright; evidently intended to be positive and to cheer him, bolster his confidence.

But he could see the doubt in her eyes that Sirius was alive and well. It tore something in him; something fragile that was trying to hold on as much as he could to the refrain that until he saw him….until he saw Sirius dead with his own eyes…

He avoided her gaze and started down the stairs.

o-O-o

Peter fiddled nervously with his tie and tried to look as though he belonged in the corridors of Saint Mungo's. He shivered. He'd had to change into his animagus form to sneak inside the building since his appearance the day before had clearly caused them to increase the security on the front door. The two Aurors had been stopping people at random and doing spot identity checks. It was unnerving and if Peter had had any choice in the matter he wouldn't have stepped foot in the hospital again.

But he had no choice.

Barty Crouch had been a whimpering mess when he'd been released from the cellar that morning and the Dark Lord had indulged him, wiping away his tears and pandering to his 'son's' heartfelt
protestations that he would never disappoint the Dark Lord again. With Barty out of action, the Dark Lord had turned to Peter and ordered him to return to the hospital and preferably kill Black while the wizard was weakened and vulnerable.

Peter really didn't want to kill Sirius. He hadn't wanted to kill Sirius when he'd blasted the street to pieces back in 'eighty-one. He hadn't wanted James and Lily dead. Certainly he'd been ambivalent about Harry but his friends…Sirius had been his friend.

Well, not wanting to kill Sirius was a problem but he'd get over it because the alternative – going back to the Dark Lord and admitting he hadn't killed him – wasn't going to happen. Peter knew he'd be the one locked in the cellar if he did that and no doubt locked in the cellar after being tortured for a while.

No, he would kill Sirius.

Given a choice between his own life and Sirius's the choice was easy.

But the more pressing problem was that after his poking of the werewolf the day before, he feared that he wouldn't be able to get near enough to Sirius to kill him. Remus had clearly already instigated extra security at the front of the hospital and Peter knew his old friend would be stationed near to Sirius, guarding him.

The Dark Lord had helped him put together a potion that would temporarily mask his scent but Peter knew it wouldn't be enough. He stared down the corridor towards Sirius's room and took cover behind a large plant while he debated how he could get past the Auror stationed by the desk.

He almost jumped out of his skin when a picture fell. He was about to take advantage of the distraction and move when he realised that there was a file floating from mid-air back to the station desk as though someone invisible searched for something at the abandoned desk.

He narrowed his eyes, trying hard to catch where the light distortion would give away a disillusioned wizard or witch and was satisfied as he made out two forms; two young people. He gave a cautious sniff and as the pair moved, a familiar scent drifted through the air…it was Harry!

No sooner had he made the discovery when Remus stormed in.

Peter frowned at Remus's words…

Surely Moony didn't mean that Padfoot was already dead?

Peter felt his spirits brighten with the thought that he wouldn't have to kill Sirius before a twinge of the boy he had been felt a flicker of guilt and pain at the loss of his old school friend.

He hunkered down behind the plant as he sensed the air shift as the young couple moved to follow Remus down the corridor. Perhaps they were trying to find out if Sirius was dead too. He aimed his wand carefully and placed a listening spell on Hermione. Immediately, his ears caught the conversation the pair was overhearing; the body had been already been removed.

It was probably in the morgue.

He wasn't surprised when the door was closed the pair made their way back along the corridor and out towards the stairs where they were reconciled with even more Hogwarts' stowaways. Peter took a moment to wonder at Dumbledore's stupidity in allowing so many students to run away from the school while he maintained his position. He carefully listened to the kids' conversation until almost fifteen minutes later he overheard Harry insist he have proof of Sirius's death.
Peter considered his options quickly. He needed proof that Sirius was dead himself and he could win even more points if he somehow managed to capture Harry's reaction. The Dark Lord would be pleased. It was more than enough to send him running for the elevator, eager to get to the morgue ahead of Harry and his cohorts.

As soon as he got downstairs, he hurried to the morgue; the wide double doors were signposted and slightly ajar. After a quick look to make sure nobody was round, he changed into his rat form and sneaked through the gap. He stopped at the sight of the morgue attendant talking with a woman in the robes that designated her as an Unspeakable. There was a body in front of them of an old man, one of his arms wasted away from a curse. He scurried underneath a nearby table before they spotted him.

"...and you shouldn't worry, Miz Caroline, we'll take good care of old Lawrence." The elderly smiled toothlessly at the young woman. "He was a good 'un. Such a shame he went the way he did. Thought he knew better than to pick up cursed objects! You can tell old Bertie that I'll take care of him!"

"I will do."

"Is it right that Lord Black's gone to the Valley for healing?" The attendant continued blithely unaware of the listening rodent nearby.

The Unspeakable sighed. "So Bertie said. I can't say I'm surprised. They were struggling last night to deal with his pain and the Valley clinic is the best. Not to mention it's probably safer for Lord Black there than here. Security in this place is a joke. You heard we had an unwanted intruder last night?"

And suddenly, Peter got it.

Sirius wasn't dead.

Someone had died – the dead man on the gurney in front of him – but Sirius himself had been taken away for healing. The Valley clinic was almost mythical with its location kept very secret. And the time bubble aspect meant that it would be another week before Sirius returned.

"Poor Lawrence. I didn't know him well but he was a good man." The young woman sighed. "My partner, Bill, is going to be disappointed that he missed saying goodbye. I should go and find him."

Peter's mind whirled with the possibilities. Sirius wasn't dead which was a problem because Peter was supposed to kill him but on the other hand Harry thought Sirius was dead which was even better because how destroyed both father and son would be by that? Would the Dark Lord be pleased if Peter simply ensured that Harry continued to believe that his wonderful new father was gone from his life?

It was a tricky decision. Peter dithered and dithered as the morgue attendant left with the young Unspeakable. Finally, Peter changed back and drew the sheet back on the body. He knew he was running out of time. It only took a moment to change the features on the wasted body to mimic those of a battered Sirius Black.

The door beginning to open as though by magic by itself was enough to alert Peter that he had run out of time and he changed back into his rat form, diving back under the table.

o-O-o

The trip to the morgue had been quiet, all of the teens lost in their own thoughts, and none more so than Harry. His mind whirled with the idea of Sirius's death. He just couldn't believe that Sirius was
gone. The picture of his father alive in his arms after Harry had removed the collar played continuously in his head.

Yes, Sirius was hurt and in pain but he hadn't been near death. Harry was certain of that.

But.

And there was a but...Harry also couldn't shake the sight of Remus looking so devastated; the empty bed in the infirmary room; Trelawney's vision of someone dying.

He pushed uncertainly at the doors to the morgue and stepped inside the frigid space. He was aware of Hermione just behind him, Ron and the others at her heels.

There was a body in front of him on a gurney but it was covered by a sheet. Harry moved to stand beside it without conscious thought. Hermione stood to his left and Ron to his right. Neville, Luna and Ginny stood on the other side. Everyone stared at the body.

There was a ripple as Harry's spell fell and they all became visible.

Ron exchanged a less than subtle look with Neville which Harry ignored. Still, he wasn't surprised when Ron noisily cleared his throat.

"Shall we...I mean you want to see him, right?" Ron said.

Harry gave a jerky nod. He could hardly hear anything over the pounding of his heart. He took a deep breath and reached for the sheet. Hermione stepped closer to him.

Everyone seemed to stop breathing completely as the sheet peeled back.

It was Sirius.

Hermione lifted a hand to cover her face and Harry vaguely heard Ginny's soft cry and Ron's murmur of horror.

Harry moaned a low denial. He felt his legs turn to water and momentarily gripped the edge of the gurney to stop himself from falling, before letting go abruptly. Harry backed away from the gurney, from the horrifying sight of his father dead. Harry wasn't sure how he was still breathing - why he was alive when Sirius lay dead in front of him; Harry's heart hurt so much he was sure it was breaking.

His magic roared up.

"Harry..." Hermione reached for him and he sidestepped her hand.

Harry tried to keep control but his magic slipped and slid through his desperate mental fingers. The air stirred around him, a hard wind suddenly swirling through the morgue. It ripped the sheet from Harry's numb fingers and sent it whirling. He knew he was going to lose control. He wasn't certain he wanted to stop it. He wanted the pain to stop.

It was all his fault. He was the reason Sirius was dead. He was the reason why Neville had been hurt. He would be the reason why Hermione would get hurt in the future. Voldemort would come after her too. And Ron. Anyone who Harry loved.

Through the haze of his grief his gaze fell on Hermione's scared face, pale and frightened.

She was frightened of him.
And she should be. He'd only hurt her or get her hurt.

He had to let her go.

Had to keep her safe.

"I'm sorry." Harry said roughly.

Something must have shown on his face – something through the maelstrom of magic that surrounded him – because her expression shifted swiftly from fear to shocked understanding to panic.

"Harry!" Hermione said urgently. "Don't do this…don't…"

"NO!" Harry shouted backing away from her, backing away from a shocked looking Ron and a nervous looking Neville, from a confused Ginny and an understanding Luna…

"You don't have to do this!" Hermione said. "You don't…"

"I have to keep you safe!" Harry cut in sharply. "I…look at me! I've managed to put you all in danger dragging you out here and…Sirius is dead! Sirius is dead because of me! I won't let…" his throat closed suddenly on the words and he gave a choked back sob as he struggled for breath.

His magic swarmed over the room, twisting the metal on the tables, turning the walls grey and foreboding as they rewrote the world to show Harry's pain. Harry was oblivious to it, and oblivious to the fact that it never harmed a hair on anyone's head – not Hermione, not Ron, not the others who'd so faithfully followed him to London, nor the body on the table.

Harry straightened his shoulders, his jaw tight as he made his decision. His eyes met Hermione's again and he saw her read his determination because her lips turned stubborn and her brow lowered.

"You don't get to make a decision for me!" She snapped at him angrily. "I know what it means to be your girlfriend and I'm OK with it!"

He smiled sadly at her, his eyes flickering to the body and back, a silent message of what could happen to her. "But I'm not." He held up a hand to stop her from arguing and with a silent thought wished her and his friends back to Hogwarts, to safety.

The wards on Saint Mungo's shattered like glass as his magic tore through them, transporting his friends away.

The building shook as Harry gave a sob, control slipping rapidly as his grief took hold. He took one hesitant step towards Sirius, and then another, and another still until he placed a shaking hand on the gurney.

"I'll stop him, Sirius. I'll stop Voldemort and then we'll be together again. I promise." Harry stepped back, trembling and uncertain of where to go…

He couldn't return to Hogwarts.

He'd just be placing everyone there in danger.

No.

He had to leave and hide; track down Voldemort on his own somehow and then…
And then he could be with his family; with his Mum and Dad, and Padfoot.

Harry swiped at the tears cascading down his face and apparated away.

o-O-o

Peter slunk out from under the table and quickly made his way out of the hospital before he was discovered.

He was almost dancing with glee when he returned to his human form.

His ploy had worked so much better than he had expected.

Harry thought Sirius was dead and gone off alone. Not only that but Peter had witnessed the strength of Harry's power and could report it to the Dark Lord.

His Master would be pleased.

Peter cackled almost hysterically and apparated back to the hideout.
"NO!" Hermione screamed as they landed on the floor in the Hogwarts' infirmary.

The wards of the school responded instantly to the magical intrusion and locked down the infirmary wing.

Hermione staggered to her feet and hurried to the door, attempting to get it open by shaking it. When that didn't work, she pulled out her wand and aimed it at the thick wood.

"What the HELL are you doing?" shouted Ron, grabbing her wrist and pulling it down sharply so it pointed at the floor.

"Let go of me!" She wrenched out his grasp. "I have to get out of here and back to London! I have to get back to Harry!" She didn't care that her voice sounded too high and too panicky.

Ron stared at her furiously. "DON'T YOU THINK WE ALL WANT TO DO THAT?!" He pushed his hands into his wild red hair.

"THEN WHY ARE YOU STOPPING ME?"

"Because the wards have been activated and you aiming a spell at the door might kill us." Luna said matter-of-factly, wandering up to stand beside Hermione.

"Oh." Hermione's body slumped with disappointment and hard on its heels was the overwhelming urge to burst into tears.

Sirius was dead.

Harry had just lost Sirius – had just lost his father.

And instead of allowing her to comfort him, he had sent her away. He had broken up with her – to protect her, yes, but broken up with her.

He was alone and she was…

She covered her face with her hands.

Ron patted her awkwardly on the back. "He didn't mean it, you know. He's just…"

"Trying to protect me, I know." Hermione rubbed at her watery eyes and frowned. "He doesn't get that I don't need protecting! I should be with him."

"No." Luna spoke before anyone else could. She was gazing into the far distance, seeing something nobody else could. "He needs this time to forge shield and sword and spirit…to prepare for the battle ahead because ultimately he and he alone will face the Dark." She blinked suddenly. "What did I just say?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond and snapped it shut again as the wooden door opened, revealing an impressive looking battle-ready Dumbledore, with Professors Snape and Moody just behind him.

"Professor!" Hermione said hurriedly, jumping in before anyone else could. "You have to help us!"
Dumbledore frowned heavily at them while Snape sneered.

Moody motioned at her. "Before we do anything, you'll explain how you lot managed to crash through the Hogwarts' wards!"

"Well," Ron exchanged a quick look with Neville, "that wasn't us so much as…" he grimaced, clearly unwilling to give up Harry as the culprit.

"Potter." Snape immediately jumped to the right conclusion.

"It wasn't Harry's fault!"

"Harry was just…"

"We needed to find out what happened and…"

"You can't blame Harry!"

"Harry just sent us away and…"

"I think Hogwarts has pretty colours."

A sharp whistle cut through their combined babble and yanked their attention back to the concerned looking Headmaster.

"Miss Granger, perhaps you could explain from the beginning what has happened." Dumbledore said calmly.

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded, her hair bouncing lightly around her shoulders. "When Neville came back from the infirmary, we went to see Harry…"

Dumbledore's rheumy eyes sharpened brightly. "You were there when I visited with Professor Trelawney."

"In Harry's room, yes." Hermione agreed, refusing to feel guilty for seeing Harry despite Dumbledore's advice. "When you left, well…"

"Professor Trelawney went kind of funny and had a vision." Ron supplied helpfully, stepping up to stand close to Hermione in support.

"Something to do with someone who had worn a cursed object dying and being reunited with their loved ones, Professor." Ginny added.

"Harry thought," Hermione had to stop and take another breath as tears stung her eyes again at the memory of Sirius lying dead, "Harry thought it meant Sirius."

Ron's hand patted her awkwardly on the back.

"So…"

"We went to Saint Mungo's to check on Sirius." Neville said gravely.

"You did WHAT?" Snape spluttered indignantly.

"We went to London." Neville repeated, his shoulders straightening as he met Snape's furious glare. "Nobody," he shot a look at Dumbledore, "was telling Harry anything."
"Typical Potter!" Snape snapped. "Of course he had to know and so off he went to London!"

"Snape!" Moody growled. His magical eye whirred and spun before fixing on Neville. "That isn't the end of it, is it, lad?"

Neville shook his head. "We found out…" he stopped and Hermione could see him struggle to find the words, "we found out Sirius is dead."

The adults blinked at them in shock.

Dumbledore looked dumbfounded. "I'm afraid that's impossible."

"It's not impossible!" Hermione argued. "We saw…we saw for ourselves!" The memory of Sirius's broken body on the gurney had her covering her face as though she could block the sight from her memory.

"Miss Granger," Snape sneered, "Black is currently alive and well. Whatever you think you saw…"

"Don't talk to her like that! WE SAW THE BODY!" Ron roared, white with rage, his freckles standing out in sharp relief.

"Professor Snape is quite right. You might have seen a body but it could not have been Sirius."

Dumbledore asserted calmly. "Last night, it was quickly ascertained that Saint Mungo's was not secure nor could the healers there deal with his injury, thus Sirius was taken to the Valley clinic by Doctor Jordan. Professor McGonagall has gone with him."

They all stared at him.

"But, but…that can't be true," Hermione said, "because if Sirius is in the States then whose body did we see in the morgue and…OH MY GOD, HARRY!" She raised her stricken gaze to Dumbledore, "Harry thinks Sirius is dead!"

"Where is Potter?" Snape demanded.

"He was just so upset…" Hermione said in a rush.

"He sent us back here." Neville interjected. "We have to get back to Saint Mungo's and find him!"

"I will go and retrieve Harry." Dumbledore said crisply.

"Not without me." Hermione said, raising her chin and glaring at him. "If you had just told Harry when you saw him this morning, none of this would have happened!"

A part of her was appalled at how she was speaking to her headmaster but she was just furiously angry with Dumbledore.

"I'm coming too!" Neville said firmly. "I'm sworn to Harry's service! I can't leave him there! It would be against the oath I took!"

"Me too." Ron insisted.

Dumbledore held up his hand and sighed. "Very well. Severus, you'll come with us and protect the children."

Nobody looked happy at his pronouncement but putting up with Snape was better than being left behind.
Dumbledore whirled around and marched to the infirmary floo. He took a pinch of powder and threw it into the flames. "Saint Mungo's!"

Snape went through first and Hermione followed after him. He held her back when she would have stormed to the morgue and as she waited for the others, the strange chaos surrounding her filtered through her worry.

A large number of Aurors were gathered in the reception, a gawking and babbling crowd around them, peering into the huddle as they tried to get more information.

"What's going on?" Hermione murmured.

A passing healer overheard her and paused. "Someone wrecked the wards!" She hissed and hurried off.

"I wonder who?" Snape jeered.

Hermione glared at him.

The others stumbled through the floo and went as equally wide-eyed at the sight of the reception area.

Dumbledore strode through and immediately caught the attention of one of the Aurors.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir!" The dark skinned man called out with relief. "It's good to see you. The wards…"

Dumbledore nodded briskly, his eyes taking on a faraway gaze as he magically took in the damage. "I will confer with Directors Croaker and Bones to re-establish them. Where…"

"Morgue, sir." The Auror gave a grateful smile. "Epicentre of the magical disturbance was there."

Hermione followed after Dumbledore, Ron falling into step beside her. Luna and Ginny flanked Neville, while Snape brought up the rear.

The morgue fairly glimmered with magic.

"Oh my dear boy!" muttered Dumbledore as he passed through the double doors. The inside of the morgue was filled with people – Amelia Bones, Bertie Croaker and Remus among them.

Remus caught sight of their entry immediately and did a double take. He strode over, a furious scowl on his face. "Where is Harry?" He glared at Dumbledore.

"Now, Remus…" Dumbledore began soothingly even as he sketched a privacy bubble that encased the room and its occupants.

"Don't!" Remus growled, his eyes flashing amber. "His magic is all over this room! What was he doing here and where is he now?"

"He's gone?" asked Hermione before Dumbledore got a chance to derail her question.

Remus snapped his eyes to hers. "What happened, Hermione?"

"I think we would be…" Dumbledore began.

"Harry overheard Professor Trelawney say that someone wearing a cursed object would die and he
thought it was probably Sirius so we all came with him here to find out and, well…" Hermione waved a hand towards the once-again covered up body across the morgue. "We thought that was Sirius."

Remus glowered at Dumbledore and took a step toward him. "Why would Harry come here when you were supposed to tell him that Sirius was at the Valley clinic?"

Dumbledore's cheeks tinted red. "I had to spend most of the morning with Hagrid after that appalling article this morning and I thought it was perhaps best to wait until I had more time to explain."

Hermione noticed Snape shoot Dumbledore a disgusted look before he hid it behind his usual sneer.

"Of course you thought best." Remus shook his head.

"Why didn't you tell him?" Ron blurted out.

Hermione folded her arms and pierced Remus with a pointed stare as she registered the truth of Ron's accusatory tone. "Yes," she added briskly, "why didn't you? You said something about how you were going to tell Harry Sirius was gone when Harry and I eavesdropped on you earlier!"

"What? When?" Remus looked confused before the moment Hermione was referring to seemed to come back to him. "I meant how was I going to tell him Lawrence was dead on top of his being told Sirius was gone – gone to America!" He waved his hands at them. "And why would you kids think Lawrence Appleby was Sirius anyway?"

"It looked like Sirius." Ron jumped in before Hermione could reply.

Remus frowned heavily, his eyes dimming down to a brown before flashing amber again. He went back to the body and ran a diagnostic spell.

Amelia watched the results appear and swore. "Pettigrew was here again?"

"This is a…" Remus started but cut himself off as his eyes landed on Hermione and the other teenagers around her. He drew in another breath. "So, let me summarise." He pointed at Dumbledore. "You decide not to tell Harry the truth about where Sirius is…"

"I was with Hagrid and didn't want to worry Harry when I couldn't be with him." Dumbledore said defensively.

"…and Harry," Remus continued on, "worried regardless of your efforts, and attempted to come and see Sirius for himself. Only Sirius isn't here and the rat sees Harry and sees Sirius isn't here and decides to take advantage by using Lawrence's body to mimic Sirius." He waved his hand at Hermione. "Have I got this right?"

Hermione nodded quickly. "Harry was very upset. His magic…he sent us all back to Hogwarts! He didn't give us a choice!"

"And so we have a distraught, powerful and grief-stricken wizard missing!" Remus glared at Dumbledore and he wasn't the only one. "But more importantly, we have a young boy who believes his father is dead!"

"To be fair, I could not have anticipated this." Dumbledore pointed out calmly, although there was a faint hint of chagrin in his blue eyes.

Remus gave a huff. "But you could have prevented it!" He pushed a hand through his hair. "I have
to find Harry!"

Amelia placed a hand on his shoulder. "We'll find him, Remus."

Ron clicked his fingers. "What about Dobby? Won't he know where Harry is?"

Remus's eyes widened for a moment before he called for the elf.

Dobby didn't appear.

Remus frowned heavily. "Mumby!"

The Black elf assigned to the School House popped into the morgue with a guarded expression. "Mumby bes here, Steward."

"I need you to tell me where Harry is, Mumby." Remus instructed tersely, almost vibrating with impatience.

Hermione found herself holding her breath as she waited for the elf to answer.

"I cannot answer, Steward. Orders from the Heir." Mumby said, waggling his ears in distress.

"Harry thinks Sirius is dead." Hermione jumped in. "Can you tell him he isn't and to come home?"

Mumby's round protruding eyes blinked rapidly. "Elves cannot be sensing Lord Black."

"That's because Lord Black is in a time bubble." Bertie explained patiently. "You can inform Harry that his father is at the Valley clinic."

Mumby started rocking side to side. "Heir orders all but Dobby from his side. Only the Lord can overrule."

"DAMN IT!" Remus snarled and whirled away.

"Thank you, Mumby." Amelia said softly. "I believe you can return to your normal duties."

"Well, this is unfortunate." Dumbledore sighed.

"UNFORTunate?" Remus stomped back up to Dumbledore. "THIS IS YOUR FAULT!"

"Perhaps rather than laying blame we should focus on retrieving Potter." Snape stepped up to Dumbledore, drawing Remus's attention.

Hermione rubbed her head and tried to think how they could find Harry. "What about the family magic? Is there any way that we can find him through that?"

"If Sirius was able to call it, yes," Amelia informed her briskly, "but I'd rather not wait until he's back before we try to find Harry."

That wasn't what she had meant, Hermione fumed silently. Of course they couldn't wait for Sirius to return in a week before trying to find Harry.

"Merlin help us all if we haven't found Harry by the time Sirius returns!" Bertie pointed out quietly.

"The family magic," Snape pondered out loud, "won't he realise that he was wrong about Black's demise when he does the inheritance ritual?"
"I very much doubt that Harry will attempt the inheritance ritual, Severus." Remus retorted. "He's grieving for Sirius. Confirming his succession as Lord Black is going to be the last thing on his mind."

Snape looked at him sceptically but bowed his head in acceptance.

Ginny tentatively raised her hand. "Wouldn't he have gone back home? I mean, that's where I would go if…"

Remus brightened at the thought and snapped his fingers. "I'll check."

"Good." Amelia said crisply. "We'll reconvene in one hour at Hogwarts if you haven't found him by then."

"I want to come with you!" Hermione stepped in front of Remus as he made to leave.

Remus gently shook his head. "You said Harry sent you back to Hogwarts? I'm sure he was trying to protect you and that was right; you should all be back at Hogwarts." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'll find him." Without another word, he marched out.

Amelia sighed and rubbed her head. "Let's hope Harry has gone home. We can't publically declare Harry missing and do a large scale search. It'll play right into Voldemort's hands and cause chaos."

"Agreed." Bertie sighed tiredly. "We should start thinking about how we can find Harry if he isn't at any of his usual abodes."

"Well, let's put our thinking caps on and reconvene in my office in an hour." Dumbledore asserted authoritatively.

"That should include us too." Neville waved a hand at the group of teenagers.

They all turned to look at him and Hermione realised with a start that her friend had assumed his role as Harry's second. His face was set in determined lines, a stubborn cast to his jaw.

"Now, Mister Longbottom…" Dumbledore began.

"Headmaster, this was your doing." Neville stated forcefully. "Had you told Harry the truth as Remus clearly asked you to, Harry would never have come here. He would never have been tricked into believing Sirius was dead – we would not have been tricked! And just because you're our Headmaster, don't think for a moment that you're in charge here and making the decisions!"

"That's enough, Longbottom!" Snape snarled angrily.

Neville ignored him, continuing to glower at Dumbledore. "Harry being missing is an alliance matter. He's sworn to protect us and we are sworn to protect him!"

"He's right." Amelia stated firmly. "The alliance – well, key members of the alliance at any rate – will need to be informed."

Dumbledore made a dismissive hand wave. "I'm sure young Remus will find Harry shortly and we can put this whole thing behind us without anyone else having to be involved."

Amelia regarded him evenly and Hermione admired her rock-steady calm in the face of Dumbledore's natural authority. Amelia didn't challenge him aggressively but she made it clear that she wasn't afraid of him and wasn't simply going to bend to his will either.
"We'll wait until we meet in your office in an hour." Amelia made a circular gesture that encompassed the teenagers. "All of us. If Harry is back…fine." She smiled humourlessly. "If he's not then we'll inform those who need to be informed."

"Very well." Dumbledore said, clearly irritated that he wasn't getting the final say.

Hermione didn't care about his annoyance; she was just relieved that she wasn't going to be shut out of looking for Harry. And as she turned to follow the Headmaster back to the floo, she only hoped that Remus would find Harry and that it wouldn't matter at all.

o-O-o

Somehow Harry had expected it to be much harder to get to the Potter vault but when he'd shown up at Gringotts and made his request to a teller, it had been surprisingly easy.

He quickly filled a pouch with money. He was going to need money to travel, to buy food…all the necessities of life. Surviving had been the only coherent thought he'd had once he'd apparated away from the hospital.

That and he had to move fast. The sheer amount of magic he'd expended at the hospital would soon alert everyone to his running away…

No.

Not running away.

He wasn't running away like a coward. He was staying away from his friends and family to protect them.

Retreating.

Regrouping.

The terms from the military books Moody had made him read as part of his leadership training echoed through his head.

He'd ensured he was hidden. He'd called Dobby to collect a few key items for him – namely, his invisibility cloak, his photo album and some clothes. He'd also called the Black elf that had taken over from Kreacher and ordered that his location not be disclosed to anyone; that the elves themselves stay away from him so they would be safe.

Just like he'd sent his friends to safety.

Ron and Hermione were going to be furious with him, probably Neville too, but they were safe and that was all that mattered.

He wouldn't let anyone else die trying to protect him.

His eyes caught on the trunks from Godric's Hollow.

Too many people had died already.

He shivered; a tug on his spirit and his gaze drifted to land on the small innocuous box that sat on the shelving.

The Resurrection Stone.
Without thinking, he raised his hand and the box zipped across the space and landed in his palm. He struggled with the storm of emotion that swept through him like a tidal wave. He could talk with Sirius…he could talk with his parents…

He closed his eyes and wrestled the temptation back. He pushed the small box into a pocket and stood up to leave.

His exit from Gringotts was swift and he immediately apparated again.

His bedroom at Privet Drive was freezing.

The house had been abandoned by the Dursleys and bought immediately by Sirius. He'd told no-one except Harry that they owned the property.

Harry's mind slipped back to the Summer…

He was always happy to spend time with his new father and thrilled that their Sundays had been designated for father-son quality time. He sensed Sirius was a little nervous about their trip that day though and wondered why.

"Hold on." Sirius said. "We're going to apparate to our destination." He placed his arm around Harry's shoulders and Harry leaned into Sirius's solid premise.

They landed in the back garden of Harry's old house.

"Phew." Sirius said brightly. "Was a bit worried I wouldn't remember it right."

Harry tensed. "Why are we here?"

"Good question, Pronglet." Sirius said, leading him up to the back door and waving his wand at it so it opened. "We're here because this just became our newest property."

"Why?" demanded Harry as they stepped into the kitchen.

It had been left with the Dursleys old furniture and belongings as part of the deal Sirius had agreed with Petunia on Harry's custody had him providing a sum of money for her to furnish and decorate her new property.

"Because it's an asset." Sirius said with enough gravitas that Harry knew he was serious.

"An asset." Harry mumbled unbelievingly.

"Your Mum created a blood ward around this place; a very strong pretty impenetrable blood ward that kept you safe for years. It's weak right now because you've barely lived here for most of the last year and your Aunt has moved out – and its strength was predicated on you living here with your Aunt; renewing its energy through the spell of protection your Mum cast at her death." Sirius spun his wand in his hand absently. "Now there's no way that we're having you live here with your Aunt but I did some digging and…there is another way to renew the protection."

"How?" Harry asked, curious despite himself.

"Blood." Sirius grimaced. "We have to unfortunately reinforce the original binding with our blood. Your blood and mine as you living with me is now what anchors your protection."

"But why keep this place at all?" Harry asked tentatively. "I don't get it. I mean, we have our house and the Manor and all the other properties so…why have this place?"
"Because very few people would ever think to look for you here." Sirius said patiently. "Nobody except Dumbledore and a few others even know the address of where you used to live and certainly those who do wouldn't think you'd ever return here since you hated your life here. A bit like how nobody thought I'd go back to Black Manor this time because I hated it there."

Harry began to understand.

"People will look in the obvious places." Sirius continued. "They'll look at places you considered safe and home. This place isn't one of those and that's why it's perfect. Not only that, but only you and I even know we own the property now. I've already added some minor wards – notice-me-not, muggle repelling, that kind of thing. Once we've renewed the blood ward, this will make a good bolthole if we ever need it."

"Only you and me?" Harry frowned. "Remus doesn't know?"

Sirius shook his head. "I trust Moony, Harry, I do. But we need somewhere even he doesn't know about. This place," he waved a hand around the kitchen, "is our secret."

And it had remained their secret.

Harry swiped at his eyes and when he lowered his hand Dobby was there in front of him, sat on a small trunk with Hedwig perched on his shoulder.

Dobby sniffed at the sight of the bedroom and snapped his fingers. Instantly the broken furniture was mended, the stale air gone and a magical warmth covered Harry like a blanket.

Hedwig flew to Harry's shoulder and she began nuzzling his hair. He felt his resolve waver under her comforting touch.

"Don't be worrying Master Harry Potter." Dobby said solemnly. "Dobbys be taking care of you."

"You should leave, Dobby, and…"

"I bes a free elf and I bes choosing to remain with you as your Paddy would have wanted. Yous be hungry and tired. Too much magic. You'll need to sleep." Dobby ushered him to the bed and a moment later Harry was in pyjamas and being tucked into bed.

Horizontal, the last of his energy drained out of him. He was tired…so tired. The pain of his loss snaked through him again and he gave a sob, turning his head into the pillow. He felt the tug of Morpheus and gave into it, tumbling into sleep and darkness where the pain couldn't reach him; where he could dream that he hadn't lost Sirius…

o-O-o

The newspaper was thrown across the kitchen with a snarl and Peter quickly rearranged his expression into one of abject servitude. He had known as soon as he had read the rag with its report of a magical catastrophe at Saint Mungo's the day before being nothing more than a result of a cursed body being blown up that the Dark Lord was not going to be happy. Especially when he'd been so gleeful at Peter's retelling of what had really occurred.

"REPORT!" The Dark Lord snapped at Dennis Travers.

Travers drew himself up but his expression was respectful and filled with deference. "The traitor Karkaroff reports that the boy is back at Hogwarts and is currently being kept in protective seclusion
in his rooms along with Black."

"You don't believe it." The Dark Lord's red eyes bore into his minion.

"The alliance kids have been sent home rather than staying on at the castle as planned." Travers shrugged. "If Black and Potter are there why do that? Something's not right."

"You believe Potter is still missing?" The Dark Lord probed.

Travers nodded. "Patrols this morning acted as though they were looking for something and the oaf left his shack to join them search the Forest at the Headmaster's urging. He's been shut in there since Skeeter's article yesterday about his being half-giant."

"Hmmm." The Dark Lord turned to Barty who was kneeling by his chair and pushed a childish hand through Barty's hair. "Has Severus made contact?"

"No." Barty said, leaning into the touch in a manner that made Peter's gut churn.

"Contact him." The Dark Lord ordered. "He will know the truth."

Barty immediately leaped to his feet, eager to prove his worth after his previous failure.

The Dark Lord nodded approvingly at Travers. "You've done well, Dennis. Return to Hogwarts and continue to watch."

Travers gave a small bow and disappeared into the Vanishing cabinet.

"Fetch a map." The Dark Lord motioned at Peter and Peter knew better than to dally. He hastened to the sideboard and pulled out an old Encyclopaedia that had been left there. It had a map of Britain and he swiftly flicked to the right page and placed it in front of the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at the book and muttered a spell under his breath. A yellow light sprang from the wand's tip, skittered around the map and slid off the page to dissipate harmlessly on the floor.

"Interesting." The Dark Lord mused contemplatively as his snake slithered around his chair. "Potter is well shielded or somewhere unplottable but he is definitely not at Hogwarts." He tapped his fingers against the edge of the dining room table.

"Shall we search for him?" Peter inquired, unable to stay silent any longer.

The Dark Lord's eyes slid to Peter briefly before returning to the map. "No. I think not." A wave of his wand had the book sent back to the sideboard. "We shall let him remain broken and hiding, grieving for his father, looking over his shoulder in the belief that I will try to find him when he is so vulnerable. What better way to torture him for our ritual?"

"Brilliant, Master." Peter simpered.

The Dark Lord's lips twisted into a mockery of a smile. "And I believe we shall ask Severus to pass on that we are hunting for Potter though. It should keep Dumbledore and his minions running around and allow us time to set things up for the second task."

Peter smiled tightly and nodded. It looked like he had been right in his decision to remain loyal to his Master. Potter had run away like the scared child he was and the Dark Lord was once again proving why he was the most powerful wizard around.
Remus blew out a frustrated breath as he dropped into the chair by the fire.

The parlour in the School House was small but cosy and Remus needed its warmth and familiarity while he took a moment to rest. He rubbed at his tired eyes.

It had been five days since Harry had gone missing; five very long, very tiring days of searching with no sign of Harry.

It looked increasingly likely that they weren't going to find Harry before Sirius came home. Remus closed his eyes. He wasn't looking forward to telling Sirius Harry was missing. Guilt suffused him again.

He should have gone to Hogwarts as soon as Sirius had disappeared in the whirl of the portkey to the Valley clinic. He should have ensured Harry was comforted and fully informed about Sirius's healing and condition.

Sirius was going to kill him.

Why had he trusted Dumbledore to tell Harry what had happened? Why had he chosen to stay at the hospital in the hopes that Wormtail would reappear and they could trap him? Hadn't he learned from what had happened in 'eighty-one when Sirius had made the same choices?

It wouldn't happen again, Remus swore to himself. He only hoped Sirius and Harry would forgive him for his poor decisions.

The thought made him pause for a moment as he realised deep down he expected that when Sirius did return, Harry would be found. Of course he believed that, Remus mused; Sirius would turn over every rock in Britain to find Harry. Padfoot wouldn't rest until he had found his son and brought him home.

Home.

The memory of searching Griffin House and finding nothing raced through his brain again. He had been so sure Harry would have sought sanctuary there…

The sound of the fire flaring caught Remus's attention; the flames turned green and a moment later Tonks stepped out.

She looked frazzled; her pink hair was tied back into a braid but tendrils had come lose and drifted haphazardly around her face. There were purple circles under her eyes giving truth to her exhaustion. Her Auror robes were wrinkled and creased as though she had been wearing them for days.

"Hey." Tonks said and fell into the opposite chair with a groan. She raised her hand and gave a half-hearted wave. "Anything?"

Remus shook his head. "Nothing. You?"

It was Tonks's turn to shake her head. "The Director's got more patrols out in the Alley, around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, and at the hospital but so far nothing. The Underage magical sensor hasn't activated either so wherever he is he's either not doing magic or he's heavily shielded. Has there been no sign of him at any of the properties?"

"I've alarmed every property in the Black and Potter estates here in Britain." Remus said. "He's not
taking refuge in any of them." He sighed. "None of his friends have had any contact with him. I know Amelia was hoping that by sending them home to their parents it might tempt him into approaching them but…"

"Are you sure they aren't lying, protecting him?" Tonks asked carefully.

Remus nodded. "Hermione's too upset that he's missing for him to have contacted her. Ron is angry and resentful that he hasn't been contacted – it's written all over his face. Neville's too stoic when asked; he's trying to keep it together because Harry isn't around." He sighed. "I don't think Harry's close enough to either Luna or Ginny to have approached them and besides…he sent them all back to Hogwarts to protect them. He's staying away from everyone to protect them."

That had been clear once they'd had the chance to examine Hermione's memory of what had happened at Saint Mungo's in Dumbledore's pensieve.

A noise behind them had them both turning.

Sian stepped into the room, tying the belt on her silky purple dressing gown tighter. "You both look wiped out. Have either of you eaten?"

Both Remus and Tonks replied negatively at the same time.

Sian motioned for them to follow her into the kitchen.

"Where's Mumby?" Remus asked slumping onto the bench at the kitchen table, Tonks sitting beside him and leaving the opposite bench free for Sian.

"Back at the Manor." Sian said, heading to the Aga and pulling on heavy oven mitts. "I thought it was best to have someone there in case…"

Remus gave her a grateful smile, oblivious to Tonks's annoyance at the other woman's thoughtful action.

Sian took out a casserole dish from the lower oven and set it on the centre of the table. A moment later, she had cutlery and plates in front of them and was spooning out a thick beefy stew. She set bread on the table beside it and without asking, she poured them both a glass of Merlot before sitting down with her own glass of wine.

"Thank you, Sian." Remus said, his stomach growling appreciatively at the taste and scent of the food. He hadn't eaten since a quick chocolate bar at lunch time.

"Yes," Tonks waved her spoon, "thank you."

"I hope Harry has something to eat." Remus said, feeling a little guilty as his hunger abated.

"Dobby is with him." Sian pointed out. "He's pretty devoted. I can't see him letting Harry starve."

"He won't." Tonks agreed. "That elf is too obsessed with his Master Harry Potter." She twirled her spoon around. "And we know Harry has money, Remus."

It was the one thing that they had been able to verify; Harry had gone straight to Gringotts and visited the family vault. There had been a small withdrawal of funds – too small to sustain Harry for long but enough to tide him over for about a month.

"What I find weird is that any mail owl won't leave with a letter for him." Tonks added. "He's
somewhere managed to convince them that they're not to give him anything."

"Is Hedwig still missing?" Sian sipped her wine.

"Nobody's seen sight nor sound of her." Remus scooped up some stew. "The current theory is she's with Harry." He let a small smile touch his lips. Somehow knowing the owl was with Harry reassured him; Hedwig seemed to consider Harry her charge. She would look after him.

"So," Tonks said despondently, "we know nothing. There are no leads, no reports of him, no signs of contact. It's like he's disappeared into thin air."

"Which is good, isn't it?" Sian said softly. "If we can't find him, neither can…can you know."

"Voldemort." Remus stressed the name and shot Tonks a look not to argue with Sian. He gave a short sharp nod. "And in some ways, you're right. Severus says that they're looking but haven't found him yet. He's leaking false leads to them to keep them off track."

He pushed his plate away and picked up his wine. It was horrifying that the only good news they had was that the bad guys were no closer to finding Harry than they were.

"Mum and Dad are devastated." Tonks murmured. "They think they should have offered to have stayed with Harry when they heard about Sirius being injured." She grimaced. "I should have stayed with Harry."

"Dumbledore should have just followed his bloody instructions and told Harry the truth." Remus countered before his ire deflated. "In truth, there's plenty of blame to round. I should have been with Harry."

Sian reached over and clasped his hand. "This wasn't your fault either, Remus."

Tonks placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sian is right. The only people to blame here are Dumbledore for not allaying Harry's worry in the first place causing him to run off to Saint Mungo's, and the rat for taking advantage of Harry's suspicion that Sirius was dead and tricking him into believing it for real."

Remus was going to kill Wormtail.

Slowly.

The wolf inside him was in complete agreement.

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" Sian asked. "Are you going out searching again?"

"I'm going to talk to Petunia." Remus noted their blank looks. "Harry's Aunt."

Tonks pulled a face, her hair cycling through colours and giving away her inner thoughts. "Why? You don't think Harry would have gone to her? Seriously?"

"She's his Aunt." Remus said simply. "She and that horrible family of hers might have treated Harry appallingly but they were to all extent and purposes the only family he had for years." He took a sip of his wine as he tried to put his thoughts into words. "I don't think he's with her but I do think she might know where he would have gone."

"I doubt that woman has any idea where Harry might have gone in the magical world." Tonks argued fiercely.
"But she might have some idea of where he'd hide in the muggle." Sian rejoined fiercely. Her eyes flashed across to Remus's. "That's why you want to talk with her, isn't it? To see if Harry is hiding in the muggle world?"

"Partially…" Remus said carefully, trying not to let his discomfort at the two women glaring at each other show. "She may well have some thoughts about the muggle world and if so…I'm hopeful that they'll translate to the magical. I don't believe Harry is in the muggle world. Dobby and Hedwig would be difficult to explain."

"You really think she'll know anything of value?" Tonks said sceptically.

"She knows Harry." Remus repeated. "As much as I hate to admit it, she was his caretaker for the first thirteen years of his life. And yes, she might not have wanted to have anything to do with him, but she raised him and on some level she knows his habits – where he goes when he's upset, what he's likely to do…" he sighed heavily again, "or at least I hope so."

Tonks patted his shoulder and gave a sympathetic grimace. "Well, we've got to have hope, right?"

Remus nodded and felt Sian's fingers tighten around his. He drew away from the comfort of the two women, uncomfortable with their support and feeling decidedly undeserving of it. "Thank you for the food, Sian. I'm going to turn in now."

He wouldn't sleep again; would stare up at the ceiling as he had done every night since Harry had gone missing. Perhaps tomorrow they'd find Harry and then he could sleep again.

o-O-o

*31st December 1994*

Harry woke between one breath and the next, sitting up and gasping for air.

He sat, panting softly for a long moment, before he rubbed a hand over his face and tried to remember what had happened.

Everything came back to him in a rush and he slumped back against the pillow, huddling back into his bedding.

Sirius was dead.

And he was back at Privet Drive because nobody would look for him at his old muggle house. Because Sirius had bought it as a bolthole for him. Because Sirius had cared about him, loved him and Harry had never told him…

The tears seeped out of his eyes and into the pillow.

There was a gentle flap of wings and he felt Hedwig landing on the pillow behind him; her beak nuzzling into his hair as she gave what comfort she could.

He missed Sirius so much.

A small pop gave away Dobby's entry and Harry wasn't startled when the elf's hand patted his back awkwardly.

"Alls is being alright, Master Harry Potter, sir." Dobby murmured quietly.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing's going to be alright again, Dobby." He shifted carefully, aware of
Hedwig beside him. She hopped up onto the bedside table and Dobby handed him his glasses as he got himself upright. He felt exhausted still.

He inched out of bed and to the bathroom. Standing under the warm spray, memories filtered through the fog of tiredness...of waking up before...fed warm soup and urged to drink sweet hot chocolate...of a cool cloth against his forehead...of being ushered into the bathroom, into a shower and clean clothes...fresh bed-linen scent as he slid back to sleep again...

He felt a momentary flush of embarrassment that Dobby had taken care of him so much. He finished up his shower and dragged on a bath-robe. He wandered back into his old bedroom and found Dobby waiting with a tray of food.

Harry pushed his embarrassment to one side and met Dobby's kind eyes directly. "You've been taking care of me."

The tiredness that still dogged his limbs was familiar; magical exhaustion.

"Dobby will always be taking care of his Master Harry Potter." Dobby stated with complete conviction.

Harry nodded as he got back into bed. "Thank you, Dobby." He looked around the room; at the thin daylight filtering through surprisingly cheerful curtains – Dobby had obviously redecorated while Harry slept. "How long was I..."

Dobby silently handed him a stack of newspapers as he settled the tray across Harry's lap. "Dobby bes getting you breakfast."

It looked good and Harry's stomach growled appreciatively. He dug into the scrambled eggs and buttered toast while flicking open the paper on the top of the pile. It was dated the day after Boxing Day and the headline gave away the cover story for what had happened at Saint Mungo's. He scanned the articles and couldn't find anything about Sirius's death. He tossed it aside and reached for the next newspaper. Several newspapers later and he'd pushed the tray away, frowning as he considered the lack of any kind of announcement about Sirius.

He was certain that they would have reported it...

Maybe the War Council or the alliance had decided not to publish the information to the press yet, Harry mused. Maybe they'd decided it wasn't politically the right time or would give Voldemort too much of an advantage. It was probably why there was nothing about his own disappearance...

His gut twinged with guilt as his gaze snagged on a small article in one of the early papers about how the rest of the Hogwarts students had returned home. He wondered what had happened to the plan for everyone to stay on at the school. Maybe they'd gone home out of respect for Sirius.

His heart ached a little at the thought of Hermione. They'd had plans for New Year's Eve, nothing very special just a promise to spend it together, to kiss at the change of the year. But it was New Year's Eve and he couldn't spend it with her. He had to protect her and if that meant he couldn't be with her then that was just the way it was.

His fingers brushed over the article again and he pressed his lips together.

"Dobby," Harry said, "is the last paper today's paper?"

Dobby nodded eagerly.
"So, it's the last day of the year." Harry murmured. Tomorrow would bring a new year.

A year without Sirius.

Harry rubbed his head tiredly and picked up his abandoned cup of tea. He sipped as he tried to come up a plan…any plan.

What would Sirius want him to do?

Well, it didn't matter because Sirius wasn't there anymore, Harry thought angrily. But his anger drained away quickly overwhelmed by the pain he felt at not having Sirius in his life.

It came down to what Sirius had been trying to teach him and what they had planned already; his responsibility to the Houses of Black and Potter…being prepared to fight Voldemort…not giving in and coming out fighting in the tournament…

So, he sipped his tea, first thing was his responsibility to the Houses of Black and Potter.

He shouldn't have just run off and left them. Yes, he'd done it to protect them but he owed them more than silence. He sighed and pushed a hand through his messy hair. Hedwig spread her wings and looked at him pointedly.

"Letters, I should send letters." Harry paused. "Or a letter."

Maybe to Augusta. She would be the de facto adult leader of the alliance with Sirius gone. Of course, if he only sent a letter to Augusta, Neville would be pissed, Hermione hurt and Ron incandescent. And he probably owed a letter to Moony who was no doubt as devastated as Harry was himself about Sirius's death.

He blew out a frustrated breath. OK, so he was writing letters to all of them. What could he tell them? What exactly was his plan? To track down Voldemort by himself and confront him once and for all?

It was a plan.

Of sorts.

The alliance could focus on the last piece of the Treasure Hunt and he would take care of Voldemort. But he needed everything to happen before the second task in February or he'd end up having to go to Hogwarts to take part in the tournament no matter what.

He probably needed something more than 'taking care of Voldemort' as a plan too; possibly maybe more than 'finding Voldemort.'

He scratched his forehead absently. One thing at a time.

Harry's eyes strayed to his Heir ring. He should probably consider doing the inheritance ritual but he couldn't face it. Not right then.

Tomorrow, Harry decided; he would do it tomorrow at the beginning of the New Year.

But first he needed to say goodbye to Sirius, to his father. There'd been no report of a memorial or funeral but Harry was certain that they wouldn't have waited for him – and if they were, there was no way that he was going to be able to go.

No, he'd say his goodbyes in private.
He glanced over to the small wooden box on his old desk, felt the tug in his spirit as its contents called to him once again.

And he just knew how he was going to do it.

o-O-o

Remus stared at the package of letters that sat on the coffee table as Augusta directed everyone to their seats. He was perched on a chair, almost falling off the edge, his eyes pinned to the large envelope.

Hermione sat down in the chair next to him; her mother offering Remus a sympathetic smile as she sat on the arm of her daughter's seat and placed a comforting arm around Hermione's shoulders. Ron sat next to Neville on the sofa, the two of them both wearing determined stubborn expressions that gave them an air of solidarity. Arthur and Molly Weasley took the second sofa, while Dumbledore conjured himself an armchair; Andromeda followed his example. Both Richard and Amelia Bones eschewed a seat, choosing to stand, and Augusta took the remaining chair.

Augusta cleared her throat. "Just after lunch, Hedwig appeared in the garden. She flew in, dropped the envelope and flew out again before we could attempt to stop her."

"You're certain it was Hedwig?" Amelia asked tersely.

Augusta bristled. "I recognise the owl and we've checked the envelope just to be safe. There's no sign of tampering." She motioned at Remus. "Perhaps you could do the honours?"

Remus practically pounced on the envelope. He opened it and tipped it up. A cascade of letters fell out and onto the table. Remus scooped them up and handed them out.

Hermione clutched hers tightly, hope and fear shining out of her brown eyes. Ron's face settled into grim satisfaction. Neville looked relieved while Augusta looked surprised when Remus handed her the final one while he kept his own clutched in his hand.

"It's addressed to the Potter alliance." Augusta said slowly.

"Read it." Richard encouraged.

Augusta unfolded the letter. "Dear friends, I should start with an apology for leaving the way I did but with Sirius's death I can no longer justify placing others in danger when I am sworn to protect you." She stopped abruptly before she swallowed hard and continued. "I want you to know that I will defeat Voldemort; I don't ever want you to doubt my commitment to that. I will return to Hogwarts for the second task but it is my hope that I find him before then."

Remus paled rapidly. Merlin! Harry was intent on going after Voldemort by himself.

Augusta cleared her throat noisily. "I need the help of the alliance to continue to maintain the political pressure on those that would support Voldemort; to help me find him and a way to defeat him. I know Sirius is a great loss in our fight but I hope we will honour his memory by continuing his plan. I will return to Hogwarts for the second task but it is my hope that I find him before then."

Remus suppressed the wolf's urge to growl at him. Instead, he turned to Harry's friends and motioned for them to read their letters. "You don't have to share but please; read them."
It was Ron who tore into his first. He quickly scanned it, frowning then smiling broadly. "He's good. Says he wants us to continue planning for the second task and making sure things stay the same at Hogwarts."

Neville nodded, reading his. He looked reassured, more confident and Remus was certain that Harry had given him the task of leading the Heirs.

In contrast, Hermione gave a sob and ran out. Her mother gave an apologetic sigh and went after her.

Ron gazed after them unhappily. "I guess he didn't say he was being stupid and ask to get back together with her."

Harry had hurt Hermione badly, Remus surmised. It was going to be a mess when the young wizard did return.

He slowly unfolded his own letter and scanned the message…

"Dear Moony,

I feel terrible leaving you to handle everything with Sirius's death and looking after the Houses. I know you're grieving for him just as much as I am and… I'm safe. I'm somewhere Sirius found for me.

Dobby's looking after me and Hedwig…

I'll keep writing I promise.

I'm so sorry, Moony. It's all my fault and…I promise I'm going to make it right.

Snitch."

"Oh, Harry." Remus murmured softly, his emotions churning wildly. His heart ached for the loss that was written in every word, the grief that seeped through the paper and through his fingers and into his bones. He felt a renewed rush of guilt that he'd trusted Dumbledore to inform Harry; hadn't been there for Harry once again.

Harry was safe somewhere Sirius had found for him.

The thought suddenly stampeded through his head.

Of course.

Sirius had planned for every contingency. He had known Harry might need a safe place to go at some point in their fight against Voldemort; somewhere secret from everyone including Remus. The contrast with Petunia was marked since Harry's aunt had expressed little knowledge of Harry's habits when he was upset beyond him doing weird magic.

"Remus?" Andromeda prompted gently.

"Sirius gave him somewhere safe to run to," Remus replied without looking up, "he's there."

"Well," Dumbledore clapped delighted, "all's well. As soon as Sirius returns, he can retrieve Harry and…"

"And we'll be lucky if Sirius doesn't kill the lot of us for letting Harry think he was dead in the first
place." Remus pointed out dryly. He deliberately met Dumbledore's eyes and the old wizard did at least have the grace to look ashamed.

But Dumbledore was right. There was nothing more to do than wait until Sirius returned. Another day and Padfoot would be back in England, hopefully fully healed from his experience at Christmas. Remus felt frustrated that his own efforts to find Harry had been so unsuccessful but it was gratifying to know that Sirius's contingency planning had worked; Harry was safe.

"I don't think there's anything more we can do." Remus said out loud.

Amelia huffed out an irritated breath of her own, her eyes raking over Dumbledore before she nodded. "Cornelius will be relieved to hear that Harry's well-being is confirmed." She shook her head a touch as though to shake the thought of the Minister of Magic away. "I've already sent a portkey to the Valley clinic for Sirius to use as soon as he's released. It will return him to my office at the Ministry. I thought it was best he find out about Harry on relatively neutral ground."

"A good idea, Amelia." Dumbledore demurred.

Remus suppressed the urge to roll his eyes – Amelia didn't.

"This could all have been avoided, Albus." Amelia stressed. She pushed away from the mantelpiece and glanced at her brother and Augusta. "I take it the alliance will wait for Sirius's return before doing anything else?"

Augusta gave a slow nod. Her fingers traced over the letter she held. "Knowing he is safe…" she sighed, "we'll wait for Sirius."

"Although I think one of us should talk with Sirius when this calms down a bit." Richard said firmly. "I can understand why Sirius gave Harry the bolthole at the beginning of the Summer but things have changed…Harry should view the alliance as his safe place to come."

"Exactly." Molly nodded enthusiastically. "Harry's just a young boy. He needs supervision and emotional support! What he must have gone through these last few days!"

"Harry doesn't want to put any of us in danger." Neville countered, defending his absent friend.

"And it's not like he's thinking straight." Ron jumped in. "He's grieving!"

Molly bristled. "Ronald! That…"

Remus raised a hand bringing an end to the debate. "I don't disagree that Harry should view his new extended family and his allies as his first port of call now when Sirius isn't around, but the boys are right." He rubbed at his forehead tiredly. "Harry's in a great deal of pain, blaming himself for Sirius's death and…in his grief, his immediate thought is that he doesn't want to be the cause of anyone else getting hurt. Hence why he's pushed us all to a distance." And in the case of his school friends, that pushing had been very literal.

"Well, he's wrong." Hermione's voice sounded from the doorway. She marched into the room, stopping by her previous seat. "You can't tell me you think he's right? We should all get to make the decision for ourselves!"

"Actually," Amelia stated dryly, "I, for one, am glad he reacted the way he did that day at the hospital. It's all too likely that Pettigrew and maybe some of Voldemort's other minions were close by. If Harry hadn't sent you all back to Hogwarts, we may have ended up with another abduction attempt or worse."
Neville's face blanched white and a quick look at Augusta had Remus convinced that she was in complete agreement with Amelia. Molly placed a hand on Ron's shoulder and Remus knew she was also contemplating how close the kids had come to being seriously hurt.

"You'll get the chance to talk to Harry about it when he gets home." Miriam Granger reminded her daughter with the air of something that had been oft repeated.

"Maybe I don't want to talk with him." Hermione muttered and sat down, crossing her arms over her chest.

Remus looked over at Miriam with a grimace. Yes. There were definitely going to be stormy times ahead for the teenagers. He smoothed a hand over his letter. They would count themselves lucky that Harry would be back for there to be stormy times, Remus mused. And regardless that he dreaded Sirius learning of what had happened, he couldn't wait for Padfoot's return…for Padfoot to make it all alright again.

o-O-o

The sun shone brightly above him but Sirius ignored it in favour of glowering out at an undefined point in the majestic scenery. He was back in his Padfoot form. It had taken him a while after waking from the three week-long healing coma he'd been placed in to be able to manage the shift without excruciating pain, but he was damned if he was going to let Crouch or anyone deny him the comfort of his animagus form.

Sirius fidgeted, his claws sinking into the ground below him. He'd felt as weak as a kitten when he'd woken up three days before and hadn't been able to argue with Minnie's sound logic that the Valley had been the best place for him to receive treatment. But he had also chafed badly at the news that no-one had considered letting Harry accompany him. Sirius missed his son so much it ached.

More than that, with each day that passed he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something wasn't right with Harry; that Sirius was needed back home. It was the reason why he'd sought the spot on the mountain where he and Harry had talked once when he'd gone for his morning run.

Footsteps alerted him to the approach of Noshi and Sirius didn't move. Sirius wasn't surprised Noshi had come looking for him. The healer had personally overseen Sirius's treatment. Sirius gave an internal sigh and morphed back to his human shape.

Noshi smiled and sank to the ground to sit beside him. "Thank you for changing back, my friend."

Sirius huffed audibly. "Minnie told tales on me, didn't she?" The old professor had been hovering worriedly over him during his stay at the clinic.

"She is concerned about you." Noshi said calmly.

Sirius knew it was futile to argue Minnie's concern wasn't justified. He surrendered gracelessly. "I had another nightmare."

Noshi's eyes sharpened thoughtfully. "The same one?"

Sirius nodded. "Every night the same thing."

Noshi motioned at him. "Tell me about it."

He had already described the dream once before but Sirius acquiesced to the request with a tilt of his head.
"Harry is missing and I'm desperately trying to find him." Sirius swallowed hard, remembering the ache in his heart that had echoed through his dream and into the reality of waking. "And I find him in the cemetery by his parents' grave. I'm running as fast as I can but before I can reach him, Death appears and..." He sighed heavily. "And that's when I wake up."

Noshi regarded him contemplatively. "You are worried about your son; to dream of him is natural. He has a heavy destiny to face."

"If this was just one dream, one night, I might agree with you." Sirius murmured. "This feels more." He shook himself. "I think something is wrong now."

And as he put it into words for the first time, he was struck by the sense that he was right; something was wrong and his son needed him.

"You were involved in a traumatic situation prior to waking here," Noshi said, "are you certain that isn't simply preying on your mind?"

"No." Sirius retorted firmly. "Something is wrong. I just know it!"

Noshi nodded slowly. "You are mostly healed, I would prefer you to stay a while longer, but I believe returning home and reassuring yourself of Harry's well-being will accelerate your remaining healing."

"Is there any way I can borrow one of the amulets that allow you to overcome the time bubble?" Sirius asked.

Noshi raised his eyebrows a touch. "You believe you need to return before a week has passed outside?"

"My gut is screaming at me that I need to get home right away." Sirius said, standing up.

"Then we will get you home." Noshi said.

Things moved fast after that. It was only a few hours later that Sirius found himself hugging Minnie goodbye in Noshi's office.

Minnie stepped back and patted his arm consolingly. "I really hope you are wrong about this, Sirius."

"So do I," murmured Sirius. He accepted the amulet Noshi handed to him with grim satisfaction.

"I cannot guarantee how much time will have passed on the outside; how much time you may gain back." Noshi cautioned.

Sirius nodded in understanding. He knew deep in his gut that the amulet would return him to when he was needed.

Noshi passed him a portkey. "I understand it will take you to Director Bones's office."

Sirius appreciated that someone had considered the logistics of getting back to Britain. He grimaced apologetically at Minnie. "I'll get a replacement sent straight away."

"As soon as it arrives," Minnie said, "I will follow you."

Noshi sighed. "I am sorry that I was only able to secure one amulet for you."

Sirius waited a moment while Minnie assured Noshi that it was fine. "I should go."
He placed the amulet around his neck and with a final goodbye headed out of the clinic. He walked until he felt the tell-tale tingle on his skin of passing through the magical time barrier. He paused and checked the date; New Year's Eve. He had been gone almost the full week. He frowned and activated the portkey.

The tug on his naval was wrenching and he was wincing when he landed in Amelia's office.

Sirius realised he should wait but the urge to find his son was too great. He made for the floo and headed straight to the School House; he could walk up to Hogwarts from there.

The cosy Hogsmeade house was filled with welcome warmth when Sirius stepped into it. He brushed the remains of the floo powder from his shoulders as he made for the front door, stopping abruptly as he almost collided with Remus in the doorway of the parlour.

"Moony!" Sirius stared at him with bemusement. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you with Harry?"

And the certainty that something was wrong grew in the face of Moony's guilty expression.

Sirius drew himself up and glared at his oldest friend. "Where is Harry?"

Remus tried to usher Sirius into the parlour but stopped when Sirius refused to budge.

"First things first," Remus said soothingly, "Harry is safe." He raised his hands as though to ward Sirius off but mostly to stop him from talking. "He's at the bolthole you arranged for him."

"Why?" Sirius demanded. The house at Privet Drive was meant to be used only in a dire emergency...

Remus sighed tiredly. "Did Minerva explain why you were at the clinic?"

Sirius nodded impatiently. "Saint Mungo's couldn't treat me..."

"And Wormtail paid you a visit." Remus added. He pushed a hand through his hair and Sirius absently noted how weary Remus looked. "Harry was safe at Hogwarts so I left it to Albus to tell him what was going on and I stayed to see if the rat showed again."

Sirius suddenly understood where the story was going. "What did the old coot do now?" He snapped.

"More what he didn't do." Remus muttered, pushing his hand through his hair again. "He didn't tell Harry anything."

The growl was completely involuntary and unavoidable; Sirius felt strangely connected with his inner Grim after the fight with Rookwood, and his inner Grim was ready to tear Dumbledore to pieces.

"Trelawney was looking after him – Trelawney!" Remus continued. "Harry overheard her having a vision where she said someone would die and...and he thought it was you so..." he sighed, "he broke out of Hogwarts with his friends and went to Saint Mungo's."

"This isn't explaining how he ended up running away!" Sirius said impatiently.

Remus waved at him to calm down. "The rat saw him at the hospital, realised Harry thought you were dead somehow and..."
"And?" prompted Sirius, a dread gathering in his gut.

"And made Harry think you really had died." Remus finished at a rush. "Wormtail transfigured Lawrence Appleby's body to look like you."

Sirius felt the panic start to rise like a tidal wave inside of him. If Harry thought he was dead… "He thought I was dead so he ran to the bolthole?"

"Yes." Remus nodded. "Sent the rest of his friends back to Hogwarts first, somehow breaking up with Hermione in the act, and… I think he ran to protect the rest of us. He sent us letters today and he pretty much admitted that protecting us was his motivation." He motioned at Sirius. "He thinks you died because of your association with him so…"

"Buggeration!" Sirius said furiously. It was a complete mess but all that mattered was his son was at Privet Drive thinking Sirius was dead; was alone and hurting, grieving for no reason. He pushed past Remus and headed for the door. As soon as he was clear of the wards he would apparate.

"Where are you going?!" Remus hurried after him.

"Where do you think I'm going?" Sirius snapped without turning around to look at him. "I'm going to get Harry."

"I'll come with you." Remus offered immediately.

Sirius whirled around and glared at him; anger at his old friend storming through him suddenly and overwhelming his urge to see Harry. "You'll stay here."

Remus looked crestfallen and guilty. "Sirius…"

But Sirius was too angry at him. He stabbed a finger in Remus's direction. "I trusted you to stay with Harry if I couldn't be there for him! I thought we were trying to avoid the mistakes of the past and – and bloody hell, Remus, you just committed the same mistake I did trusting Dumbledore with Harry's safety! And where is Harry again? Hurt and alone and…” he choked on his words, turned around and stormed out of the house, aware that Remus wasn't following him.

He felt a twinge of remorse for yelling at Remus but his mind was too preoccupied with his need to get to Harry. The wards passed over him as he jumped over the garden gate and he immediately focused to apparate.

The back garden at Privet Drive was in darkness. The muggle houses next door were lit up with bright green and red Christmas lights. No such effort had been made at Harry's old home; the house was shrouded in darkness. It was late – almost midnight, Sirius assured himself, even as he bounded for the door. Harry had probably decided just to go to bed early. He entered the back door almost at a run. The kitchen was empty and the living room clearly hadn't been lived in for a long time and Sirius wondered if Remus was right and Harry was there. He made his way upstairs, hope and foreboding warring inside of him. Something told him to ignore the rooms that had once been allocated to the Dursleys. He made straight for the smallest bedroom.

He opened the door and froze.

"Master Harry Potter's Paddy!" Dobby rushed towards him and wrapped himself around Sirius's left leg. "You is being alive!"

Sirius continued to scan the bedroom for any sign of Harry even as he dropped a hand to pat the elf kindly on the top of his head. Harry had clearly been living in the room; the desk was cluttered with
the remains of letter writing paraphernalia; the bed was made but had clearly been used; clothes were neatly stacked in the wardrobe; and, Hedwig's perch had been placed near the window.

"Where's Harry, Dobby?" Sirius asked urgently, stooping to push the elf away from his leg and look him in the eye.

Dobby's ears waggled – a sign of distress. "Master Harry Potter went to say goodbye to his Paddy."

"Where?" Sirius pressed.

Dobby fidgeted unhappily. "Cemetery. Dobby scared and Master Harry Potter told Dobby to stay behind."

Cemetery…oh Merlin.

Sirius felt his heart stutter in his chest.

Harry was at the cemetery.

Just like in his dream.

He raced out of Privet Drive. He wouldn't let anything happen to Harry. His nightmare was not going to come true, Sirius swore to himself. He wouldn't let Death have Harry.

o-O-o

Harry transformed back into his human form with a small sigh of relief. Hedwig had carried him in his Snitch form most of the way to the cemetery on her back, and tucked up in her feathers he had been surprisingly warm and comfortable. But he had flown some of the distance and his body felt sore and tired. Of course, Harry mused, some of it could simply be his lingering magical exhaustion. He hadn't made it better using his animagus form but he hadn't wanted to take the risk of being spotted by either ally or enemy, and Snitch allowed him to travel about inconspicuously.

He had his invisibility cloak with him too and he was glad of the extra warmth as he wrapped it over his other clothing of heavy denim jeans, a thick black cable sweater and a short black corduroy jacket. The air was bitterly cold. He was regretting eschewing the black woollen hat and gloves Dobby had tried to press upon him and as he cast a new warming charm on himself.

He glanced around the cemetery. It was empty and he figured that most people were tucked up inside their homes celebrating the New Year. Shadows drew strange patterns on the icy ground between the headstones and a brief look upwards had Harry frowning at the beginnings of a fall of snow; small flakes drifting down from the heavy cloud above that obscured the moon.

Harry shook himself and cast another spell to keep the snow off him. He didn't want to get wet. He aimed another spell at Hedwig, perched on a nearby tree, and she hooted appreciatively.

It seemed odd that only a week before he'd been there with Sirius, both of them saying goodbye to Harry's parents. Now, Harry was back only to say goodbye to Sirius himself…

Harry blinked back tears. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out the wooden box containing the Resurrection stone. He unholstered his wand and pointed it at the lock, muttering the spell under his breath.

Nothing happened.
He tried again.

The lock shook but didn't open.

Harry frowned, frustration curdling in his gut and stinging the backs of his eyes. All he wanted was to say goodbye; just to say goodbye! Was that too much to freaking ask?!

His magic surged up to the surface and swirled around him, sending the invisibility cloak flying from his shoulders like Superman's cloak.

He snorted and hurriedly reached to tug it back around him. He was no Superman. He breathed in shakily and wrestled his magic back under his skin.

Think, Harry told himself briskly. Why wouldn't the lock open? It had obviously been locked by someone powerful...someone like Dumbledore or Bertie. He had the power to overcome their spells, he knew he did, but...but he couldn't force that amount of power through his usual wand. He wasn't certain his second wand would be any better either and it was a moot argument as he didn't have it on him.

It was exactly like the problem with the collar that Sirius had been forced to wear by Crouch, Harry mused. He had needed the Elder wand to unlock that and...and he needed the Elder wand to open the box. The problem was that the Elder wand was with Dumbledore and Harry wasn't foolish enough to go back to Hogwarts to ask him for it nicely; he figured Dumbledore would lock him into Gryffindor tower to keep him safe or maybe lock him into the Headmaster's office...

He shook his head and put his own trusty holly wand away.

What was he going to do?

What was he...wait.

Hadn't Ollivander said he could call the Elder wand to him? He frowned heavily. He couldn't remember whether it was Ollivander or Remus or someone else but who had said it didn't really matter. What mattered was whether it would work.

Harry breathed in deeply, closed his eyes and centred himself as Noshi had taught him over the Summer. He reached inside himself and found the tendrils of magic that signified the bond between himself and the wand. And he reached...called out with his mind...

I need you.

There was a strange tug as though he was pulling something toward him and a moment later, the touch of smooth wood against his palm almost made him jump; the wand was in his hand.

It had worked.

He could call the Elder wand to him.

Harry's heart pounded in his chest; nerves and excitement warring with trepidation. He shook off his tumultuous thoughts about being able to call the wand and focused on unlocking the box. It sprang open easily when he cast with the Elder wand. He tucked the wooden box back into his pocket and held the stone.

He wasn't sure what to do but the stone sang in his hands just like the wand. He could feel it reaching out with cold fingers to envelope his magical core, settling against the binds of the wand
Focus, Harry thought determinedly, closing his eyes once more; he needed to focus. He wanted to say goodbye to his father, tell him that he loved him, and that he was sorry that he had never told him. He wanted to see again the man who had been a father to him…

The silence of the cemetery penetrated his concentration. There wasn't a sound. No trees rustling; no wildlife moving; no snow landing with a quiet hush.

And it was cold.

A different kind of cold to the bitter winter chill that he had felt when he'd arrived. This was colder and warmer and…something was there in front of him.

Harry opened his eyes warily, and they went wide with shock.

The shade of James Potter stood in front of him; almost translucent, a flickering glowing being that shimmered against the dark backdrop of the cemetery's shadows.

Harry drank in his Dad's image. His father was young; the age he had died. The dark mop of unruly hair that they shared thanks to their genetics fell over his Dad's forehead and against the wire round frames he wore. A warm smile creased his father's worried face.

"Dad?" Harry breathed the word out in a stream of mist.

"Hello, Pronglet." His father's smile widened but the look in his eyes remained sad.

Harry shifted awkwardly, moving his weight from one foot to the other. It wasn't that he didn't want to see his Dad but… "I, uh, I mean…I wasn't expecting…you?"

His Dad nodded with understanding. "You wanted Padfoot."

"It's not that I don't want to see you!" Harry hurried out. "It's just that…"

"Padfoot is the father you know." His Dad said. "He's the one you think of when you think of a father." He smiled again. "It's OK, Pronglet. It's why we made Padfoot your godfather. We knew he'd be there for you."

"Doesn't he…doesn't he want to see me?" Harry asked, an edge of desperation creeping into the words.

"He isn't dead, Harry." His Dad said softly. "Padfoot isn't here. I'm the only one on this side who has died who was a father to you."

Harry reeled back as though he'd been hit. Padfoot wasn't dead? "But I saw him!"

"You were tricked." His Dad informed him briskly. He reached out as though to touch Harry but stopped just short of Harry's arm. "Believe me: Sirius is alive."

"Then where is he?!" Harry demanded. "And why didn't anybody tell me?!"

"I'm afraid we don't get all the news on this side," His Dad looked both apologetic and frustrated. "All we know is that he isn't here and so he must be alive. As for someone telling you…you've been hiding away from everyone for the past week."

That was true.
"I had to hide away...I..." Harry pushed a hand through his hair, tugging on it slightly as he tried to make sense of his thoughts. "I had to protect everyone."

"Because you thought it was your fault Sirius was dead?" His Dad said quietly. "You have to know it wasn't if it had happened and will not be if it ever does."

"He's in danger because of me!" Harry replied fiercely. "Because Voldemort's after me!"

"He's in danger because he's against Voldemort!" His Dad retorted just as strongly. "We were in danger because we were against Voldemort and your Mum and I...we placed you in danger because we were against Voldemort!"

The heartfelt words arrowed through Harry's angry defensiveness and he stared at his Dad blankly.

"Don't you see, Harry?" His Dad said softly. "We all made choices before you were born; your Mum and I and Padfoot and Moony to stand against Voldemort...Voldemort to come after you...Wormtail to betray us...none of this is your fault."

Harry's gaze dropped to the floor. He had heard the words his father had spoken but he was loathe to believe them.

"Tell me, Harry," his Dad continued, "do you blame us for putting you in danger?"

Harry's head snapped back up and he stared in shock at his Dad. He shook his head furiously. "Of course not! It wasn't your fault! It wasn't..."

"But it was." His Dad insisted. "I was the one who insisted on joining Dumbledore's Order. Your Mum and I were the ones who 'thrice defied' Voldemort and wouldn't join him. We were the reason why you matched the criteria in the prophecy."

"You couldn't have known though when you defied him." Harry pointed out. "And if Voldemort hadn't believed it..."

His Dad nodded. "But he did and he came after us and it's his fault that we died." His ghostly gaze held Harry's gaze fast. "Just like it's Crouch's fault that Padfoot was hurt; not yours. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, willing on some level to accept his father's argument that the bad guys were to blame for others actually being hurt, but still unwilling to completely let go of his guilt and his viewpoint that people were better off without him – and if Padfoot was still alive that included Padfoot.

"Harry...Padfoot loves you." His Dad said quietly. "More than anything. He'd be incredibly hurt if you pushed him away – especially now."

Harry flushed red with guilt, the heat of his shame storming across his cheeks.

"Merlin, I'm pants at this." His Dad said suddenly, his hand going to his hair in a familiar gesture. "Lily is so much better at this kind of thing than I am. She was meant to take all the serious talks and I was meant to talk to you about Quidditch and girls."

Lily. His Mum.

He'd forgotten about the stone in his hand and as he thought about her, Lily Potter appeared;
The shade of her was as beautiful as the spirit that sometimes appeared to him thanks to the family magic; hair cascading down her shoulders, a friendly warm face with eyes that looked at him so lovingly...

"Oh Harry!" His Mum said breathlessly. "Look at you!"

"Mum." Harry whispered. He could hardly breathe; he was standing in front of their grave but his parents stood beside him; talking to him.

"He thinks everyone's better off without him, Lily." His Dad immediately ratted him out.

Harry winced under the sharp gaze that was immediately levelled at him.

"Harry James Potter," Lily said briskly, "that's complete rubbish and you know it!"

The matter-of-fact maternal scolding shattered through Harry's stubbornness like a battering ram and left him feeling foolish.

"But..." he began weakly.

"You really think Sirius would be better off without you in his life?" His Mum demanded. "He only pulled himself together because of you! He loves you!"

Harry grimaced because he knew she was right and he hated the thought of Sirius wasting away in Azkaban or as a fugitive.

"How would you feel if Neville thought he was bad for you and tried to push you away?" His Mum continued relentlessly. "Or if Ron was in trouble and didn't come to you? Or Hermione? Hmmm?"

Harry deflated. He rubbed his cold nose. "I'd hate it." He said out loud, answering his Mum's questions. "I'd want to be there for them and I'd refuse to believe that being close to them was a bad thing."

And he wouldn't blame them if he got hurt, he realised, any more than they would blame him. They were his friends and they wanted to support him.

His Mum nodded, seeing her message had seeped through. "They love you, Harry."

He'd hurt them when he'd pushed them away. He knew he had because thinking about it, he would be hurt if they had done the same thing to him. He hadn't meant to hurt them although he'd known his breaking up with Hermione had been going to hurt her. But he'd thought it was for the best and now...now he really didn't know what he thought.

"It's not easy knowing that because they're close to me, they're at risk, that they can get hurt." Harry said quietly.

"We know." His Mum murmured. "And we know that your childhood with your aunt – and believe me I will be having words with Petunia when she dies – and her loathsome family told you that everything that went wrong was your fault – but it's not. They were wrong. Very, very, wrong."

"Shutting other people out isn't the way to go, kiddo. You're stronger together." His Dad said. "You told the kids of the alliance that, and you're right. When the Marauders stood together, there was nothing that we couldn't accomplish and nobody we couldn't defeat. It was only when we fell apart that...well, things fell apart."
"I get it." Harry said with a sigh.

"Good." His Dad seemed to look beyond Harry for a moment, his expression shifting to fondness. "Because you and Padfoot make a great team."

Harry bit his lip feeling guilty again.

"Don't feel guilty," his Mum said quickly, wrapping her arm around his Dad's arm, the two of them leaning towards each other with an innate affection and intimacy that Harry drank in eagerly, "sometimes I think this was what was meant to be; you and Sirius. From the moment you were born, you had a connection with him…you always did love him." Her eyes slid momentarily to something over his shoulder but he kept his attention on her, and her gaze returned to him.

"I've never told him." Harry confessed. "That's…that's why I came here tonight. I wanted to use the stone and say goodbye and tell him…tell him I loved – love – him. And it's not that I don't love you guys, it's just…"

"He's your Dad." His parents said it in unison and Harry grinned weakly back at them as they beamed their approval at him.

"That's what we wanted, Harry." His Dad said firmly. "Well, not what we wanted exactly because that would be us raising you ourselves and not dying but the next best thing because Padfoot does love you to bits and we knew…"

"James." His Mum interjected exasperated. "He knows." She let her gaze slide over Harry's shoulder again and smiled somewhat smugly. "And now so does Padfoot."

And suddenly Harry knew.

He knew exactly where Padfoot was.

He whirled around and threw himself at the man standing just behind him.

Sirius caught him and hugged him hard, his arms wrapping about Harry's shoulders even as Harry wrapped himself around Sirius, tears falling of their own volition down their faces as they embraced the reality of each other.

"Pronglet." Sirius kissed the top of Harry's head.

Harry eased back a smidgen but only a smidgen. He didn't really want to let go at all. Sirius was alive and warm and alive and there and alive…

"I thought…" Harry managed to choke out.

"I know, Pronglet." Sirius said, smoothing a hand over his back. "Moony told me. But I'm fine. Yes, I was a bit battered but Noshi healed me right up, and I came home as soon as I could."

Harry shuddered and squirmed closer to Sirius again, wanting to feel his warmth, hear his heartbeat and the steady rise and fall of his breathing; all the signs that told him the undeniable truth that Sirius was alive.

"Don't leave me!" Harry said desperately. "Don't ever leave me! Promise!"

Because he'd thought Sirius had died…but if he had died and Harry had been on his own…but Sirius hadn't died and Sirius wasn't going to die – not if Harry had anything to say about the matter…
Without realising it, with that last thought, ancient magic long spelled into three wondrous artefacts reached out and invisibly twined around Sirius, anchoring the older wizard's life to Harry's own even as Sirius moved to look him straight in the eye.

"Pronglet; I promise that I am going to do all I can to be with you for a very long time. I promise that I am going to try and be there when you graduate Hogwarts; when you tell me there's a girl you want to marry; when you hand me your son and tell me he's going to be called Quaffle."

Harry gave a snort of laughter remembering the teasing Sirius always gave him about his Marauder nickname being Snitch.

"I promise." Sirius ended softly. "And I expect you do the same."

Harry gave a quick nod. "I promise."

Sirius pulled him in for another firm hug and Harry was luxuriating in the proof of Sirius's existence when he felt the other man tense up.

Harry peered up at him and saw Sirius's gaze fixed on…fixed on the shades of Harry's parents, who had remained quiet during his and Sirius's reunion.

"Prongs." Sirius said shakily. "Lily."

Harry shifted until he was standing beside Sirius, his own arms still wrapped around Sirius's waist while Sirius kept an arm over Harry's shoulders, tucking him into the shelter of his body.

"Padfoot." His Dad smiled fondly at the man who had once been his best friend.

"I can't…I just can't say how sorry I am about…" Sirius stuttered out.

"The rat's fault not yours." His Dad said interrupting.

"Please don't tell me we have to have the 'it's not your fault' talk with you too, Sirius." His Mum joined in. "You're supposed to be the adult."

"You know me, Lils." Sirius replied shakily, making an attempt to banter.

Harry squeezed his lightly, supporting him, knowing how hard it must be for Sirius to see them again, talk to them again.

"And it's alright, Sirius, that Pronglet loves you," his Dad said, "like we said, if we can't be with him, then we're glad that it's you and that he loves you; that you love him."

Harry felt Sirius relax, a deep breath that eased out of him in a long sigh.

"And you should know that I do approve of your plan," his Dad grinned impishly and Harry could see the mischievous boy he'd seen in the memories he'd been shown, "didn't we agree as Marauders to take over the wizarding world one day?"

"First year," Sirius agreed with a choked voice, "on the train home." He stared at Harry's Dad and Harry wondered what the exchange was about. "You heard that?"

"We hear things." His Mum replied. She smiled. "I'm glad you get it, Sirius."

"Anything, Lily-flower." Sirius said sincerely.
Harry looked from one to the other confused. "Am I supposed to know…"

Sirius glanced at him and shook his head. "Just a conversation I had with your parents only I didn't think anyone was listening." He paused and stared at the shades of his friends again. "I'm not sure what's weirder; that or this."

And he was right; it was weird.

"I guess…" Harry felt the weight of the stone in his hand again, "we should probably say goodbye." A lump coalesced in his throat, hard and tight.

"We should." His Mum agreed. "The stone uses your magical energy to power pulling us over."

"Oh." Harry hadn't thought about that.

"All magic demands a price." His Mum said. "You're right about that, Harry."

"Do you know what the power is that he's meant to have to defeat Voldemort?" Sirius suddenly asked.

Harry straightened, interested in the answer but he could see his Dad was already shaking his head.

"Prophecies are strange things. There are always possibilities. Just like it could have been Neville Voldemort chose to mark and not Harry." His Dad replied, answering Sirius seriously and giving Harry a glimpse into the Lord Potter his father had been so very briefly. "Harry," his Dad waited until Harry looked at him, "you have more power than you realise; political, emotional, and magical. Any of it could be the power he knows not."

"I guess I was hoping for something more definitive as a reply, Prongs." Sirius sighed.

"I'm afraid we don't know anything for certain." His Dad said. "Only what we've said before; you're stronger together than you are apart so…"

"Stop pushing people away." Harry completed. He tightened his grip on the stone. "I shouldn't call you again, should I? Not like this."

"Cadmus could never say goodbye to his love." His Dad explained. "He held onto the stone until it drained him of his magic and he died."

"We don't want that to happen to you." His Mum said.

Harry glanced at Sirius, a silent question of whether Sirius was ready too passing between them.

Sirius gave him an answering nod. "It's time, Harry."

Harry looked over at his parents, drinking in the sight of them one last time. He remembered how he'd done the same each night when he'd sat in front of the Mirror of Erised; how lost he'd felt in the days after the Mirror had been moved. Letting go of the stone would create a similar ache in his heart but he knew it would be easier because of the man stood beside him, the weight of his arm around Harry's shoulders still providing comfort.

Harry pushed the Elder wand into a pocket while he took out the wooden box that had held the stone. He looked over at his parents again.

"Look after each other." His Mum said softly.
"We don't want to see either of you for a very long time." His Dad added.


Harry couldn't speak so he settled for giving his parents a wobbly smile and nodding his farewell. He slid the stone into the box and they disappeared in a swirl of snow. Sirius tapped the lid shut with a finger and Harry pulled out the Elder wand again to lock it. He handed the box to Sirius.

"Maybe you should keep hold of it." Harry mumbled a little embarrassed that he'd succumbed to the temptation to use it. He swayed on his feet, tired suddenly.

"Maybe we should give it to Bertie to look after." Sirius replied with his own chagrin, steadying Harry without a thought.

Harry agreed. He rubbed a thumb over the wand he held and willed it back to Dumbledore while Sirius's attention was focused on the box. The wand complained a little but went, leaving behind the sensation of grumpy acquiescence to Harry's wishes.

A bell rang out and another.

Their attention moved to the church and Harry counted the bells as they marked out the midnight hour and the turn of the New Year.

Sirius wrapped his arm back around Harry and pulled him close again. "Well, not quite the way we planned it but...Happy New Year, Pronglet."

And it would be, Harry swore to himself. He was done being tricked and trapped and manoeuvred by Voldemort and his cohorts. Voldemort meant to hurt everyone Harry loved; that much was clear and if Harry truly wanted to protect them, he had to stand with them; had to fight for the people he loved until Voldemort was defeated and couldn't hurt anyone ever again.

It was time to end it.
Part 10: Pronglet Fights Back (The Swimming not Drowning Prank)

4th January 1995

"She hates me." Harry muttered morosely into his oatmeal.

Sirius sighed heavily as he sat down at the table in their quarters at Hogwarts, his eyes glancing off the parchment by Harry's breakfast.

After a rather tense meeting on the day before with Hermione, Harry had been left simmering somewhere between annoyance and heartbreak. Hermione had ruthlessly pointed out that Harry couldn't expect to have everything go back to normal with a few apologetic words, not when he'd literally pushed her away, made decisions for her, and had taken his time in trying to make it right. She had accepted that the latter hadn't been completely Harry's fault since he'd been asleep most of New Year's Day with magical exhaustion and Sirius had kept him resting for a couple of days after that just to make sure his son was recovered. But she had been less forgiving about everything else. Harry had sent her a letter as a second attempt at getting her to forgive him; clearly it hadn't worked.

"She doesn't hate you." Sirius assured Harry.

He was fairly certain that Hermione loved Harry a great deal, both as his friend and his girlfriend. She was just teaching Harry a lesson by not allowing their relationship to resume until Harry could, in her words, prove he trusted her to make her own decisions. On one hand, Sirius could appreciate Hermione's viewpoint that Harry needed to understand making lone decisions about their relationship wasn't on; on the other hand, he couldn't bear to see Harry hurting in any way.

"The path of true love never runs smoothly." Sirius said brightly, trying to comfort Harry. "Look at your Mum and Dad."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I don't think I want years of Hermione giving me the cold shoulder."

Sirius grimaced. "I don't think it'll be years?" He offered tentatively. "And besides," he waved at the letter by Harry's plate, "she is still being cordial, isn't she?"

Harry sighed and pushed the last of his oatmeal away. "Only because of the House thing."

Hermione had assured Harry and Sirius that she wouldn't make things difficult as far as the House of Black was concerned; she was still happy to be a daughter of the House and was committed to ensuring the safety and position of the House within the magical world.

"Still, the House thing means she's not going to ignore you." Sirius pointed out. "I'm also fairly certain I heard her tell you that she was still going to be your friend and help you with the second task, so…"

"So…" Harry murmured grumpily.

"So, all is not lost." Sirius pointed out as Dobby arrived with a traditional English breakfast. His stomach growled hungrily. "Faint heart never won fair lady, Pronglet. You're just going to have to win her back around."

Harry nodded slowly, a glint entering his green eyes in a way that was slightly worrying. "Ron and
Neville are coming over later. Maybe they'll help me think of something."

Sirius couldn't help the nostalgic smile the look on Harry's face prompted. James had looked the same way trying to cook up scheme after scheme with the Marauders to win Lily over. It was good, Sirius thought, that Neville and Ron had forgiven Harry without too much fuss. Ron had been the easiest, his punch on Harry's arm had been accompanied by an exasperated "You plonker; don't do that again!" and that had been the end of it. Neville had settled for lecturing Harry for an hour about the history of fealty and their oaths, and having gained Harry's assurance that he understood pushing them away was not an acceptable way to protect people, Neville had nodded and said "Apology accepted." Sirius was pleased Harry had the full support of both boys, although the idea of them coming up with a plan to get Hermione back on board had all the hallmarks of an impending calamity.

"Try to stay out of trouble." Sirius advised dryly. "You really don't want Minnie upset with you."

Seeing her going to town on Dumbledore had been a pleasure. Sirius had ended up not having to say anything while Minnie dressed Dumbledore down for the sheer stupidity of not keeping Harry informed about Sirius's status when Remus had explicitly asked him to do so. Sirius had settled for standing there glowering while Dumbledore's face turned bright red under Minnie's blunt scolding.

Dumbledore's apology and subsequent promise to do better, Sirius had accepted with a large dose of salt. He and Harry had already given Dumbledore more chances than he deserved as far as Sirius was concerned; he wasn't getting another one.

What had Remus been thinking, Sirius thought again, scowling. They'd agreed they were going to do better than before and what had Moony done? He'd done the exact same stupid idiotic thing that Sirius had done so many years before. Moony was damned lucky that it had ended with Harry truly safe somewhere; that Wormtail had chosen to play with Harry's head instead of killing him.

"Are you ever going to talk to Moony again?" Harry asked bluntly breaking into Sirius's unhappy thoughts.

Sirius shot his son a pointed look to keep out of his festering anger at his old friend. "I've talked to Moony." He stabbed a sausage.

"You've sent him mail." Harry retorted. "That's not the same thing."

"This isn't something for you to worry about, Harry." Sirius said firmly. Yes, he and Remus were having a bit of a spat but it wasn't the first time in their friendship and he doubted it would be the last.

"But I do!" Harry blurted out, capturing Sirius's attention immediately.

Sirius frowned. "Harry…"

"It's just…" Harry squirmed under Sirius's concerned gaze, "I mean, Remus isn't to blame really when you think about it, and he couldn't have known what would happen, and I hate that you two aren't speaking and…"

Sirius held up a hand before Harry could continue. "Look, Pronglet…" he sighed and tried to organise his thoughts into something his son could understand, "I do realise what happened wasn't Moony's fault. Dumbledore should have given you the message that I had gone to the States for treatment, Trelawney's prophecy was unfortunate timing," or the result of too much eggnog, "and Peter is obviously smart and slimy enough that he was able to take advantage of the situation when you went to the hospital looking for me."
He knew those specific things couldn't be laid at Moony's door.

"But," he continued with a returning spark of anger at Moony, "the fact is that he didn't deliver the news about me to you himself. He promised me, Harry, that he would be there for you if anything happened to me and he wasn't."

And that was the top and bottom of why Sirius was mad at Moony - and why Moony himself was accepting of Sirius's ire.

Sirius was all far too aware that there was a danger that he wouldn't survive the upcoming fight with Voldemort. He knew he was a target, not only because of his relationship with Harry, but because of the power he wielded as Lord Black – power Voldemort had enviably coveted during the last war. He had to trust that the people he'd asked to take care of Harry would take care of Harry.

Of course, he'd received a scolding from Augusta, Richard, Amelia, Andy, Molly, and a number of others about giving Harry a bolthole instead of a list of people to go to for help. Sirius considered the various lectures he'd received with a touch of grumpiness. He had pointed out that when he'd given Harry the bolthole the only allies he'd had at the time had been Remus and the healers back at the clinic. He'd also pointed out that in the latest crisis Harry had been bound and determined to believe that contact with anyone was a bad thing and that it wouldn't have mattered if Sirius had told Harry to go to Augusta or Richard, or Andy, or whoever – Harry would still have bolted. But they had made their argument and there was now a list of who Harry should seek out in such an event in the future (and since Harry had apparently finally accepted that he wasn't to blame if people got hurt, Sirius was reasonably assured Harry would use it). Sirius had, however, refused to disclose where Harry's bolthole was; Privet Drive would remain his and Harry's secret.

"I just hate it when the two of you argue." Harry murmured, dragging Sirius back to the present and the breakfast table in their Hogwarts' quarters.

"We'll make up," Sirius reassured him again before waving a hand absently in the air, "just…not right this minute."

Harry snorted inelegantly but poked his letter morosely and Sirius figured he was safe from his son pushing him to talk with Remus for another few hours.

Dobby popped in suddenly beside Sirius, the Daily Prophet clutched in his hands as he hopped nervously from foot to foot.

"Dobby?" asked Harry hesitantly, picking up on the elf's distress.

"Story in the paper about Master Harry Potter's Mooey." Dobby said, pulling on an ear.

Sirius snatched the paper out of Dobby's hands, aware that Harry had shoved his chair back to run around to read the article over his shoulder. It was on the front page…

**THE DANGEROUS PET WEREWOLF of BLACK AND POTTER: STEWARD'S HISTORY OF VIOLENCE**

*It is not a secret in political circles that the Steward for the Houses of Black and Potter, Remus Lupin, is a werewolf. What is not so commonly known is that Lupin has been reprimanded for unsafe behaviour – behaviour which led him to attack the hands that feed him!*

*In a document provided anonymously to the Daily Prophet, it is revealed that Lupin lost his place as Defence Professor at Hogwarts – an appointment that seriously brings into question Albus*
Dumbledore's capability as Headmaster – after attacking Black and Potter in his werewolf form at the end of the school year. So bad was the attack that a disciplinary note was added to his file after questioning by the Head of the DMLE herself.

However, it seems this werewolf was able to convince Lord Black, an old school friend, and the innocent Lord Potter that his attack was not something to worry about! They generously forgave him and allowed him a place within their family.

But worryingly it is rumoured that Lupin has been consorting with European werewolves to create his own werewolf army on the Continent – one that threatens the fabric of our wizarding world and which he intends to use as a coup d'état against the very people who have given him sanctuary until now.

Perhaps with the rumblings that Black hasn't spoken with Lupin in days, the truth has finally emerged and this werewolf pet has been revealed for the pest he really is!

"Bloody Skeeter!" swore Sirius furiously, the paper crumpling in his hands.

"What was that about a disciplinary note?" questioned Harry, pushing his glasses up his nose, worry in every nuance of his tone.

"I don't know." Sirius admitted.

The only time he knew Amelia had questioned Remus about the events at Hogwarts had been during the interview Remus had done at the start of the Summer – the interview to prove Sirius's innocence and push for Sirius getting custody of Harry, and – oh! That bloody idiotic werewolf!

"Remus had to tell Amelia about turning into a werewolf to explain Pettigrew getting away when he talked to her about what happened with me at Hogwarts." Sirius said tightly. "She must have put a note in his file then."

A flush of guilt ran over Harry's features matching the rush of guilt that stampeded through Sirius. As much as it wasn't their fault that Remus had changed into a werewolf after they'd left the Shack, who would have attacked them when all was said and done, it was through helping them that the events had led to formal action and the evidence that someone had given to Skeeter for her atrocious article.

"Bugger!" swore Sirius again. His mind raced with the political ramifications of Skeeter's article.

"We have to go see him!" Harry said urgently, pulling on Sirius's arm.

Sirius nodded, his previous ire at Remus pushed away under the immediate need to connect with his old friend and provide some reassurance that the article wasn't going to affect Remus's position in their lives.

They marched over to the floo and Sirius followed Harry through to the School House.

Tonks was pacing in her dressing gown in the front parlour. She turned and glared angrily at them, brandishing a rolled-up version of the paper like a weapon. "Where the hell have you two been? Have you any idea…"

"Nymphadora!" Andy's harsh scolding tone brought a halt to her daughter's diatribe before Sirius could yell at his young cousin for her disrespect. "That's enough!" She turned to Sirius with flashing grey eyes. "Although, where the hell have you been?!"

"We just got the paper!" Sirius snarled.
Andy had the grace to look abashed. She crossed her arms and nodded briskly. "He's in the kitchen."

Sirius stormed past her and through to the kitchen.

He paused in the doorway arrested by the sight of Remus sat at the table, head in his hands, the remnants of breakfast laid out in front of him. Sian was desperately trying to comfort Remus, a hand on Remus's shoulder patting him gently, her head close to his, whispering soothing words.

Sirius cleared his throat and Sian's head whipped up, her eyes flashing amber at him.

"What do…" Sian began heatedly.

"Leave." Sirius stated tersely. "Now, Sian."

She huffed but a quick glare at Sirius's implacable face had her gathering her dignity, sliding out of the table and stomping sulkily out of the room.

Harry gave Sirius a push and Sirius sighed. He took the space Sian had left while Harry slipped into a chair on the other side of Remus.

"You'll have my resignation immediately, of course." Remus croaked out without looking up.

Sirius and Harry exchanged a shocked and horrified look over the werewolf's head.

"Don't be stupid, Remus." Sirius snapped out.

Remus finally raised his head. "You can't possibly think my staying on as steward is a good idea after everything that has happened over the last few weeks and especially after today!"

Harry sent Sirius another silent look, pleading with him to fix it.

Sirius sighed heavily and grudgingly let go of his righteous anger. "You screwed up, Remus. I trusted you to be there for Harry and you weren't. But," he held up a hand when Remus went to speak, "you trusted Dumbledore and you had every right to think that everything would fine if you waited it out at the hospital for the rat to show again." He squirmed in his seat a little. "I can hardly condemn you for making the same mistake I made back in the day, even though I would have hoped you would have learned from my piss poor example."

"I should have." Remus sighed, dropping his hands onto the table. He looked over at Harry. "I am very sorry, Harry."

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug. "Dumbledore should have told me." He bit his lip. "And I should have talked to you when I saw you at the hospital instead of hiding. If I had…"

Remus reached over and patted his arm. "Maybe we all have a lesson to learn from what happened but don't blame yourself, Harry. You were let down by Professor Dumbledore and by me." He grimaced. "I can only promise that it won't happen again but…" he motioned in the direction of the newspaper Sirius still held, "unfortunately it seems that events have overtaken us."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Sirius asked dismissively, tossing the newspaper down. "It's a pile of crap."

Remus frowned heavily. "Sirius, you can't honestly believe that I can continue as your steward after such awful press?" He grimaced. "You need to do damage control and my resigning…"

"Who cares what they think?!" Harry blurted out angrily. "You're not leaving! I don't accept your
resignation!"

"Harry…"

"And neither do I." Sirius cut in before Remus could marshal an argument for Harry's outburst. "Do you honestly think I hadn't considered the possibility that at some point the press would react badly to the idea that a werewolf holds one of the most important positions for two powerful Houses within our society? Not to mention the whole providing sanctuary thing for the rest of the British pack? Do you think I haven't planned for this particular day already?"

"Well…" Remus mumbled sheepishly. He pushed a hand through his hair. "When you put it like that."

"So, firstly," Sirius said, focusing on the problem they faced, "why didn't you tell me you'd received a warning, Moony?"

He knew Remus had registered the use of his Marauder name and knew that Remus knew that it meant Sirius really did forgive him because Remus's shoulders dropped a touch, tension eking out of him.

"Because it wasn't important." Remus argued succinctly. "Your name needed to be cleared and Harry needed you to be his guardian." It was his turn to gesture for silence, preventing Harry and Sirius from speaking with a simple raised finger. "And truthfully, I deserved it." His cheeks turned red. "I was monumentally stupid that night. I completely forgot my Wolfsbane and if you hadn't been able to turn into Padfoot to run me off, I could have hurt you all very, very badly."

Sirius harrumphed. "You'd probably have just gone for Snape." It was only a partial joke.

Remus chided him with a soft tut. "Not the point." He shrugged. "Amelia was very kind about the whole thing. She could have had me arrested but she appreciated it was an accident. She had to uphold the law and make a record of it but that was it."

"So how did Skeeter get her hands on it?" Harry wondered out loud.

Sirius pointed at his son. "An excellent question, Pronglet."

"A very excellent question." Amelia's dry tone had them all looking over at the doorway. She strode in and took the remaining seat at the table. "I wanted to come over and apologise immediately, Remus. Your file is meant to be confidential. I have an Auror investigating."

"Well, I have two suspects in mind." Sirius growled.

"Wenlock and Diggory?" Amelia nodded. "Me too." She waved a hand at Sirius. "But I doubt Wenlock was behind it. He's far too prissy to get his hands dirty."

"But not beyond using Diggory to do it."

Amelia nodded unhappily. "Amos has been a good friend for a number of years. It's not going to be easy if it is him."

Harry slumped back in his chair. "Merlin. Can you imagine what it's going to be like for Cedric?"

"We don't know for certain it is them." Remus protested weakly.

"Oh, it is them." Amelia contradicted him. "The second report on the Creatures bill goes in front of
the Wizengamot tomorrow with the overview of the new legislature proposal. What better way to push for another overturn of the Committee reviewing the laws if it's biggest proponent is discredited thanks to bad publicity."

"That's cheating!" Harry said hotly.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of dirty politics." Sirius said dryly. "There are cheats everywhere, Harry, not just on the Quidditch pitch."

"I do have a concern for your safety, Remus." Amelia turned to him. "Regardless that the article is a load of nonsense, there is a fair amount of anti-werewolf feeling out there and this paints a target on you."

"I already had a target on me." Remus countered. "I'll be fine."

Sirius hid the wince he wanted to make at the reminder that Remus was being hunted by Greyback.

"I'd prefer to have Tonks provide you with a discreet escort until we can contain this." Amelia shot back.

"You're that worried?" interjected Sirius before Remus could refuse.

Amelia nodded briskly. "I am. This type of thing stirs up mob behaviour." She spread her hands. "Look at what happened over that disgusting article about Hagrid on Boxing Day."

"Missed it." Sirius reminded her.

"It was bad." Remus said quietly. "Skeeter revealed Hagrid is half-giant. There are rumours a number of the villagers from Hogsmeade went to Hogwarts to demand Dumbledore fire him because they didn't want him around."

"That's awful!" Harry said. He frowned. "Is this why Dumbledore had Trelawney looking after me? He was taking care of people wanting Hagrid to leave?"

"Partly." Remus admitted.

"It doesn't negate the fact that Dumbledore should have just told you the truth about my whereabouts and condition." Sirius said quickly, anticipating that Harry was about to excuse Dumbledore's decision given the situation with Hagrid. He decided a slight diversion was in order. "How did Skeeter find that out anyway?"

"I assume she must have eavesdropped on them in the garden at Hogwarts the night of the Ball." Remus said. "I remember seeing her on the map near to where Hagrid was sitting with the Madame Maxime."

"Really?" Amelia said. "I'm certain I overheard Maxime telling Dumbledore that they were alone. She was taking him to task about security and privacy. I can't blame her."

There was a moment of silence while they all considered Hogwarts' wobbly security.

Sirius sighed. "If Tonks can stay with Remus as an escort that would be great, Amelia."

"Now, wait a moment…" Remus began.

"No, Moony." Sirius said strictly. "Greyback can't get to you easily but a mob can. Tonks is a good choice being a daughter of the House, it keeps it within the family."
"Moreover, it's probably not safe to keep your guest here." Amelia said.

"Sian?" blinked Remus, taken aback, before the real threat of a mob bent on hurting a werewolf sank in a moment later. "No. It's probably not safe." He agreed. "This place is well protected but…"

"But it would be better if she were elsewhere." Amelia said crisply.

"There's no reason why she shouldn't head to the sanctuary." Sirius said. "I admit it's useful having her here for intelligence on Greyback but she could provide that through a floo connection or over a mirror."

Remus sighed but gave a nod of acquiescence that had Sirius letting out a slow breath of relief at not having to argue about it.

Amelia got up from the table. "I should head back and see what the investigation is doing."

"I'll be in contact later." Sirius said. "I'm going to call a meeting of the Potter alliance; we'll need to discuss strategy for the Wizengamot. Harry, you should return to Hogwarts…"

"No." Harry said so firmly Sirius's eyebrow rose in surprise making Harry blush. "It's just…this is my fight, Padfoot. Remus is the steward for the House of Potter and this is an attack on my political agenda. I should be at the meeting."

Sirius leaned over and ruffled his hair. "Well said, Pronglet." He glanced at Remus and motioned toward the door. "Why don't you walk Amelia to the floo?"

Harry nodded a touch unhappily but Sirius figured that Harry understood he needed a moment alone with Remus.

"It's going to be brutal." Remus said as soon as Harry and Amelia were out of earshot. "Are you sure he should…"

"He'll stand up." Sirius said simply.

Regardless of his romance troubles, Harry seemed more settled in his skin. Sirius suspected some of it was down to Harry finally meeting Lily and James. A touch of envy and jealousy spiked sharply in his gut but he shook it off quickly. He was raising Harry; got to live with him, see him grow into a fine young man. James and Lily were gone but if talking to their ghosts had helped Harry even a little bit in facing up to his destiny, how could Sirius think of it as anything but a good thing? And hadn't Harry admitted he loved Sirius?

Remus felt himself settle into his own skin with that final thought. "I talked with James and Lily."

"What?"

"I found Harry at the cemetery with the Resurrection stone talking with James and Lily." Sirius explained quietly.

"Dear Merlin." Remus breathed out thinly. "Were they…are they…"

"They looked exactly like they always did." Sirius said, grief churning through him as always but it was tempered by the knowledge of seeing them. "They forgave me, Moony." He shook his head. "I never realised how much I needed them to until…"
Remus clasped his hand on top of the table. "It was never your fault, Sirius."

"I let them down, Moony."

There was a hushed silence.

"And I let you down." Remus said regretfully.

Sirius sighed. "We have to stop making the same mistakes, Remus. Lily and James told Harry that he's stronger with his friends than without. The Marauders…we were stronger together. We are stronger together."

"So…" Remus said tentatively.

"So I really do forgive you." Sirius said sincerely.

"Thank you." Remus said. He wiped a hand over his face, hiding suspiciously shiny eyes. "I just wish that Skeeter hadn't gotten hold of that note."

Sirius squeezed the hand that was clasping his own. "We're brothers, Moony. You, me and Prongs. We didn't run when you told us as teenagers, and Harry and I - we're not running now. Now, come on. Let's find our youngest Marauder and work out how we're going to prank the pants off Wenlock."

Remus gave a huff of laughter. "I hope you don't mean that literally."

Sirius's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Well, now that you mention it…" he slapped Remus on the shoulder as the other man chuckled and felt his own equilibrium return with a vengeance.

Wenlock was going to deeply regret taking on the Marauders.

o-O-o

The fire in the parlour was down to a dull ember.

Remus sipped the whiskey he had poured out and dropped his head back against the cushion of the sofa. Tonks switched on the wireless and sat down beside him but didn't say anything for which he was eternally grateful.

There was a blast of music before the sound faded and the tones of the radio host echoed through the room.

"This is Malcolm Mitherington, reporting on today's extraordinary news from the steps of the Ministry where I have the Minister himself here with me to make a statement!"

Remus snorted. He remembered Malcolm as a rather pompous Hufflepuff in the same year as Sirius's brother.

"Minister," Malcolm continued, "what can you tell us about the werewolf Lupin and what will happen now?"

"My dear Malcolm, and faithful Wizarding Wireless listeners of course, I fear this article today has become something of a mountain when it is in fact simply a molehill." Fudge's smooth politicking slid through the airwaves like honey.

"So Lupin didn't attack Lord Potter and Lord Black at Hogwarts at the end of the school year in
June?" Malcolm inquired sharply.

Fudge gave a small cough. "Uh, no – that is to say, Remus Lupin did admit that on the full moon in question, in trying to apprehend Peter Pettigrew and understand the truth behind Lord Black's situation, he had forgotten to take his Wolfsbane and did turn into his werewolf form when he was in the open."

"And he attacked them." Malcolm insisted.

"Oh no, my dear fellow!" Fudge said cheerfully. "On the contrary, Lord Black was able to divert him and Lupin chased after the fleeing Pettigrew. No harm befell Lord Potter and Lord Black from Mister Lupin's actions that night."

"I see."

Remus chuckled dryly because it was evident Malcolm didn't see.

"Obviously, when Director Bones investigated the situation with Lord Black at the beginning of the Summer, the truth about the evening at Hogwarts came out in her interview with Mister Lupin and as per protocol, a note was added to his Creature file." Fudge continued when Malcolm remained silent. "All completely above board and normal process." He gave a tsking sound. "What has not been above board is leaking this confidential note to the press and I will assure you and the listening public that the DMLE will thoroughly investigate how this happened!"

"Surely it doesn't matter though?" Malcolm argued. "Lupin is a werewolf and doesn't have the same right to privacy! Surely this was in the public's interest to know! Lupin is dangerous!"

"Ah, well, let's examine those three statements, shall we?" Fudge sounded almost gleeful.

Tonks shot Remus a questioning look and he smiled weakly back at her.

"Firstly, the law that stated werewolves did not have the same right to privacy as wizards and witches was suspended by the authority of the Wizengamot following the decision to review the Creature laws. At the present time, werewolves do hold the same right to privacy and it is completely illegal to reveal details of Ministerial files containing any private information related to them." Fudge explained.

Remus breathed out. It had been a shock to him earlier in the day to realise that whoever had leaked the information would face criminal charges for their action.

"Secondly," Fudge said, "the matter was uncovered in the course of a separate investigation and Mister Lupin's actions were examined by the Director of the DMLE herself and found to be accidental and non-criminal. There were extenuating emotional circumstances surrounding the event which provide some mitigation to Mister Lupin forgetting the Wolfsbane and the impact coming out into the open would have upon him. Furthermore, all parties involved bar Pettigrew have come forward today to state their support for Mister Lupin."

"I think Professor Severus Snape might disagree." Malcolm argued. "He did advocate to have Lupin removed from the Hogwarts' staff."

"On the contrary, Professor Snape has contacted me personally to express his dismay that Lupin's record has been besmirched by this incident." Fudge countered calmly.

Remus's eyes widened with shock and he almost dropped his drink.
"Professor Snape has had time to consider the incident and admits his immediate reaction was driven from a personal phobia rather than sound logic and his knowledge of Lupin's character." Fudge said. "Which brings us nearly onto your third point that Lupin is dangerous. Outside of the full moon, Remus Lupin is a very intelligent and gifted wizard who Lords Black and Potter count as a friend as well as their steward. He is dangerous on the nights of the full moon but Lord Black provides Wolfsbane as part of their agreement and Mister Lupin usually spends the time alone in one of the Black properties."

Malcolm cleared his throat. "What about the rumours he is building a werewolf army?"

Fudge laughed lightly. "Dear me, no! Mister Lupin was identified as an Alpha by his counterparts in Europe and has undertaken that duty seriously with the support of his Lords. They are simply providing a sanctuary to any in the pack run by Fenrir Greyback, a very dangerous werewolf who is a wanted criminal not least for his act in biting a four year old boy who grew up to be Mister Lupin."

"Lupin was four when he was turned?" Malcolm sounded shocked and Remus carefully avoided making eye contact with Tonks.

"Yes, it was very tragic." Fudge said with just enough sincerity to be believable. "Greyback had tried to blackmail Lupin's father into a deal and when he wouldn't kowtow, Greyback took his revenge by biting the son. Lupin deserves our compassion not the diatribe of unremitting intolerance and hatred typified by today's newspaper article. I adore Rita but on this occasion she has it very wrong."

Remus waved his wand at the wireless and switched it off abruptly.

"Well, that was a positive defence." Tonks said brightly.

Remus snorted and rubbed his free hand over his face. "I really don't want to talk about it." He knew the second stage of Sirius's and Harry's plan involved the Wizengamot the next day and he really didn't want to think about that.

He knew he had royally screwed up trusting that Dumbledore would follow Remus's instruction to tell Harry about Sirius; trusting that Dumbledore wouldn't just assume that he knew best and do his own thing. And he'd let his own want to get the rat get in the way of taking care of Harry the same way Sirius had done all those years before. Well, Sirius had learned and smartened up his act where Harry was concerned and so would Remus. He took a deep gulp of the Scotch. He had to do better at putting Harry first, Remus mused, especially given the support Harry was giving him.

The meeting at the Potter alliance had been as brutal as he had anticipated. The room had been hostile at the beginning – too many had too ingrained prejudices about werewolves regardless of their liberal views for it not to be. A couple of them had gone so far as to recommend that Harry and Sirius ditch Remus but they had been quickly silenced by Harry's blunt statement that Remus was staying.

There was something different about Harry, Remus mused. Sirius might have chaired the meeting – ensuring there was direction to the discussion and that everyone had their say – but it was Harry who'd led; who'd made it clear that he was going to stand beside Remus and the wider agenda Harry wanted for werewolves. Harry hadn't faltered under the glares of the older men and the arguments they marshalled. Instead, Harry had simply cleared his throat and tersely explained Sirius's plan of how they were going to deal with the press and the Wizengamot. After which, the alliance members had all gone away happy.

Remus swirled the amber liquid in his glass. Somehow Harry had taken on the mantle of leader while he'd been in hiding. But why wouldn't he, Remus thought with sudden insight. Harry had
believed for a short time that Sirius was dead; that Harry alone was going to have to lead, to battle evil and find the power to defeat Voldemort. For those brief days, Harry hadn't had Sirius to lean on, to lead the alliance and lead the battle for him. And somehow his old friend had realised that because Sirius was allowing Harry to lead.

It was…disconcerting.

"Something on your mind?" Tonks asked, breaking into his train of thought.

Remus simply glanced at her incredulously.

Tonks flushed and her hair cycled from pink to green and back again. "I know; stupid question after everything today."

"Actually, I was thinking about something specific to do with Harry." Remus admitted. "He seems to have changed, don't you think? Become more authoritative?"

Tonks changed position to look at him fully, her elbow on the back of the sofa as she propped up her head on her hand, her legs tucked underneath her. "Maybe." She admitted. "He was pretty forceful at the alliance meeting but I wondered if that was something he and Sirius had worked out as a strategy."

Remus shook his head. "No…" he sighed, "I think being on his own to deal with his grief at losing Sirius…it changed him."

Tonks bit her lip. "I guess we really don't know what happened to Harry during the days he was alone – what he went through." She reached for his glass and he let her have it. She sipped and made a face at the harsh spirit. "I'm more surprised that Sirius is letting him take so much of a lead."

Remus nodded slowly, understanding Tonks's view. Sirius was so protective of Harry, it was surprising that his old friend had allowed Harry to step forward in the way he had. But his mind skipped over Sirius's mention of seeing James and Lily, how he'd found Harry talking with them (and ignored how his belly churned with envy again). Perhaps Harry's newfound leadership had something to do with that and Sirius would never presume to interfere with something that James or Lily had said or done. He sighed. "I don't think it's easy for Sirius but he trusts Harry."

"He trusts you too." Tonks said quietly.

His lips twisted wryly, knowing she was just trying to make him feel better about the days of silence after Sirius's return from the States. "He had every right to be angry with me, Tonks. I let him down; I let Harry down."

"You trusted Dumbledore." Tonks argued. "Most people would say that's a good thing."

"But it isn't." Remus replied without thinking.

Tonks's eyes went wide, a dazed disbelief written all over her face. "Remus…"

He snatched his drink back. "Dumbledore has continually let Harry down in the choices he's made for Harry, Tonks. You had to have realised that from everything that Sirius has told you and your parents since reinstituting the House last Summer."

"I guess…" Tonks sighed and pulled her knees up to her chest, "it's still hard to believe that Dumbledore is fallible, you know? That he can make a wrong choice?"
"I know." Remus said softly. Such was Dumbledore's reputation and legend. It was difficult to let go of the old ingrained belief that Dumbledore was right; that he knew everything; that his decision was the best; that he could be trusted above and beyond all others. And despite all Remus knew about Dumbledore's actions and his mistakes, it was still difficult. It had been so easy to turn to Dumbledore after Sirius had been sent to the Valley clinic, to ask him to speak to Harry. He rubbed his forehead again.

"You have to stop blaming yourself for what happened." Tonks said bluntly, guessing his thoughts fairly accurately. "It wasn't your fault."

Remus gave a huff of disagreement but didn't speak.

Tonks set her glass down and shifted closer to him. She placed her hand on his arm and stroked downwards, soothing him before tangling their fingers together. "Do you think Harry and Sirius would have forgiven you if you'd done something so terrible?"

She had a point.

A small point.

But a point nevertheless.

Harry and Sirius had forgiven him, and he had gotten the impression from Harry that there was nothing to forgive. Remus sighed. Maybe Tonks was right. He told her so.

"So if they are going to let it go, are you going to let it go?" Tonks pressed.

And ultimately there was no choice. Remus would not let Harry or Sirius down again and to do that he needed to remain strong and face the next few days as though he wasn't bothered by the press and the snide remarks at beingouted to the whole of England.

"I guess I will." Remus said softly. He squeezed her hand and made to let go as he got to his feet.

She kept hold of him and scrambled to stand. "Remus."

Before he could protest, her lips were on his and he responded automatically, sinking into the comfort of the kiss, of being wanted. But he had just enough sense to pull away when she went to deepen the kiss further.

"Tonks…"

And it felt so wrong to call her by her surname and yet he didn't want to call her by a name she hated.

"Dora." Remus substituted and felt a rush of warmth as her face lit up at his choice of nickname.

"Remus." She breathed his name eagerly and leaned forward again.

He quickly placed his hands on her shoulders, halting her. "Dora, we can't do this."

"Sure we can." Tonks argued. "You're a consenting adult; I'm a consenting adult. Sian's gone and we have the house to ourselves…"

"Tonks."

The use of her surname had her stilling.
"This is a bad idea." Remus said quietly. "I'm... not at my best and you... you're my protection detail."

Tonks frowned slightly. "Remus, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Of course." He was quick to reassure her. "And that's why this is a bad idea. Honestly I don't know what you see in me! I'm far too old for you and there's that fact that I'm a werewolf."

"I don't think you're that old." Tonks' hair cycled to a bright blue. "You're a charming, funny and smart guy, Remus. I like that. I'm attracted to that. As far as the lycanthropy goes... well, it's never mattered to you I'm a metamorph, so why should I care that you have a furry problem once a month?"

Remus couldn't do anything but stare at her.

"I know I'm not the girl you would want to be with long term, Remus, and that's fine," she raised her hand to stop him protesting, "but you're a good friend; someone I trust and I like you." She shrugged. "I'd like us to be friends with benefits. You've had those in the past, I know you have, and so have I. You can't tell me you haven't thought about us."

Remus shifted away from her and paced a couple of steps, his mind racing almost as fast as his heart. "I do like you, Dora." He conceded. "But this is very complicated... no!" He said firmly when she would have interrupted. "I'm the steward of your House. Sirius would have every right to fire me if we started something without asking for his permission."

Tonks made a face at that and he could understand; the whole thought of having to ask Sirius if he could have an arrangement with To... Dora... was excruciating.

"So we'll ask him." Tonks said bluntly.

"We'd also have to agree that if we stopped being friends with benefits, we'd remain friends and civil." Remus hurried out as a counter-argument.

"If Harry and Hermione have managed it, I'm sure we will." Tonks agreed eventually.

It was hardly a ringing endorsement and Remus wondered for a moment when he'd stopped arguing against getting involved with Tonks and started negotiating terms.

"So, you'll speak with Sirius?" Tonks asked blithely unaware it seemed about Remus's confusion.

"We should sleep on it." Remus said. "If in the cold light of day we feel the same then... I'll talk with Sirius."

And he had no idea if he was hoping for Tonks to change her mind or not.

He shook himself. "I should head up."

"Let me come with you." Tonks said, stepping into his path. "Just to sleep, I promise."

Remus sighed and looked away but she closed the gap between them and placed her hand on his cheek, forcing him to meet her gaze.

"Hey, no funny stuff." She reiterated. "But I don't like the idea of you being alone after today and... I want to be there for you, Remus; as your friend."

Remus felt torn. On one hand, he knew it was the height of stupidity not to turn her away; to reassure
her he was fine and go up to his bed alone… but on the other hand, he yearned for the comfort of
pack; of snuggling into another warm body and knowing he belonged somewhere.

He sighed and held out his hand.

Tonks smiled, her face lighting up with delight at his capitulation.

But as her hand slid into his and she tugged him towards the stairs, Remus couldn't shake the notion
he was doing the wrong thing.
Sirius's study within Hogwarts lacked the intimidating feel of the Black family magic but Hogwarts seemed to have responded to the need for the study to be a safe place for Sirius, and Albus as the Headmaster could feel the shift in the ambient magic; Sirius – and Harry – would be defended within the space even against any action Albus might take. It was a sobering realisation.

Albus tucked his robes around him as he sat on a cosy armchair in the seating area in front of the fireplace; Cornelius and Amelia had ended up on the small settee, Croaker had taken the other chair, and Sirius, Remus and Harry had chosen to stand.

"First things first," Sirius waved at Harry, "Harry will be joining us from now on when his schedule allows for it."

Albus's gaze sharpened on Sirius but the Head of the House of Black had been trained well and there was nothing on his expression to give away why Sirius had changed his mind about including the teen. He thought about protesting for a moment but determined from the look of satisfaction on the others' faces that he would be a lone voice so refrained.

"Secondly, we have a political crisis to deal with before we get to the rest of the agenda so..." Sirius motioned at Cornelius.

Cornelius smiled grimly. "Wenlock is clearly moving against us." He waved a hand almost absently. "Nothing we didn't plan for but still very annoying to have to deal with."

Sirius exchanged a look with Harry and Remus, heavy with the truth that the reality for Remus was a good deal more than annoying.

"The papers were a good start at a defence." Bertie said, stepping in before Cornelius could say something else.

"The international press has been the most supportive." Sirius nodded, and as he glanced again at Cornelius, a glimmer of approval returned to his gaze. "The wireless interview was a stroke of genius. The Prophet is running for cover this morning."

It was something of an understatement, Albus thought; the Prophet had published a full apology to the Houses of Potter and Black in the morning edition with a full article from Rita claiming she had been duped by incorrect information from an informant.

Amelia snorted in a very unladylike way. "They claim that Rita found the information on her desk and after verifying that the incident had taken place – although they don't say how she verified it – that she went ahead with the article."

"So they don't know who gave them the information?" Bertie sighed. "That's very convenient for them, isn't it?"

Albus nodded in agreement.

"And not a good thing when I'm trying to pin down the culprit responsible for giving her the information for criminal charges." Amelia pointed out dryly.

"It's a shame Rita can't be charged." Sirius muttered – unkindly in Albus's opinion and he had no love of the journalist.
"We can't prove that she was aware the information was illegally gained." Amelia said with a sigh. "Unfortunately, the check on Remus's file has only provided us with two suspects as the source of the information – Diggory and Dolores Umbridge."

"Umbridge!" Sirius exclaimed. "I thought she was in the depths of the jungle somewhere?"

"Oh she is," Cornelius hastened to assure them, "but she is still a Ministry employee so she still has some access to Ministry resources."

"Not to mention that she still has friends, well, allies here." Amelia added. "Allies such as Clarence Smutter who accessed Remus's file for Dolores soon after it was announced that Sirius was Lord Black."

"She was looking for dirt." Sirius commented, his disgust evident in his tone.

Albus felt disappointment in Dolores; she hadn't been the best student but he expected better from her.

"She found some." Remus sighed.

"It's not your fault, Moony." Harry said softly. "If it hadn't been this, she would have found something else."

"Harry's right, Remus," Amelia said, "she also asked Smutter to access the sealed file on Harry's placement with the Dursleys. Smutter, of course, couldn't access that file without my approval so Dolores agreed he could leave it."

"Better my file than Harry's." Remus remarked.

Albus noted Harry frowning at the idea that it was better the scandal revolved around Remus than Harry's childhood abuse. Sirius, on the other hand, looked as equally relieved as Remus that Dolores hadn't gotten her hands on Harry's file.

"Unfortunately, all I can prove right now is that Smutter accessed the file and gave her the information," Amelia sighed, "and as she is still a Ministry employee I can't charge Smutter with passing the information to her." She motioned with a free hand. "I've sent an Auror to question her but I doubt she'll admit to anything and I can't use truth serum without more evidence against her."

"What about Diggory?" Sirius asked, shifting position to glance at Harry and check he was fine.

"Same issue," Amelia's frustration bled into her voice, "he has plausible deniability given his post means that he has every authority to access Remus's file. He readily admitted to it and he has offered to take a vow that he didn't give the information to the press."

"That's a pretty specific vow." Harry commented.

Amelia gave him an approving nod. "It certainly doesn't exclude him giving the information to someone else who then passed it on."

"That someone being Wenlock." The disgust was back in Sirius's tone.

"But again there is no proof." Amelia said. "Even if Amos admitted giving the information to Wenlock, without more evidence I couldn't accuse a member of the Wizengamot."

Sirius sighed.
"So that's it?" Harry demanded. "They just get away with it?"

Albus felt a rush of nostalgia for the days when he had been as innocent and passionate; when he hadn't been jaded by the reality of political wheeling and dealing.

"We can move Diggory to another department as a response," Cornelius suggested. "Move someone with the same agenda as us into his post."

"We should do that anyway." Sirius agreed. He rubbed his chin. "Maybe there's a way to get Wenlock to admit it during the Wizengamot discussion."

"He's probably expecting you to try something," Remus pointed out. "I mean more than you already have planned."

Albus wondered at that especially when Amelia looked amused. "Do we want to know what you have planned, Sirius?"

"Nothing too wild," Sirius said evenly, "I promise."

Remus smiled tightly. "I talked him out of pranking Wenlock naked."

Cornelius choked on his tea, but then grinned. "That would certainly liven things up."

Bertie chuckled. "I take it you are going to give the counter-argument rather than Daniel?"

"Yes," Sirius said, "and Remus is probably right, Wenlock will expect me to attempt to manoeuvre him into saying something about the newspaper article and be on his guard." He shrugged. "Still, we might be able to trick him into saying something."

"You're going to have to be on guard yourself too." Remus remonstrated gently. "Especially as Harry will be in attendance."

Albus frowned. He didn't think that was a good idea, but he refrained from speaking seeing the glee on Cornelius's face, and immense satisfaction on the others. It seemed his view that Harry had no business being at the Wizengamot until he was of age was not shared.

"Albus?"

The sound of his name drew him sharply back into the War Council.

"My apologies," Albus said smoothly, "I was wool-gathering."

"We've moved on to the tournament since there's nothing else to say on the politics front." Sirius explained without a hint of the impatience that glimmered in his grey eyes.

Albus motioned at Harry. "My apologies but I do not believe I can speak of it with Harry present."

Harry's face fell but Sirius nodded his agreement to Albus's concern.

Remus gestured at Harry. "Why don't you and I get ready that while everyone else here finishes up?"

Harry glanced at Sirius for permission, Albus observed, and on gaining it, left immediately with brief if polite goodbyes to the others. Remus followed him out.

Albus repressed the urge to sigh heavily. He had been hoping for a second alone with Harry to make an apology. He shook the thought away and refocused on the discussion. He knew he would also
have made an attempt to get Harry to reconsider attending. A Wizengamot debate was no place for a fourteen year old boy, even one as accomplished as Harry.

"Albus?" Sirius prompted with enough exasperation that Albus knew it wasn't the first time his name had been called again.

Albus nodded sagely to cover his embarrassment. "The preparation for the second task has already begun. Alastor is in charge of the security and we are keeping an eye on the Durmstrang ship. Unfortunately this task was made much more dangerous by Voldemort's revisions, and I fear he will not have to resort to sabotage to pose a real threat to Harry's life." It was more than likely that someone would die in the second task outlined by Tom, Albus thought sadly, despite their best efforts to mediate some of the parameters. "I'll be giving the same warning to all the champions."

Sirius's face was a dangerous blank. "I see."

"In terms of security," Albus continued, "we haven't been able to provide any further evidence that young Bartemius and his cohorts are operating from the Durmstrang ship beyond the obvious relationship Karkaroff has as a liaison – which is hardly definitive proof."

"It's certainly not enough to be able to issue a warrant to search it or ask formally." Cornelius said regretfully. "I have spoken with Bogdan though since Remus approached him off the record, and, unofficially, he tells me he is making some progress with his fellow Ministers in the Durmstrang pact. He feels they may make a decision based on the outcome of the second task and whether there is additional evidence of sabotage."

"Now I don't know if I should be hoping for sabotage or not." Bertie said wryly.

Albus inclined his head, understanding the sentiment.

Sirius gave Cornelius an approving nod. "Thank you for the behind the scenes support, Cornelius."

Cornelius puffed up proudly in response.

"Let's move on; Tag the Death Eater?" Sirius redirected the meeting with quiet competence.

"No movement on any front." Amelia sighed heavily. "None of the tagged Death Eaters have had any contact with Crouch, Travers or Greyback as far as we can tell. There have been no sightings of any. Professor Snape has exchanged messages through Karkaroff, of course, but we don't know how Karkaroff is passing the message on; it may be in person, or by an illegal floo connection."

"What of the Azkaban lot?" Sirius asked. "Travers Senior and Mulciber?"

"With your account of what happened we managed to find the house you and Neville were held at," Amelia said, "and we found Rookwood's and Mulciber's remains. Travers Senior is at large." She took a sip of tea. "We've upgraded the wards at Azkaban following the breakout at Yule so we don't expect a second wave of escapees."

"I take it the Dementors Crouch had are still missing too?" Sirius asked.

Amelia nodded. "I'm afraid so. It may be that they'll get hungry enough for some unexplained catatonic states to appear which will then give us a clue." She tapped her fingers lightly against the tea-cup. "Hearing myself report our lack of progress, I feel we're being rather ineffectual."

"You're doing the best you can." Sirius reassured her before Albus could speak. "You know Moody told us that ninety per cent of law enforcement was patience, pain-staking clue gathering and desk
work." He gave a short laugh. "Made us do surveillance after surveillance in training so we'd learn."

"I remember." Amelia smiled. "He made me watch Florence Parkinson for a whole week because she was going into Knockturn Alley, and the most suspicious thing she did was buy an illegal hair dye."

Albus pursed his lips. He had known that particular shade of blonde couldn't have possibly been natural.

"I should also say, Amelia, that you're not the only one feeling rather ineffectual." Bertie broke in. He glanced at Sirius for permission to continue and received a nod in reply. "After our gains in the Summer on the Treasure Hunt, the Ravenclaw diadem is proving to be very elusive." He huffed and motioned to Albus. "Thanks to Albus's continuing attempts to talk with the ghosts, we do know that the Ravenclaw ghost – otherwise known as Ravenclaw's daughter – did let Riddle know where the diadem was in Albania."

Sirius glanced towards Albus and inclined his head slightly. Albus inclined his own in response, feeling something tight inside of him lessen with the younger man's acknowledgement of his efforts.

"The ghosts have also confirmed that Tom brought the diadem back with him when he returned from Albania to interview for the position at Hogwarts but they claim they do not have the knowledge of where it is hidden, only that it is at Hogwarts." Albus said brightly.

"So we have made some progress," Bertie said quietly, "we have confirmed that the diadem is likely the horcrux rather than the other Ravenclaw artefact we considered."

"And you've confirmed Regulus's letter that it's hidden at Hogwarts." Sirius said. "We'll just have to keep searching for it."

"At least we know it's not a futile search." Bertie agreed.

"Well," Sirius said looking towards the clock, "we should wrap this up since we all need to get to the Wizengamot."

There was a flurry of movement as everyone made to leave, but Albus hung back and it didn't take long before he was alone with Sirius.

"You need something, Albus?" Sirius asked dryly.

"I wanted to once again apologise to you," Albus began, "Minerva was quite right to take me to task. I should not have assumed that I knew best nor allowed the situation with Hagrid to distract me from completing the task Remus had asked of me."

"We've covered this ground more than a few times now, Albus." Sirius said calmly, his steady grey gaze meeting Albus's own.

Albus sighed. "I fear I did not realise how difficult it was to change my thinking, my dear boy." He paused again. "I truly am sorry for the pain I inadvertently caused to young Harry."

"You need to apologise to Harry." Sirius replied.

"I was hoping for the opportunity to do so." Albus said.

Sirius seemed torn but he nodded and gestured for Albus to follow him out. Harry was in the living area with Remus. Both had changed into their formal robes and Harry was talking rapidly with his
honorary uncle.

Albus wondered again if it was the right thing to place the pressure of being present at the Wizengamot on Harry's shoulders but he focused on the matter at hand, jumping in when Harry paused for breath. "Harry, if you have a moment, please?"

Sirius nudged Remus's arm. "I need to talk with you. Come and sit with me while I get changed."

Remus cast a distrusting look in Albus's direction but went with Sirius.

Harry had stopped pacing and he gestured for Albus to sit down. "You wanted to talk me with me, Professor Dumbledore?"

He gathered his robes and sank into a chair; Harry perched on the edge of the sofa.

"I wanted to personally apologise for not informing you as Remus had asked." Albus said solemnly. "I can only imagine what you went through believing Sirius to have died and I am tremendously sorry that I played a role in you coming to that conclusion."

"It's OK," Harry sighed and rubbed his nose, "well, not OK, but I know you meant to protect me and…well," his cheeks reddened, "I've had my own taste of making decisions I thought would protect others and it not working out the way I thought it would."

Albus relaxed with Harry's welcome benediction. "I will try to do better, Harry." He cleared his throat. "With that in mind, I hope you take this in the caring manner it is meant, Harry; are you certain you should attend the debate in the Wizengamot?"

Harry's gaze flickered to him and for a long moment Albus felt as though he was being weighed and judged. It was a disconcerting feeling. Finally, Harry spoke. "The alliance is called the Potter alliance. They stand with me on my agenda. I know I can't debate because of my age – and I'm grateful for that – but the least I can do is be there."

"It is Sirius's responsibility to represent you until you come of age, Harry." Albus pointed out gently.

"Maybe," Harry conceded, "but…" he paused and his gaze fell to the pictures on the mantel, "when I lost him…"

Albus had to strain to hear him.

"When I thought I'd lost him, I realised that I was going to have to lead the alliance and do everything myself…and I accepted it because there was no other choice and because I know it's going to be me and Voldemort in the end." Harry said simply. "I think I always knew it even before we went to hear the prophecy." His green eyes flashed up and caught Albus's fiercely. "You and I both know it."

His heart about broke with the pain that was evident on Harry's face.

"Now I have Sirius back…Sirius would gladly do everything on my behalf, I know he would, but I need…I need to take the lead if I'm going to face Tom again." Harry concluded.

Albus could do nothing but nod. He had known it for years and still wished that there was something he could do to change it.

"The thing is," Harry continued, "it's not like I had someone before." His expression saddened. "It was only me with Quirrell and Voldemort, and only me with the basilisk and Tom's shade. So," his
shoulders went back and his chin went up, "if I can face them, I can face Wenlock." He smiled
suddenly. "And at least I know Sirius and Remus will do all they can to prepare me and will cheer
me on; that they're there if I need them now."

"Not just Sirius and Remus, my boy." Albus said softly.

Harry nodded slowly.

Suddenly, steps running down the stairs had them both turning to see Sirius approaching, Remus on
his heels. Albus noted that Sirius once again wore sharply tailored duelling robes over black leather
pants and black silk shirt; dragon hide boots completed the outfit. Remus wore immaculate formal
robes in the same style as Harry, the crests of Potter and Black proudly embroidered on their chests.
They were going to make a definite statement walking into the Wizengamot together, Albus mused,
eager in many ways to see the reaction to them.

"Right," Sirius said loudly, "let's get going, shall we?"

Albus rose from his seat along with Harry and took a moment to let the wild surge of hopefulness
inside of him let loose before he reigned it back. Because if Harry could face Voldemort in the end
with as much dignity and courage as he had shown in their discussion, Albus had no doubt
Voldemort would lose. And the hapless Wenlock stood no chance.

It was a most satisfying thought, and it was with a spring in his step that Albus led the way through
the floo to the Ministry.

o-O-o

"I'm not surprised that she's ignoring you." Draco drawled.

Harry spared a moment from gazing at Hermione, stood with the Tonks' on the other side of
Cornelius's office, to glare at him. "That's very supportive, Cousin. Thank you."

The Houses of Potter and Black had been waiting forever in the office. Sirius wanted to make a
showy entrance to the Wizengamot at the very last minute, and they had arrived with time to spare.
Harry looked again towards Hermione, but her attention was firmly on whatever Amelia was saying.
Hermione had politely greeted Harry but ignored him otherwise.

Draco raised one thin blond eyebrow. "You have to admit you'd be furious if she'd tossed you back
to Hogwarts the way you did her."

"I was trying to protect her." Harry bit out.

Draco shrugged. "If you say so." His pointed features seemed entirely too gleeful for Harry's liking.
"So are you single now?"

Harry scowled at him. "No! Will you just shut up about it?!

Draco lifted one hand in supposed surrender. "Would you prefer we talk about Wenlock and the
debate?" He sneered.

In truth, Harry figured they should be talking about the debate. Which maybe was a sign, Harry
mused, that dating was a distraction and he needed to be focused on other things. Maybe he really
should give up on dating until the whole thing with Voldemort was over – then he wouldn't have to
worry about protecting his girlfriend nor about upsetting said girlfriend when he protected them in a
way they disagreed with, nor worrying about how to make it up to them when he had upset them
when he should be thinking about how to defeat Voldemort, or prepare for the second task, or how not to allow Wenlock provoke him in the debate…

He repressed the urge to sigh and rubbed his forehead trying to ease the beginning of a nagging headache there. He figured this was one of those moments where Hermione would berate him if he made a decision alone without conversing with her. Truthfully, he really didn't want to give up dating Hermione although the situation with Remus had distracted him from planning a way to make it up to her.

Harry belatedly realised Draco was waiting for him to reply. He dragged his mind back on topic. "Sirius will be great in the debate." Harry muttered defensively.

"I'm sure he will but Wenlock be expecting him." Draco drawled.

He wasn't wrong, Harry thought, the plan he and Sirius had come up bringing another flutter of internal butterflies.

"He might make mistakes in the debate underestimating Sirius, but the only way I can see him confessing anything illegal is to dose him with truth serum or put him under a truth spell like Sirius did with Father." Draco continued.

Harry froze, arrested by the germ of an idea that Draco's words had triggered. Sirius had used family magic to force Lucius to be truthful. Was it possible for Harry to call on Wenlock's family magic to force him to tell him the truth? If the magic was available to him, he could do it, Harry mused, but that was the question; would Wenlock's magic be available to him as the most powerful in the family magic circle? And how could he do it discreetly?

"Harry?" Hermione's quiet voice yanked Harry out of his thoughts abruptly and he started a little when he realised she stood next to him.

Draco smirked at him knowingly.

"Hermione." Harry pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Amelia says Sirius is going to try and get Wenlock to confess in the debate?" Hermione questioned, worry creasing her forehead.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, he's planning to…" his gaze flickered to Draco briefly, "and Draco's just given me a brilliant idea.

"I have?"

"He has?"

They spoke in unison and glared at each other in with identical frowns of outrage; if the situation wasn't so important, Harry would have been tempted to laugh out loud.

"Draco mentioned that he didn't think Wenlock would give too much away unless he was under the family magic truth spell." Harry explained.

Hermione's frown cleared almost straight away. "So you're going to see whether you can call on his family magic?"

Harry nodded. "I need some way to do it without actually saying it though."
"Why do you think you can call on Wenlock's family magic?" asked Draco, puzzled.

"I, uh, managed to call on Neville's at the World Cup," Harry admitted, realising that Draco probably hadn't been told – he wasn't sure Sirius had even told Lucius and Narcissa. The secret of his ability with family magic was too important to share widely. He'd only told Ron and Hermione, and only because Neville had witnessed it.

"Really?" Both of Draco's eyebrows shot upwards. "But…that would mean…I mean, are you that powerful?"

"Well, we don't really know if it's a question of power or whether it's something to do with Harry's and Neville's oaths." Hermione lectured briskly. "This would be a good test of that since Wenlock is not allied in any way with either House."

"I still need some way of doing it quietly though." Harry said. "If I shout it out everyone will know and that would be bad if it got back to Voldemort."

Hermione turned contemplative. "You couldn't cast it silently?"

"I'm not sure." Harry admitted. "I don't think so; I think ritual magic has to be declared when invoked." He glanced toward where Sirius was deep in conversation with Lucius and frowned. "I can ask Sirius."

"It's a shame you can't use Parseltongue." Draco said. "Father said you talked to the family snake the entire time you were at the Wizengamot last. He said it drove everyone mad trying to guess what you were talking about."

Harry shrugged, flushing. "The snake likes to gossip."

Hermione and Draco both gaped at him.

"Ready, Harry?"

Harry almost jumped when he realised that in the few minutes that had passed from his glance-over, Sirius had moved to stand next to him, along with Remus. "I think so. Actually, Draco has come up with something."

Sirius's eyes flickered to Draco who blushed furiously as Harry quickly explained.

"…so we don't know if I can try to invoke it silently or try Parseltongue or…" Harry shrugged helplessly.

"Well, firstly, I'm not sure if it will work. The truth spell usually only aligns to the family head who has cast." Sirius said.

Harry's face fell and he noticed Hermione and Draco also looked despondent.

"But I guess there's no harm trying." Sirius added.

Harry breathed out, gleeful anticipation sending his blood tingling through his body.

"Now we can invoke some family magic silently, it's rare but I remember my Grandfather doing it." Sirius said contemplatively. "But you've only just started doing silent casting in your lessons so it could be a bit hit and miss if it works."

"But you could try it and if that doesn't work use Parseltongue." Remus suggested.
Harry nodded. It was a plan.

"And really it doesn't matter if it doesn't work, it's a good idea to have thought of it in the first place." Sirius said approvingly, looking over to Draco.

"I hope it does work." Harry said. "It might be the only way to make Wenlock trip up."

Sirius patted his shoulder. "Have some faith." He chided dryly.

Harry flushed. "Sorry, I mean, I know we have the plan, it's just…"

"It's going to be difficult to ensure Wenlock hangs himself with the rope we're hoping to give him." Sirius acknowledged. He grinned at Harry suddenly. "Besides, if it does all goes terribly, I'll make him lose his pants and nobody'll notice the debate."

Harry chuckled and his spirit lightened. His eyes caught Draco's for a moment, before moving onto Hermione's chocolate gaze. She blushed and looked away.

A curl of satisfaction settled in Harry at the small sign that she still liked him. So, he thought determinedly; he'd get the debate with Wenlock out of the way and then he'd plan how to win Hermione back as his girlfriend, and of course, finally defeat Voldemort.

It was a good plan. Well. It was more of a plan than he usually had at any rate.

o-O-o

Augusta watched the chattering groups spread all over the Wizengamot with well-hidden glee. The chamber rang with the verve and energy emanating from the various groups.

On one side of the chamber, Richard Bones was urgently conferring with Leonard Abbott, and on the other, an equally passionate exchange seemed to be happening between Wilkes and Nott. Augusta couldn't help noticing Wenlock nodding at some of his allies, a smugness in his manner that had her wondering what else the wizard had up his sleeves to try and disturb the revamp of the Creature legislation.

She shook her head and once again mused wistfully that Sirius's advent as Lord Black, the steps he'd taken in the protection of Harry, had certainly brought life back to the legislative body of the magical government. And that was a good thing, Augusta thought with inward wry acknowledgement of her own continuing deep-seated guilt that it had taken Sirius to kick the rest of them into action.

Her eyes landed on Albus, deep in discussion with Dullard. Times had changed for the Chief Warlock, she mused. He was no longer the foremost authority that the Light looked to, not after his mistakes with Harry. Oh, Sirius's plan wasn't completely without its delays and its problems – Yule and the incident with Crouch abducting Sirius was proof of that – but ultimately it was working.

The DMLE was dynamic; actively and proactively keeping the peace through their constant vigilance (and Augusta smiled at the latter phrasing of her thought, her mind drifting absently to Alastor); the Unspeakables in the DOM were equally vibrant in their pursuit of whatever it was that was the focus of the Treasure Hunt, and even Cornelius seemed rejuvenated, diving into his politicking with a new energy and a new direction that was wholly aligned with the wishes of the Potter alliance.

Augusta fingered her wand and settled back into her chair. It had been a shock the day before when Harry had attended the alliance meeting but Harry had done an admirable job. She'd been proud of how he'd listened to them all offer him advice, (which had ranged from her own supportive
'whatever you decide the House of Longbottom will stand with you' to Doge's blunt – and very rude statement since Remus had been right there – 'you should get some distance between you and the werewolf'), before he'd straightened his shoulders, thanked them and then proceeded to tell them that Remus wasn't going anywhere, that the best defence was a good offence, and he wasn't going to allow the likes of Wenlock to bully them into agreeing to legislation that would only weaken their society at best and totally undermine it at worst. It had been easy to see just why so many of their Heirs had sworn fealty to Harry.

Her gaze shifted to the fourth tier of the gallery where those same Heirs were gathered. She noted Amos Diggory sat near to grandson. Neville sat beside Hannah, Susan beside her with Diggory beside her. On the other side of her grandson, a space had been left for the missing but expected members of the House of Black. Just as she began to consider where they were, the doors to the chamber floor opened and they all entered.

The Blacks, Augusta thought amused, knew how to make an entrance as the chamber fell into an almost reverent hush.

Sirius, Harry and Remus entered first; all robes adorned with both Potter and Black crests. The Tonks' were next; Nymphadora wore Auror robes and her gait suggested that she was on duty; her mother and father escorted Hermione Granger between them. The three Malfoys followed close behind them. The procession paused at the bottom of the stairs up to the empty seats Neville had commandeered for them.

Remus gave a bow to Sirius and Harry. Augusta heard the worried murmurs trickle around the chamber as the werewolf calmly, and with his head held high, escorted Nymphadora up the stairs. She wasn't surprised to see that when he sat down it was with Neville on his right and the Auror on his left. The House of Black quickly took their places but the chamber's attention was drawn back to the Ancient and Noble House tier where Sirius and Harry had arrived. Sirius was quietly invoking the family magic to protect Harry as he had done previously on his son's first visit.

"Seal the doors!" Albus instructed loudly.

The doors to the chamber closed with a sharp bang and Augusta mused ruefully that she'd been so caught up that she'd failed to even see Cornelius, Amelia, and Bertie enter.

Sirius made his way unhurriedly to his seat. There was another moment of acknowledgement as the Houses rose in deference to him (even Wenlock although his manner was grudging and mocking), and then they were all sat and the session was upon them.

"Point of order!" Wenlock jumped up just as Dullard opened his mouth to speak the first order of business. Wenlock pointed over towards Remus. "I demand that creature be removed immediately!"

The chamber erupted into chaos.

Augusta was on her feet and shouting her objection along with several other members of the Potter alliance, although she absently noticed Harry didn't move an inch after a quick glance at Sirius who remained calm and seated. Members of Wenlock's group were yelling back and it was hard to hear what anyone was saying in the cacophony of noise.

A small bang from Albus's wand silenced them all.

"Thank you, Chief Warlock." Sirius said as everyone else subsided. "As the objection was raised against the steward of my Houses, perhaps I may be permitted to respond?"
Albus inclined his head, his blue eyes twinkling madly. "Of course, Sirius. Please proceed."

"Lord Wenlock," Sirius said firmly, "I will not take insult with you on this occasion as I assume the erroneous publicity surrounding my steward's one time lapse in judgement has influenced your opinion."

The threat that he would take insult for a second slur was more than evident in Sirius's words and manner. Augusta nodded in approval.

"However," Sirius continued, "I will reaffirm the statement I made to the press yesterday; Remus Lupin remains the steward of the Houses of Black and Potter, and has our trust. While I would not say he isn't dangerous outside of the full moon – he is a fully trained wizard after all with excellent knowledge of Defence of the Dark Arts – he is only a werewolf during the full moon. As we have some way to go before the full moon this month, I can vouch for him not turning into a werewolf for the next four hours of this Wizengamot session."

The point that Remus was a wizard more than a werewolf had more than one face turning ashamed in the chamber. Wenlock merely sneered at Sirius.

"I agree with Lord Black," Albus said calmly, "Mister Lupin is hardly a threat to anyone and will remain."

"He's a werewolf!" Avery said shrilly. The way he looked towards Wenlock for approval gave away where that thought had come from.

Sirius glared at him and Avery cowered back. Augusta mused that perhaps it was occurring to Avery that the greater threat wasn't the werewolf but the Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black.

Nott stood up and cleared his throat. "I would like to state that I concur with Lord Black's assessment of Mister Lupin as a threat. There is no need for his removal."

"That's easy for you to say," Wenlock responded, "you have a détente with the House of Black."

"Yeah, what about those of us who don't have some kind of détente or agreement?" asked Tripe scowling as he stood up.

Augusta thought she saw a glint of satisfaction in his eyes as he resumed his seat. It was a trap, she realised suddenly. They had anticipated Remus would attend the session and had determined a manoeuvre to force Sirius into a corner. Either he would have to acquiesce to Remus being removed or concede to conditions on his remaining. Her lips thinned. Well, not on her watch! She was going to…

"Why don't you just use the family magic?" Harry's blunt question broke through her mental ranting.

She glanced over and found Harry petting the Potter griffin absently as he pushed his glasses up his nose and regarding Wenlock and Tripe with guarded wariness.

"I mean," Harry continued, "Sirius calls ours to protect me while I'm here so why don't you call yours to protect you if you're really all that worried about Remus?"

Wenlock seemed momentarily speechless.

Tripe got to his feet, red in the face. "I'd remind young Lord Potter that not all of us have family magic." He snarled.
Sirius shrugged. "I won't take offence if for the duration of the session Lord Wenlock extended his family magic to protect all those in the chamber. I'd offer to extend my own but I believe some may not believe it would protect them against a protected member of my Houses." He smiled darkly.

Augusta frowned. It almost seemed as though Sirius and Harry were baiting Wenlock into calling his magic.

Dullard sprang up. "There is a precedent," he said excitedly, "in nineteen forty-one Lord Lovegood extended his family magic to protect all in the session from the Goblin entourage that had come to sign the last treaty at his behest."

"Well, then," Albus said firmly, "that seems to be the solution." He waved his hand toward Wenlock. "Lord Wenlock?"

Wenlock glowered, clearly unhappy that his grand plan to corner Sirius into making concessions had been thwarted. He made an impatient gesture and called his magic. The silver vulture formed slowly and didn't seem happy to be there as it immediately flew to the ceiling of the chamber and perched itself on the chandelier. Wenlock sat down.

The public tier was quiet; hushed by the sight of another family magic avatar and Albus indicated for Dullard to continue with the notices.

It hardly felt like any time had passed before Dullard called on Dirk Cresswell to present the suggested revisions to the Werewolf and other Magical Creature legislation. Augusta had read the legislation and was pleased with it but she listened intently as the wizard began to make his case.

"Let me first deal with the relatively non contentious item," Cresswell stood in the centre of the Wizengamot floor, hands behind his back, his blue robes of good quality but not ostentatious. "There are currently two rough categories of Creatures with the easiest being those identified as Benign. The Benign creatures range from the firefly to the kneazle to the postal owl and the review of the laws suggests that only minimal changes are required, mainly to address change in language and terminology since the last laws were enacted. I'd like these changes to be put immediately to a vote."

Dullard addressed the chamber. "Does anyone present raise an objection?"

Augusta glanced around at her fellow Wizengamot members but all remained silent. The following vote was brief and unanimous for passing the changes into law.

Cresswell returned to the floor. "The second part of the legislation deals with the remaining Creature category." He cleared his throat. "Firstly, it is the view of the Committee responsible for the review of the existing legislation that the definitions of Magical Races and Magical Creatures have been allowed to become blurred in our legislature. It is recommended that those listed in Table 2a of the Committee's Change Bill be known as Protected and Dangerous Creatures…"

Augusta tuned out the list as Cresswell read it out loud. She had read it and agreed with it.

"Again, the proposed changes in regards to these Creatures are mostly minor in respect to registration and control with the major proposal the establishment of a new Ministry controlled endangered species reserve in the Highlands." Cresswell concluded. "The new reserve would be able to be self-sustaining within three years and can be funded from the increased registration and licensing fees that are part of the minor changes. I'd like these changes put immediately to a vote."

Selwyn raised his wand and Albus recognised him. "What of those you have redefined as not a Creature? If we vote this part of the legislature through, are we not already approving this list as
definitive? And if we are, I have a problem with that since it's missing a number of creatures you are proposing to redefine!"

There was a chorus of agreement from a number of seats, mostly those in Wenlock's little enclave although Augusta noted a number of Lucius's group. Some may have sought a détente with the House of Black but it hadn't changed their fundamental politics.

Cresswell raised a hand for silence and surprisingly got it. "Clause 9 clearly states that the list remains open to the addition of new creatures or creatures that are re-classified. If this list is voted into legislation it does not prevent any of those we have yet to discuss from being added to it later in this session or another."

Mollified, most of the protesters subsided, with one or two of the Minor Houses standing up to protest the rise in licensing fees and the breeding regulations. Their objections were swiftly dealt with – because any sane person would want the breeding regulations changed and really the licensing fees have been too low for decades. It didn't seem like any time at all before the second vote swiftly moved the Protected and Dangerous Creatures section into legislation.

Augusta huffed out a satisfied sigh. Two sections of the new law were done, but there were several further sections to go and she knew neither she nor the rest of the alliance could be complacent.

"All others previously known as Creatures are now identified as Magical Races as listed in Table 2b of the Committee's Change Bill." Cresswell announced. "The following sections set out the proposed legislature either repealing prohibitive rules and regulations in respect of a Creature species now deemed a Race or Wizards and Witches with Special Circumstances."

There was an immediate objection from Wilkes. "What are you saying constitutes a Race and what's this complete nonsense about Wizards with Special Circumstances?"

"A Magical Race is redefined in this legislature as a magical species with recognisable governance, speech and intelligence." Cresswell stated firmly. "Wizards and Witches with Special Circumstances refers to situations where there is a cross-species progeny between another magical Race and our own, or where those who were born as a Wizard or a Witch are infected with a condition such as lycanthropy."

Unsurprisingly, the chamber went into an uproar again.

Augusta glanced over at Sirius and was unsurprised to find him keeping a close watch on Harry who seemed to be talking with the Black snake.

"Silence!" Albus's stern declaration finally brought order again and the session resumed.

The creation of a new Department overseeing Wizard and Magical Race Relations was proposed and passed with only a minimum of protest. Each Magical Race was then discussed in brief where the Wizengamot voted that they were a Magical Race and then determined a course of action. They made quick work of Giants, Centaurs and Merpeople since there was grudging admission that all three constituted a Race with their own governing bodies, and as all three Races simply wished to be granted dominion over their own lands (something the Wizengamot hadn't fully conceded before and still didn't under the new law) and to be left alone, the sections of the law pertaining to them passed quickly and without debate. Equally there was no real debate about Vampires and Veela as neither had real communities within Britain and the sections simply recognised that they existed and restricted their usage of their various powers against Wizards and Witches on British soil. The Goblins were another easily passed section; the Wizengamot agreed that the Goblin Treaties were not to be touched but the Goblin Liaison Office would attempt to open a more positive dialogue. The
establishment of House-Elves as a Magical Race did cause some debate (there was no central governing body to engage with) but ultimately passed along with a new law that protected them from abusive owners. However, it was the final section everyone was waiting for.

"Firstly, the review stands by the current laws surrounding the progeny of a Witch or Wizard with a member of a Magical Race as the second parent," Cresswell began, "in that the progeny in all cases is considered to be first and foremost a Wizard or a Witch. However, if dangerous traits are inherited, such as in the case of Vampires and Veela, then they also need to conform to the agreed legal restrictions for that Magical Race. If no-one has any objections, I would like therefore to move onto the second category, namely the topic of Wizards and Witches infected with lycanthropy."

There was an expectant hush in the chamber. Augusta could see Wenlock shift minutely; his body tensing in preparation; his cohorts also subtly changing their body language. They thought they had an advantage and Augusta wondered what it was. Sirius would clearly going to have to think on his feet in a debate if they were going to be surprised…

Get on with it, man, Augusta thought impatiently at Cresswell.

Cresswell though took his time to sweep his audience with a thoughtful gaze, pausing briefly but significantly on Remus Lupin before continuing. He cleared his throat. "It is proposed that this section replaces and supersedes all previously written legislation regarding Wizards and Witches with Lycanthropy, or as they have been previously referred to: Werewolves."

A murmur went around the public tier at the blatant renaming of a Dark creature to something that acknowledged their usual state of being more.

"The Committee has found that the previous legislation to be abhorrent and more likely to incite dissension and unrest within our society than to provide protection for its citizens." Cresswell continued. "Over ninety-eight per cent of the infected do not actively choose to be infected nor do they actively seek to harm others, usually securing themselves away during the nights of the full moon. However, our current laws strip them of all basic rights, restrict their employment, education and housing options, and allow executions of even those of minor age. The Committee believes this is a travesty of justice. Yes, our laws should provide protection for the wider community against those who have chosen infection and embraced a feral existence, but at the same time, they should acknowledge the vast majority seek help in managing their condition, and desire to continue to be productive members of our society."

Augusta found herself nodding along to Cresswell's speech. She was impressed with his eloquence and as she regarded her fellow Wizengamot members she could see the rest of the Potter alliance was pleased at Cresswell's performance and the results of the Committee's review.

"So," Cresswell stated firmly, "the proposal is two-fold: firstly, Identification and Rights: Wizards and Witches infected will no longer be referred to primarily as Werewolves unless charged and convicted with knowingly attacking another Wizard or Witch while transformed or partially transformed. They retain all rights as Wizards and Witches with which they were originally born. If employed in the Wizarding world, their employers are encouraged to make all allowances for time off for the day of the full moon and up to two days beyond it."

He waited for a second murmur of noise to die away before finishing.

"Secondly, Protection. It is understood that transformed or partially transformed Werewolves are dangerous creatures. The infected must make every effort therefore to secure themselves during the nights of the full moon; parents assume the responsibility for minors. While the State would like to provide safe houses and make provision for supplying Wolfsbane, currently there is not enough
budget to support this and we ask that this to be deferred and discussed within the next annual budget review." Cresswell looked up again. "Any attack by a Werewolf will be investigated by the DMLE. If the Werewolf is found to have attacked knowingly and with forethought, the punishment will remain execution. If the Werewolf is found to have attacked instinctively but to have harmed another, the punishment will be imprisonment. If no harm was incurred, a warning will be issued. Multiple warnings may lead to imprisonment." He nodded decisively. "This is the Committee's proposal."

Wenlock barely waited for Cresswell to sit and Dullard to open the debate before objecting. Albus sighed and nodded for Wenlock to speak.

He did make an impressive figure, thought Augusta as she took in the finely tailored robes, the aristocratic features and the impeccable grooming.

Wenlock smiled, and Augusta couldn't help but think it was a shark smile; cold, deadly and predatory. "My first point is that the Committee has taken its remit beyond what it was tasked to do. Review the legislation, yes. Provide suggestions for improvements, yes. But to redefine Creatures? No. That is a step too far." He held up a hand when there was a whisper of protest heard from the public tiers. "But we have acknowledged that perhaps, yes, in the cases of some such as Centaurs," his voice was a sneer, "or Vampires that redefinition as a Race may be in order. However, there is a substantial difference between redefining a Creature as a Race and redefining a Creature as a Wizard with Special Circumstances."

Augusta frowned. It was unfortunately a good point and she could see it resonate with some in the room – a few heads nodding along in agreement.

"We can recognise that for those infected with lycanthropy, it is a tragedy." Wenlock continued smoothly. "In one instant, their entire lives are redefined. But to pretend otherwise would be a greater tragedy for our society. Once infected, they are no longer Wizards but Werewolves. The wolf's instincts do not only come out at the full moon and we would be foolish to believe that they are as dormant in the in-between as the Committee pretends. They seek out packs. They gather in groups together and the majority seek the dominance of one they call Alpha. They identify as Werewolves. Why should we ignore this basic fact and suggest they should have the same rights as us?"

More head-nodding and Augusta could see that Wenlock's rhetoric was swaying some to his side. Merlin, she could see Doge absently giving an approving head tilt in Wenlock's direction. She pursed her lips.

"And there is a more important point here," Wenlock continued, "because if we allow ourselves to be swayed into believing these Creatures are not different to us, then we have no way of recognising that they are. We could sit beside a werewolf, anger them in ignorance and find ourselves fighting for our lives, our existence, within one breath and the next. Even a scratch from a non-transformed werewolf can be deadly. To identify them as werewolves ensures our protection as a society; ensures that we know to be on guard when one of them is within our midst; ensures that we can choose to place ourselves at risk or not. To allow them to identify as us, to roam among us freely…it is an invitation for the disease to spread and become prevalent."

He took a breath.

"Werewolves are Creatures. They are a threat. Any attack, whether intended or not, is an attack and should be met with the full force of the law." Wenlock darted a glance at Remus and then at Sirius, and clearly (or clearly to Augusta if she was any judge of character) reconsidered using Remus in his argument. "We should be reinstating our previous laws not allowing this weak and feeble-minded piece of legislation to pass."
Wenlock sat and his allies broke out into applause, something echoed by a few in the public tier. Augusta's heart sank. The unfortunate thing was that Wenlock's points were perfectly reasonable and no doubt attractive to many. Why should everyone run the risk of infection when the simple answer was to ostracize those from their society and eliminate the threat completely?

Augusta exchanged a look with Richard Bones across the chamber. Both of them knew Sirius was formidable but Wenlock had been better than they had thought.

Sirius waited for Albus to recognise him and got to his feet. The chamber fell silent as Sirius cast a serious gaze around the gathered members.

"Lord Wenlock has certainly summed up the view of the opposition succinctly: maintain the status quo. And it could even be argued that the status quo is the right state of being. For those of us who are not infected, we can go about our daily lives and know that there are no werewolves in our schools, nor key places of employment and government. We know there is the threat of execution that hangs over every werewolf in the event that they should not take care to chain themselves up during the full moon, and revel in the small security that provides us. We can look at the packs with distaste as something feral and different and wrong. And all is well because we are safe." Sirius paused and took a breath. "We are wrong."

A mutter broke out on the public tier. Wenlock's eyes narrowed trying to ascertain Sirius's argument.

"The status quo," Sirius continued, "draws lines; them on one side and us on the other. It says we are right and good; that they are wrong and evil. The truth is that who is right and who is wrong, who is good and who is evil, depends upon which side of the line that you stand." He looked around the hushed chamber. "That is a universal truth. If we were infected, would we not stand on that side of the line and say: it is not right that I have lost my home and my job and have to endure that my friends look at me with pity and fear? Would I not say that the person who would rather kill me than help me is a monster?"

There was a rustle of movement as people squirmed in their seats, disturbed by the blunt harsh reality of the picture Sirius was painting.

"So this is the truth: that the status quo has drawn lines and divisions. It has created the packs in part because where else will an infected wizard or witch find comfort and kinship and belonging when the rest of society casts them out? When they are labelled as a Creature and a werewolf – something that society tells them is no longer even human?"

Sirius took a breath. "As a governing body we are sworn to protect all in our society: the weak and disadvantaged; the elderly and the sick. And those infected with lycanthropy carry an illness. It is a condition that gifts them unusual senses, strength and endurance on one hand, and harshly punishes them with the torture of changing and losing their mind and sense of self every month on the other. We have as much a duty to ensure their safety and protection, to safeguard their rights and interests, as we do to ensure the safety and protection of those who are not infected." He looked in the direction of Wenlock briefly. "Execution and exclusion are easy options but they only make monsters of us all." His eyes landed on Harry. "But those of us who are not monsters, who look at the world through new eyes; it is those among us who show us that the right option is to protect everyone and never draw the line that says them and us."

Harry smiled at his father, at the acknowledgement that it was his political agenda that Sirius was arguing for.

"My son wants to protect everyone." Sirius said, his eyes never leaving Harry.
And Sirius would give Harry what he wanted. The unspoken message was as clear as if Sirius had shouted it from the rooftops.

The chamber erupted.

Augusta found herself on her feet, clapping. All of the alliance was clapping and a good portion of the public tier had followed suit. It was a good sign and Augusta breathed out a sigh of relief even as she sat back down as Wenlock jumped back up.

"Are you seriously arguing that we're monsters for wanting to protect ourselves from a threat?" Wenlock sneered.

Sirius smiled in response, his eyes sharp as flint. "When you would rather kill a wizard than help save him: yes."

Wenlock jumped, seemingly unable to help himself. "But they're not wizards! They're werewolves!"

"Because we call them that!" Sirius thundered back. "How we identify anything drives our reactions and actions! You call them werewolves and you see them as something less than human, as dangerous creatures that must be executed." He glared at Wenlock. "Start thinking about what you'd want to be called if you were bitten!"

Wenlock bristled. "Is that a threat? Will you turn your steward loose on me if I dare to disagree with you? After all, didn't you send a school boy rival to meet a werewolf on the night of a full moon when you were at Hogwarts?" He looked triumphant.

There was an audible intake of breath around the chamber. Every eye flew to Sirius's to see his reaction to the charge.

Sirius raised one eyebrow, a small mocking smile lurking about his lips as though to say 'is that the best you can do?' He gave a shrug. "I was young, very stupid and I almost fell for a rival setting me up to be expelled and one of my best friends to be executed." He glanced apologetically at Remus. "Luckily, James Potter rescued us all including my rival who knew what he'd find on the night of a full moon."

"Young and stupid, indeed!" Wenlock threw back. "So why should we trust your word on this? You have gathered an army of werewolves all under the leadership of your steward!"

Pandemonium broke out.

Augusta tried to retain her composure, wondering how Sirius could stand there and look so unaffected by the accusation as abusive shouts were hurled at him.

It took Albus a long time to bring order back to the session.

"An army," repeated Sirius dryly. "This is what I was talking about. You say to-may-to, and I say to-mah-to. You say an army, but I say my son and I are providing sanctuary and protection for those who want to escape from the Greyback pack."

The announcement immediately caused another uproar. Augusta felt hysterical laughter bubbling in her chest and she tried to contain it as Dullard shouted ineffectually for order again.

Wenlock was furious. "You are building an army with your steward as Alpha!" He yelled as soon as the chamber fell silent enough for his voice to be heard.
Sirius looked at him pityingly. "Why would I want an army?" He asked evenly.

"To become the next the Dark Lord!" Wenlock snapped back.

The excited thunder of chatter after that pronouncement was like a roar of sound. There were yells of disbelief; cries of panic; people shouted at Wenlock calling him a liar, some at Sirius condemning him, at Cornelius demanding he do something, with more demands for help directed at Albus.

Augusta was tempted to cover her ears, but just as she began to raise her hands, Harry rolled his eyes and stood, surprising everyone with the exception of Sirius.

The noise in the chamber petered out as the crowd settled suddenly, eager to hear the words of the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Lord Wenlock, you've insulted the House of Black and you've insulted the House of Potter." Harry said bluntly.

Augusta was sure she wasn't the only one looking stunned at Harry's impulsive move. What was the boy thinking calling out the older wizard? And yet…her eyes flew to Sirius who seemed wholly unsurprised.

"What?" Wenlock almost stuttered over the word, eyes wide with the shock of actually being called out.

"Not only is my father Lord Black, but he was adopted into and is protected by the House of Potter. My steward is protected by the Houses of Black and Potter. The army you talk about are a group of wizards and witches who are seeking protection and who have it provided by the Houses of Black and Potter." Harry responded, his eyes shining anger. "You've just insulted both Houses three times over and as the Lord of the House of Potter I take insult."

"My dear boy, perhaps Sirius hasn't had the chance to explain what that means…" Albus was clearly horrified by the turn of events.

"Actually, he's explained the matter of House honour to me very clearly, Chief Warlock," Harry replied, not taking his eyes off Wenlock who squirmed under the hard emerald gaze, "and calling my father a Dark Lord is a grievous insult especially since my last father died at the hands of a real one."

Albus swung round to face Sirius. "You cannot…"

"Harry seems to have this hand." Sirius interrupted Albus firmly. He regarded Harry fondly and sat down.

"But!" spluttered Albus.

Augusta held her breath. They'd planned it, she realised wildly, taking in Sirius's calm demeanour. They'd planned it knowing that Wenlock facing off against a teenage boy would make him appear the villain.

Oh, it was so clever! But so dangerous…if Wenlock suspected and called their bluff…

Wenlock straightened and glared at Harry. "You cannot expect me to duel you! A boy!"

Every swivelled back to Harry as though watching some kind of insane tennis match.

"Why not?" asked Harry, with all the stubbornness of youth. "I duel with Director Bones all the
Amelia cleared her throat. Augusta could tell that the Head of the DMLE was a tad bewildered, apparently as much in the dark as the rest of them. "I can validate that he does, Lord Wenlock."

Richard Bones stirred in his seat. "Actually hasn't he beaten you several times, Director?" His teasing tone eased some of the tension in the room.

Amelia shot him a sardonic look but nodded. "I believe Harry leads our duels five wins to my three."

Wenlock paled visibly.

Harry continued to look at him.

"Perhaps an apology, Lord Wenlock?" offered Albus hurriedly, trying desperately to intervene.

"I'm afraid I won't accept it," Harry said before Wenlock could reply, "it's a duel or a forfeit."

Oh Merlin! A forfeit! Augusta had forgotten about that archaic part of House honour and from the surprised faces around her she could tell most of the other Ancient and Noble Houses had done the same. A forfeit could be offered in restitution to an insult but it was a rarity.

Wenlock turned furiously to Sirius. "Are you just going to sit there?! You're his Regent and his father! You should stop this!"

Sirius raised an eyebrow, calm and collected. "Or you could accept that you insulted our Houses' honour and take the forfeit." He waved a hand vaguely at Harry. "Unless you want a duel with my son?"

It was clear that Wenlock had no idea how to handle the turn of events. For some reason he hadn't planned for his accusation to be taken so seriously; hadn't planned for Harry to be the one to challenge him. Oh, those clever boys. Augusta kept the smile off her face with difficulty.

"I will concede that my words were hasty." Wenlock muttered. "But surely you can see that it looks bad!"

Everybody turned to hear Harry's response, captivated.

"What exactly looks bad?" Harry asked pointedly.

"The army of werewolves!" Wenlock said.

"As Sirius has already said there is no army." Harry sounded completely exasperated. "We're providing a sanctuary house for any wizard or witch with lycanthropy, especially those wanting to escape the Greyback pack. We give them work and Wolfsbane and somewhere they're safe during the full moon. It's not an army. And," he gestured out towards Amelia and Cornelius, "both the Minister and the Head of the DMLE signed off after Greyback's attacks last year."

Augusta crowed inwardly at the completely flustered expression on Wenlock's face and at the way Harry had sold the sanctuary as a good thing.

"Your steward is Alpha and is building a pack from the situation, you cannot deny that!" Wenlock said desperation creeping into his tone.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Remus already has a pack; he has us." His gaze turned fond as he glanced over at Remus. "But he's also the one we put in charge of organising everything to do with the
sanctuary, and for wizards and witches with lycanthropy, part of their condition is recognising pack or rather social hierarchy to an extent. So yes, they view him as their Alpha and Remus has had to accept the position because he is the one with the most authority within the group."

"So you admit werewolves align themselves to pack mentality? That they have their own government and structure?" Wenlock tried to deflect Harry back to the original argument.

"They have no choice at the moment." Harry returned. "If the rest of society casts them out, where would they go? The packs provide a place of safety and belonging – well, most of them. Greyback uses his for his own violent purposes and puts them all in danger. That's why we're offering sanctuary. If society accepted those with lycanthropy, Greyback would never have anyone wanting to follow him apart from those who already have violent tendencies." He paused, allowing the argument to be considered by everyone in the chamber. "But that's beside the point: I'm still insulted and awaiting your reply."

Wenlock scowled furiously. "You should drop this. You're clearly not old enough to determine that for yourself."

"It's a question of honour, Lord Wenlock." Harry repeated calmly.

"The boy's right." Tiberius Ogden got to his feet. "You insulted the House of Black and the House of Potter."

Augusta rose swiftly. "Hear, hear."

Richard stood. "I don't think there is anyone in the Potter alliance who feels you didn't insult them, Lord Wenlock."

Augusta was surprised when Nott was the next to get up.

"As much as I am pained to take attention away from the actual debate on werewolves," Nott said smoothly, "if you had accused me as you did Lord Black then I would be insulted and demand restitution. Lord Potter has the right of it; either accept a duel or a forfeit so we can move on."

"I am not duelling a fourteen year old boy!" Wenlock said defensively.

Nott nodded his head thoughtfully. "Then a forfeit it is." He gestured toward Harry. "Name your price, Lord Potter."

Augusta resumed her seat along with the others as Harry's expression turned contemplative. She was surprised that he didn't immediately state a forfeit since she was certain that the move had been planned, but maybe something had changed since the plan was formed…something had been said in the debate or not said…she shook her head and refocused on Harry.

There was a 'blink and miss it' exchange between Harry and Sirius – a question that had been answered, Augusta mused, or a confirmation of support. Either way Harry's demeanour altered almost imperceptibly.

"One question answered truthfully as sworn on your family magic." Harry announced.

Even Augusta could see that Wenlock was sweating profusely. What Harry asked for on the face of it was wonderfully simple – how could Wenlock refuse without looking like an arse?

Albus beamed happily. "That sounds like a splendid idea, my boy! Lord Wenlock?"
All eyes were on Wenlock. The faint sheen of his sweat shone from his brow and ruined the picture of Lordly perfection he had been so careful to cultivate.

"What is the question?" asked Wenlock stiffly.

"Your sworn oath, Lord Wenlock." Harry insisted.

Wenlock cast a frantic look about the chamber but he received no support from any corner including his own allies. He swallowed hard enough that Augusta saw the movement of his Adam's apple. He was trapped and he knew it.

"Very well." Wenlock said between gritted teeth.

"You have permission to draw your wand for the oath." Albus continued cheerily.

Wenlock extracted his wand and held it up. "I swear on my family magic that I will answer Lord Potter's question truthfully."

The vulture swooped down and landed close to Wenlock, regarding him seriously.

Harry gave a brisk nod. "Please can you tell me everything you know about how Remus Lupin's actions on the night Sirius Black escaped Hogwarts were leaked to the press."

Wenlock went bright red, then white, then red. His family avatar stared at him before making a baleful caw. A gold geas emerged from the vulture and settled over Wenlock.

It was a version of the truth spell invoked by family magic, Augusta realised; a demand that Wenlock answer. He would not be able to resist it. Wenlock was trying though – that was evident from the way he was tightening his lips and clenching his fists.

Silence dominated the chamber as everyone waited for Wenlock to answer.

"I put Amos Diggory under an imperius spell and commanded him to bring me Lupin's file which I then arranged for someone to leave on the desk of a journalist." Wenlock finally blurted out.

As the chamber erupted again on a wave of noise. Wenlock moved, snapping his wand up and across the chamber towards Harry.

A cry of warning was on Augusta's lips but she knew it would be too late and yet…

Sirius was already on his feet, casting…

Harry stood firm…wand out and casting a shield...

The Black snake moved…flowing into the Potter Griffin whose wings were spread wide protectively in front of Harry so swiftly that to Augusta it looked like one moment it wasn't covering Harry and in the next moment it was…

And Wenlock's purple curse travelled across the chamber and…

The Potter Griffin roared, trebled in size and charged…swallowing the curse…

The red flash of a stunning spell shot across from Sirius's wand and knocked Wenlock into his chair unconscious…

And the vulture gave another sad cry and abandoned Wenlock, flying to Harry and bowing down at
his feet before disappearing .

Silence.

Sirius was out of his seat, running to Harry as the griffin returned to guard him. Sirius wrapped Harry in a tight hug, before shielding him, pushing Harry slightly behind him.

"Are you alright?" Sirius demanded.

Harry nodded but didn't protest Sirius's presence and protection.

"Aurors!" Amelia yelled. "Take Lord Wenlock into custody now!"

The Aurors hurriedly ran to do the Director's bidding.

Augusta watched as Amelia walked up to where Amos sat, and Leonard Abbott hurried to her side.

"Amos." She said gently.

Amos blinked at them, bewildered. "He said...he said...but wouldn't I know?"

Leonard took Amos's elbow and drew him up off the bench. "Come on, Amos. We should take you to see a healer."

A respectful silence filled the chamber as the Department Head was led away by his friend.

Sirius kept one his arm wrapped around Harry, the other at his side held his wand. "Chief Warlock, in the circumstances, I suggest a short recess?"

"Yes, yes, quite right, my boy." Albus raised his voice. "The Wizengamot will take a short break. Session will resume in one hour. Doors are open!"

Augusta breathed out.

It was over.
"Thank you, Remus." Narcissa carefully tucked her personal quill into her handbag and gave thanks that the monthly meeting to review the Malfoy expenditure was over.

It still galled her to have to meet with the werewolf but she was pleased with Lupin's business-like but respectful approach. He never made her feel that she was being interrogated and the questions he did ask were all pertinent. She was also pleased that he provided her with statements and briefs regarding the Malfoy estate, and that he asked for her opinions on investments and business deals. She knew more than she had before when Lucius had handled the finances. Indeed, it could be argued that the werewolf was doing better than Lucius — their investment income had already doubled since putting the werewolf in charge and with their outgoings restricted to a modest level, their savings were accumulating for the first time in years.

"One final item." Lupin pulled a sheet of parchment and a small key from his document pouch. "Sirius has made arrangements for a vault to fund the expenses for the baby such as a nursery, clothes, toys, and so on."

Narcissa barely kept her face expressionless. She had wondered how she was going to manage the baby related shopping on the budget they had agreed for usual expenditure but had decided to raise it at the next meeting. She took the parchment warily. "Did the funds come from the main vault? I don't remember seeing the deduction on the statement."

"Sirius has funded this from the Black vaults." Lupin smiled wolfishly, his pleasure at disconcerting her all too evident. "He tells me it's a Black tradition for the primary House to take care of these things."

It was but she hadn't expected Sirius to comply with the tradition. In hindsight she wasn't sure why — Sirius had proven to support a number of Black and pureblood traditions since he'd taken up the Lordship. He was also teaching them to Harry. It made her wonder whether Sirius really had hated everything to do with the Blacks or whether he had simply hated the madness and blood superiority extremism of his mother and father. If only he hadn't fallen in with James Potter and gone to Gryffindor…

"I will convey my thanks to my cousin personally." Narcissa conveyed to Lupin coolly. She was happy with the vault; it was more than enough for her to substantially redecorate a suite of rooms and to buy enough new items for the baby with galleons left over. She folded the parchment, tucked the key away into her purse and made to leave.

Lupin stood and helped her into her cloak. "I'll see you out."

"There's no need." Narcissa said firmly. While the pretence of Lupin providing steward services to the House of Malfoy was enough to stem gossip, she had no wish to be seen with the werewolf outside of formal family occasions. Additionally, while fervour had calmed down over Lupin's lycanthropy with the Wizengamot session the previous day and the revelations of Wenlock's criminality, she wasn't certain she would be safe in his presence should someone take exception to him.

As though he'd read her thoughts, Lupin winced. "Yes, probably for the best in the circumstances. Sirius would not want me to place you in any danger."

Narcissa waved him back into his seat with a muttered confirmation that she'd see him later at the
family dinner at Hogwarts. She exited the Gringotts conference room, gave a nod of farewell to her
niece who apparently was on guard duty still, (wondering vaguely why Dora had chosen to remain
outside the room), and headed for the main hall.

She entered to hear the shrill tone of a woman protesting by the farthest counter. She ignored it.
Whatever drama was happening Narcissa would not lower herself to be interested. She started to
draw on her gloves and headed for the exit with a grimace.

The January weather was rainy, cold and miserable. She’d order one of Kreacher’s hot chocolates
when she got back to the Manor, she mused, but despite the weather she needed to shop for a while.
Her figure was changing and it was time to invest in some maternity wear; something fashionable but
something that would also enable her to be discreet about her condition.

"Wait!"

Narcissa frowned at the call and turned back slightly, uncertain it was meant for her. The fast
approaching Lady Alexandria Wenlock, clearly heading toward her, had her freezing in place and
fingering her wand although she knew she couldn't use it within Gringotts. She caught the hastening
figures of a matronly woman and a young man hurrying behind Alexandria and quickly identified
them as Christopher Wenlock, the Heir and oldest son, and Katherine de Ware, Alexandria’s sister.
Narcissa contemplated leaving but had no wish to see herself pursued into the alley. She straightened
and tilted her chin upwards a touch.

"Alexandria." Narcissa coolly greeted the other woman as she came to an abrupt halt in front of her.

"Don't Alexandria me as though nothing was wrong! What is the meaning of this?!" Alexandria
waved a parchment in front of Narcissa's face, obscuring her view of the otherwise attractive and
fashionable brunette whose Slavic heritage told in her high cheekbones and graceful lines.

Christopher caught hold of the parchment and yanked it out of his mother's hands. "My apologies,
Madame Malfoy. My mother and I have had some distressing news and she is overwrought."

Alexandria huffed and shook off the comforting hand her sister tried to restrain her with. "I am not
overwrought! This is all the fault of that blood traitor and his horrid boy! I demand justice! I
demand…"

"Madame," the goblin who interrupted her was well-armoured and carried a spear, "you are
disturbing the peace of Gringotts. If you have no further business I suggest you take this outside!"

Alexandria bristled. "No further business!" Her voice rose shrilly, "No further business! I'll have
you…"

"Mother!" Christopher snapped. "Remember where we are!"

"And who you insult." Narcissa said frostily. She may have held similar views about her cousin and
Harry prior to the resurgence of the House of Black but she was content with their leadership and
their power. They had certainly trounced Wenlock most comprehensively.

"My apologies, Madame Malfoy." Christopher said, his dark eyes sincere although his cheeks were
flushed with embarrassment. "My mother did not mean her remarks."

"Do not…"

"Quiet, Mother." Christopher demanded sharply, and the order of an Heir rang out in his tone as he
turned to glare her into submission. She subsided with a glower. Christopher turned back to Narcissa.
"Once again, I offer my apologies, Madame Malfoy, and I realise my House owes you no favours but perhaps you could assist us in locating Lord Black? It seems yesterday's events concerning my father had consequences that we could not foresee." He handed her the parchment.

Narcissa stared at him for a long moment, determining whether to even look at the missive. But she could see nothing sly in his expression and so dropped her gaze to read the parchment with well-hidden curiosity.

"Gringotts has registered the magical surrender of the House of Wenlock to the Houses of Potter and Black. All vaults and property have been seized. Further inquiries should be directed to the Steward for the Houses of Potter and Black."

Merlin.

She'd heard of magical surrender in the traditional folk lore that her father, mother and tutors had crammed into the heads of the Black sisters but she had never witnessed it. Until now, Narcissa reminded herself. An image of the silver vulture of Wenlock bowing to Harry the day before flitted through her mind. It was monumental and had the potential to give them a political and magical advantage like no other.

She glanced back up at the young man in front of her. "Come with me." She didn't wait for him nor did she pay attention to the hissed protest of Alexandria which was once again overruled by her son. She strode back into the hall, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of nosy on-lookers and the goblins' grumpy disgust at the whole affair. She made her way back to the antechamber Remus occupied.

Dora straightened immediately as they approached and Narcissa could see her training in the easy fighting stance. "What's this about?"

"The Wenlocks need to see the Potter and Black Steward." Narcissa said crisply.

"He's with Madame Tonks." Dora replied a little uncomfortably.

Narcissa arched an eyebrow at the news that her sister was with Lupin. It made her wonder whether her sister and her husband had been subjected to the same financial restrictions as the Malfoys but that seemed unlikely since they had committed no crimes against the House of Black in Sirius's eyes. Perhaps Andromeda was simply taking advantage of the House steward to get some business tips. But why was Dora still outside the room? Some antiquated notion of professionalism no doubt, she surmised.

"Give him this." Narcissa pushed the parchment into Dora's hand. She was almost impressed by the scathing glare her niece aimed at her before she bent her head and read the parchment. The immediate response of knocking swiftly on the door and entering on Lupin's calm command was proof of the missive's explosive content.

The door closed and Narcissa found herself standing in the corridor with the Wenlocks. She briefly considered leaving but a part of her was too curious at the outcome; too tempted into staying to influence events.

"This is unacceptable!" Alexandria hissed at her son.

"Alexandria, please do stop making a scene." Her sister reprimanded her softly. "We are fortunate Narcissa was willing to parley on our behalf especially after the irreprehensible actions of your husband." Her tone gave away that she knew they now owed the Malfoys and the House of Black for such and Narcissa felt a curl of satisfaction. The de Wares were European nobility and had
connections throughout a number of countries; it could only be to the benefit of the House of Black.

The door reopened and Dora ushered them inside. Narcissa's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. The room was no longer the small cosy office that she had occupied during her review but a larger space. The small table she and Lupin had shared was extended into a full conference table and Lupin directed the Wenlocks to the far side. Narcissa made her way swiftly to her sister's side, greeting her smoothly and inwardly approving of the neat bronze robes Andromeda was wearing.

Lupin cleared his throat as Dora made to step outside. "You are welcome to remain inside, Auror Tonks?"

"It's best I guard the entry to the room, Steward Lupin." Dora said firmly and stepped out once again.

The formality had Andromeda and Narcissa exchanging sisterly looks of concern. The werewolf and her niece usually had a warm flirtatious relationship. Had they argued?

Lupin motioned at Narcissa. "May I prevail upon you to perform the introductions?"

She inclined her head and smartly announced everyone.

Lupin gestured for them all to sit. "I have requested Auror Tonks sends for Lord Black." He tapped the parchment in front of him. "I believe only he has the authority to make any kind of decision regarding this." He looked chagrined. "I'm afraid the official Potter and Black copy must be in my correspondence folder. Kipbold handed me a stack of parchment this morning but I've been in meetings all morning."

"While we wait for Lord Black, perhaps some refreshments?" Andromeda stepped in smoothly.

A moment later, a house elf arrived with a silver tea tray filled with a matching pot, sugar bowl and milk jug. A stack of delicate china cups stamped with the Potter crest were balanced precariously alongside them.

Narcissa gave thanks that her niece hadn't been required to carry it in. The girl was clumsy on a good day. She sat politely as Andromeda played Mother and poured. The tea occupied Narcissa's hands and gave her a focus other than Alexandria's pinched white face.

She felt a flicker of sympathy for the woman. Sirius and Harry had decimated Wenlock's political career and Wenlock's own criminality had ensured the rest of his downfall. Of course, if he'd done it correctly he would never have been caught. Lucius had at least mostly covered his tracks until pinned down by the House of Black primacy and a Lord Black he'd never anticipated.

But then no-one ever anticipated Sirius, Narcissa thought with a twinge of amusement.

Talk of the Devil…

Sirius swept into the room with an air of implacable authority that Arcturus would have been proud of; dressed head to toe in black, his open robes revealed the leather trouser, black shirt combination that had the witches of the Wizengamot drooling and the wizards remembering they were in the presence of a battle mage.

Lupin immediately handed over the parchment while making a set of introductions that Sirius barely attended to since he was reading.

"Well, this is unexpected." Sirius said as he took his seat at the top of table. "Have any of us heard of this before?"
Narcissa exchanged a quick glance with her sister and gave way at Andromeda's signal that she would answer.

"Father told us of an old tradition which had similar themes of Houses surrendering their magic to the will of another but it was usually a Head of House's explicit consensual and considered actions that led to such a state." Andromeda said crisply, a slight lecturing air to her demeanour which had Narcissa nostalgic for her childhood and feeling a pang of grief that Bella wasn't there to roll her eyes at in shared amusement and indulgence of their sister.

"It could be argued that Lord Wenlock did undertake such an action yesterday." Narcissa cut in before Sirius replied.

Sirius motioned for her to continue, his grey eyes flinty and narrowed.

"Lord Wenlock swore upon his family magic to answer Lord Potter's question truthfully." Narcissa reminded Sirius quickly. "He effectively placed the House of Wenlock under the authority of the House of Potter when he did so – a pseudo-surrender so to speak."

"So when Wenlock attempted to lie and the magic forced him to speak truthfully, the family magic deemed he'd actually surrendered?" Sirius nodded briefly. "It's an explanation." He ignored the bristling indignation of the Wenlocks on his right, and glanced toward Lupin, silently asking for his opinion.

"It's a good theory. It would explain why the vulture bowed to Harry." Lupin commented, his finger tracing the rim of his cup. "I'd forgotten about that."

Narcissa sipped her own tea. It was a working theory.

Christopher squirmed in his chair and raised a hand to catch their attention. "I just want to say, Lord Black, that the rest of the family had no idea of my father's criminal actions. We knew Father wasn't happy about the move to review the laws on Creatures but we never considered he would go further than the usual political manoeuvrings."

Sirius's grey gaze landed on the Heir of Wenlock speculatively. "How old are you, Mister Wenlock?"

"Seventeen." Christopher replied, red darkening his cheeks even as his chin lifted a little in stubborn challenge.

Lupin frowned. "Aren't you part of the Durmstrang delegation for the tournament?"

"Yes," Christopher nodded, "myself, my brother and sister are all at Durmstrang. In fact that's one of the reasons why we were so surprised about Father. He has always been somewhat dismissive of his obligations and duties here in Britain."

"We have determined as a family to return to our home abroad." Alexandria broke in sharply. "We came to organise our finances with the goblins and..." she motioned at the parchment.

Lupin turned again to Christopher. "Have you tried to invoke your family magic since yesterday?"

It looked for a long moment that Christopher would ignore Lupin, or worse insult him, but finally he settled for violently shaking his head.

"Right." Sirius sighed. He gestured at the Heir ring. "You should try."
Christopher took a deep breath and called on his family magic.

Nothing happened.

"You try, Sirius." Lupin suggested.

Sirius pushed back from the table and directed his ring to the floor beside him. "Familius magicus."

Three totems shimmered into being; the snake of the House of Black, the griffin of the House of Potter, and the vulture of the House of Wenlock.

"Well, that's new." Sirius said, staring at the silver vulture.

"So you have stolen the family magic of my children; denied them their legacy." Alexandria said bitterly.

Sirius drew himself up and she shrank back, dropping her gaze as a dull flush coloured her cheeks. Narcissa hid her smile, pleased at Sirius's silent chastisement of the woman.

"Forgive my mother, please." Christopher jumped in hurriedly. "It is a stressful time."

"Very well; I won't take insult this time as I realise you're all under a lot of pressure after Lord Wenlock's behaviour came to light yesterday and this entire experience cannot be easy for you." Sirius said sternly. "But let's be straight here: there is nobody to blame for this state of affairs but him. Clearly your family magic no longer wants to align itself with your line."

"What does that actually mean?" asked Christopher.

Sirius glanced over at Lupin. "Remus?"

"I'm only speculating as there is more unknown about family magic than known in truth but..." Lupin lifted the parchment, "Lord Wenlock had taken a vow to protect all in the Wizengamot but forced under a family magic truth spell he revealed he'd harmed someone present." He explained. "That coupled with the belief we have that family magic originated in an oath to protect the wizarding world, and I believe the magic determined he was an oath-breaker."

Narcissa could not disagree with Lupin's theory; it had merit and not just because it was in line with her own thinking.

"Judgement." Sirius said briskly. "If the family magic decided in that moment to Judge..." he shrugged, "the most common punishment is to strip magic from those found guilty of oath-breaking."

"We should probably check in with Amelia and see whether Lord Wenlock has any magic today." Lupin said quietly.

The Wenlocks sat looking perfectly horrified.

"I can believe that you're right but Judgement is usually limited is it not to the guilty? Why did the family magic surrender to the House of Potter? Why not simply skip to the next generation?" asked Andromeda, waving at Christopher.

"I think my sister and nephew would like to know the answers to those questions too." Katherine spoke up again. She had placed a comforting and restraining hand on her sister's shoulder as Lupin had expounded on his theory.

"That I don't know." Lupin admitted. "It's possibly a combination of Judgement and Lord Wenlock
being under oath to Harry at the time he was Judged."

Narcissa understood immediately. "When Lord Wenlock broke faith the family magic determined that the surrender was owed to Harry."

Lupin frowned and nodded. "But it's all conjecture. Either way this is not an outcome any of us could have foreseen."

"The question is what now?" asked Katherine. She waved at the parchment Lupin still held. "That suggests that effectively the House of Wenlock has been placed in service to the House of Potter."

"I'm afraid that's the upshot." Lupin said succinctly. He managed to sound apologetic.

Alexandria maintained her composure but only just; she went white as a sheet. Christopher remained composed though and contemplative.

"I'll need to check but I would assume that the Wizengamot has received a similar notification from magic." Lupin continued. "I suspect the proxy for the House of Wenlock will fall to the House of Potter."

Narcissa sipped her tea, another curl of satisfaction in her belly at just how thoroughly the House of Wenlock had been defeated by Harry.

"This cannot be considered just!" Alexandria exclaimed, slapping the table. "It strips the entire family of everything!"

"I don't disagree with you," Sirius answered sharply, "the sins of one man should not be paid for by his entire family."

Narcissa stopped herself from the eye-roll. Sirius still could be such a Gryffindor.

"However, clearly magic does not agree with either of us." Sirius finished, surprising Narcissa and everyone else in the room. "Even if I had a mind to reverse this, I wouldn't know how to convince magic to do it."

Christopher cleared his throat. "I am not averse to swearing an oath of service in truth to the House of Potter."

Narcissa only just managed to conceal her surprise. Andromeda raised an eyebrow. Sirius looked faintly amused at the turn of the events while Lupin looked suitably shocked.

"Christopher!" Alexandria looked horrified.

"No, Mother." Christopher raised a hand when she would have continued to berate him. "My politics are not Father's. I am not interested in becoming the next political powerhouse in British society." He grimaced. "Why would I? You and Father have never spent time here beyond what is necessary and Alexander, Anne and I are schooled elsewhere."

Alexandria frowned heavily. "But your legacy?" She demanded tightly. "And what of your sister and brother? Are they to be cast out of school and into service too?"

"Alex!" Katherine regarded her nephew carefully. "I believe Christopher is trying to safeguard all of you if you will let him speak."

Christopher nodded in gratitude to his aunt and turned back to Sirius. "Lord Black, as I have stated, I
have no political ambition. I had already spoken to my siblings some months ago when Father became enthralled with gaining more power within the Wizengamot. We are agreed; we have no interest in making England our home. We are planning to make our lives in Switzerland where we have spent the majority of our childhood." He paused. "I had determined that upon Father's death I would decline the seat in the Wizengamot and send it to the floor."

"Interesting," commented Lupin, "it's possible that magic knew of your intent and that coupled with your father's oath-breaking decided the fate of your family magic."

Narcissa nodded slowly. She thought Lupin was correct. Why would family magic designed to protect the wizarding population stay loyal to a family who clearly had no intent of following the original oath?

"As you have mentioned I am also part of the Durmstrang contingent at Hogwarts, and I have spent a lot of time with Theodore Nott recently in preparation of our Champions' next task." Christopher continued. "He and I share a number of political views. He speaks highly of the Houses of Potter and Black. I have observed for myself the power of the Head of the House of Potter in the execution of the first task. I will happily swear service on two conditions; one, that my mother is provided with a home and a living allowance which will provide her with the same lifestyle as she is accustomed to living with my father."

Alexandria stared at her son.

"And two?" prompted Lupin.

Christopher raised his chin. "Our education is protected and my sister is provided with a dowry for her future marriage."

Sirius regarded him thoughtfully for a long moment.

Narcissa found herself holding her breath wondering which way Sirius would decide. He could be so unpredictable…

Sirius leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table top and ignoring the cooling cup of tea beside him. "You will swear a lifetime of service to the House of Potter." He said sternly. "Your brother will be in service for a year following his education. Your sister will be considered to be under the protection of the House of Potter until such time as she marries. The House will provide an adequate dowry at that time. You'll all return to Durmstrang to finish your education. Your conditions regarding your mother will be met."

Christopher breathed out audibly. "Thank you, Lord Black."

Narcissa allowed an approving smile to curve her lips. Sirius had guaranteed the young man's loyalty and he would make a good, intelligent addition to the House of Potter.

"We'll take the oath before the end of the day." Sirius said crisply. "But for now, Remus will see about sorting out the practicalities of your money and housing. We'll leave you to it."

A moment later, there was a flurry of hurried goodbyes and Narcissa found herself once again outside the room, pulling on her gloves as she readied herself for the outside world.

Sirius hovered beside her, helping Andromeda into her cloak. "Well, that was fun."

"Sirius." Andromeda said chidingly, pulling on a brightly coloured scarf.
"Why did the bloody vulture have to surrender?" Sirius complained loudly, his voice verging perilously on a whine.

Narcissa exchanged a sisterly look of exasperation at Sirius's antics with Andromeda, which drew a snort of amusement from Dora. Narcissa took a moment to savour that they were reconciled and could have such a moment.

"At least Wenlock's service to the House of Potter will give you a valid excuse for the vulture answering to your call." Narcissa pointed out calmly. "Politically, this is well done. Wenlock serves the House of Potter and you hold the proxy. Its alliances are now all in disarray. The Minor Houses associated and allied with it will be scrambling."

"She's right." Andromeda said briskly when Sirius gave nothing but a disgruntled harrumph. She patted Sirius's arm. "Try not to sulk too much, Sirius." She kissed his cheek before turning to Narcissa.

Andromeda hugged her briefly, did the same to her daughter much to Dora's horror, and hurried out with a murmur about already being late for her next appointment.

"I'll escort you out, Cousin." Sirius offered, winking at Dora in goodbye.

Narcissa accepted his arm.

"How are you, Cissy?" Sirius asked.

"I'm well. Thank you, Cousin." She said. "I was going to thank you for the baby vault when I saw you this evening for the family meal."

"Just don't paint the nursery silver and green." Sirius sniffed with fake imperiousness, taking her back to the Summers at the Black estate and their childhood – when Sirius had been her favourite cousin, funny and witty and protective.

"How is the baby?" Sirius asked tentatively as they made it into the main hall and started to thread a path through the waiting customers to the outside.

Narcissa smiled at him softly, allowing her awe and love to spill over into her expression, knowing Sirius would never use it against her. "Regina is doing well."

Sirius's eyes softened. "Regina, huh? You settled on the name."

"I wanted to honour Regulus." Narcissa confirmed as they stepped out into the sunshine. "This seemed right."

"What does Lucius think?" Sirius asked, as he cast a warming charm at her, along with a number of privacy spells, and drew her to a halt on the bottom step.

It wasn't an idle question despite the casual nature of Sirius's demeanour.

"He is happy to abide my wish in this as he is in all things to do with this pregnancy." Narcissa replied, knowing that her cousin would understand the subtleties of what she wasn't saying as well as what she was. Lucius's only interest in the child she carried was in its ability to keep her biddable within their marriage. She was under no illusion about that. "He'll be pleased about today's news. The House of Malfoy is the obvious choice to act as an intermediary between the Wenlocks' allies and the House of Black."
He snorted but with a resigned tilt of his head. "It seems I might have a bit more politicking to do today than I anticipated. Cornelius will be thrilled."

Narcissa hummed an agreement. The Minister thrived on political machinations and he'd be over the moon with the turn of events. "What is the position on Diggory?"

"They found the evidence they needed of the imperius curse. They also think he's been under the influence of suggestion potions for a while." Sirius straightened, a sober expression on his face. "The Healers said possibly he'd been under them since before Hallowe'en. The Aurors found evidence his alcohol had been spiked."

"They took advantage of his weakness." Narcissa commented, her nose wrinkling with disgust for Diggory's lack of character and feeble mind.

"Appears so." Sirius concurred mildly. "His wife confessed to Amelia that Amos has had an ongoing problem with drink. He sobered up when Cedric was born." He shrugged. "It came back after he didn't get the seat and then with the pressures of the Committee review and Cedric competing against Harry..." "Do they believe Wenlock was responsible for the potions?" asked Narcissa.

Sirius shook his head. "They've questioned Wenlock with veritaserum. He used an Unforgiveable but he didn't do the potioning." He scowled. "They think Crouch did that and Wenlock just took advantage once Crouch couldn't get back to the Ministry."

"I assume Diggory is at Saint Mungo's receiving treatment?" Narcissa enquired.

Sirius nodded. "They're trying to assess if he's been given a sleeper spell."

An old trick of hiding a compulsion deep in the mind that would be triggered upon a key word. It was an ingenious spell, one that was tricky to do but extremely effective.

"Cornelius has placed him on sick leave and put Dirk in charge of the Department for now." Sirius continued.

Narcissa inclined her head. She didn't approve of the majority of the new Creature laws but she had to admit the man who'd spearheaded the review was probably best placed to lead the Department until Diggory returned – if Diggory returned.

"The publicity in this morning's press was positive to us." Narcissa commented, changing the subject a touch. The publicity had not been kind to the Diggorys or the Wenlocks. The newspapers had gushed over Harry's performance at the Wizengamot and there had been more than one respectful note of admiration for Sirius.

Sirius sighed. "I'm just pleased the worst of it is over."

The furore surrounding Lupin and the werewolf sanctuary was yesterday's news.

"How long will Nymphadora continue to provide him with protection?" Narcissa asked, adjusting the hold on her purse.

"For as long as it takes." Sirius said with a glare which asked her why she was probing that particular angle.

Narcissa inclined her head. "Dora seemed very cool towards him today."
"You noticed that?" Sirius gave a huff. "Of course you noticed that. They're not exactly subtle, are they?" He made a dismissive gesture. "She asked and he turned her down again, I think, but they're both being remarkably close-mouthed about the details."

Dora's pursuit of the werewolf was something Narcissa couldn't understand. She could not see why her niece was so enthralled with him. Lupin wasn't unattractive but his lycanthropy was a severe disadvantage and her niece could do better. At least it seemed Lupin knew that.

"Well, I should take my leave and head back to Harry." Sirius sighed. "He's probably wearing the floor out wondering what's going on."

"Is Harry eager to resume his lessons?" Narcissa asked politely. Draco had spent much of the holidays consolidating his alliances with the younger Nott and Zabini. She was pleased.

"Eager to get back to some kind of normality after everything that's happened." Sirius said.

Narcissa nodded slowly. "I am pleased you are not dead, Cousin. You need to take better care. Our Heir needs you." It was a mild chastisement for Sirius putting himself at risk; for putting his son through the trial of thinking he was dead.

Sirius's grey eyes flashed with something akin to amusement but he gave her a brisk nod and kissed her hand. "See you later, Cissy."

Narcissa watched him go with well-hidden fondness. She smoothed a hand over her abdomen and the swell of her body. Sirius's return had granted her a gift she had never thought she would have and she was determined that she would do all she could to help him rebuild the House of Black.

She shivered, the warming charm dissipating with Sirius's departure and abruptly decided against shopping. She made her way to the Leaky Cauldron to floo home.

Kreacher popped in beside her as soon as she exited the floo. "Mistress Cissy's husband returns."

"Thank you, Kreacher." Narcissa watched as Kreacher disappeared taking her outerwear with him. She smoothed a hand over her hair made her way to Lucius's study.

Lucius frowned slightly at the sight of her, even as he discarded his correspondence and rose to greet her. "I thought you intended to spend the day shopping?"

"An unexpected Black family meeting was held at Gringotts because of the Wenlocks." Narcissa commented dryly. She brought him up to speed with efficient brevity. She saw his eyes light up at the revelation of the Wenlock proxy.

"My, my." Lucius said smoothly as he resumed his place behind his desk. "This does open up some possibilities, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps we should invite Benjamin and Norman for breakfast tomorrow?" Narcissa suggested.

"An excellent idea. I'll invite Stewart too." Lucius caught on immediately to her plan to brief and discuss the turn of affairs with their closest allies. He turned back to his correspondence. "See to the arrangements; I'll owl them now."

The order rankled but Narcissa kept her expression calm as she headed back toward her own study where she'd call for the house elves. She'd allow Lucius his small victories. She had what she wanted – her fingers brushed against her child.
Her future was secure.

o-O-o

Harry sat down next to Daphne as Moody directed and shot her a quick grin. She rolled her eyes at him in response but he knew that she had no real objection to him being placed with her as a partner. Harry's good humour died a little as he caught sight of his former girlfriend across the aisle shooting Draco an admonishing look as he sniffed imperiously and sat beside her.

The start of the new term and Hermione still hadn't agreed to resume their dating. Harry had tried flowers which she'd thanked him for but nothing more, and another sincere written apology which she'd accepted gracefully but hadn't made any further comment upon. She was perfectly friendly; happy to discuss their holiday homework and to help him prepare for the second task but...no dates; no holding hands; no kissing.

Harry poked morosely at his parchment with his quill. He was out of ideas on how to win her back – well, there was the one idea but both Ron and Neville had pointed out he'd likely be grounded for a month by his Aunt Minnie if he did it...

"Stop brooding, Potter, and focus on the assignment." Daphne hissed, her wand weaving a modified privacy ward around them to prevent others from copying their work.

"Sorry." Harry muttered, a tinge of heat on his cheeks. He turned his attention to the blackboard again.

With the New Year, Moody had moved on from recognising threats and situational awareness to actual defence. On the board were a list of ten threats and their assignments were to come up with one solid defence against each. It amused Harry to see that in usual Moody style, there were only two acknowledged Dark creatures on it. The rest were thought provoking including 'a friend' which made Harry think of Pettigrew, and 'a man/woman obsessed with you.' Harry wondered if his continuing pursuit of Hermione would be counted by her as a threat.

"Very well," Daphne said with an exasperated sigh, "out with it."

Harry turned to look at her confused.

"You're clearly not going to focus on our assignment until you've gotten the current state of affairs with Granger off your chest; so out with it." Daphne said impatiently, her eyes flashing with annoyance.

Harry didn't try to hide his wince. He sighed heavily and rubbed his cheek. "I just...I don't know how to convince her that I'm sorry about what happened."

Daphne folded her arms over her chest and tapped her fingers restlessly. "What has she said?"

"Said?"

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Yes, Potter; what has she said about forgiving you?"

"Um, not much?" Which was true. Harry quailed a little under the disbelieving stare of Daphne and pulled his thoughts together, remembering the first time he and Hermione had met after Sirius's return and his own. "She told me she understood that I thought I was protecting her but that she couldn't be with me again until I could demonstrate that I trusted her to make her own decisions about her security and protection."
"Those were her exact words?" checked Daphne, a considering expression drifting across her face that Harry knew meant she was thinking.

He nodded.

"Well, it's clear why the apologies haven't worked so far," she said crisply, "Granger's not going to believe you until you actually show her you trust her. Saying you're sorry isn't doing that."

"Oh." And suddenly Harry realised the fine line Daphne was pointing out for him; all of his apologies had been showing Hermione that he cared for her and still wanted to be with her, but they hadn't showed her that she was trusted. He frowned. How could he show her?

Daphne sighed as he said the final words out loud. "Well, you have two options."

Harry raised an eyebrow waiting for her to expand her statement.

"Either you contrive some kind of circumstance where Granger realises you trust her – "

Harry was already shaking his head. "Hermione will see right through that."

"Probably," Daphne conceded, "and she values honesty so you'd be in worse dragon dung with her than you already are."

"Thank you." Harry said dryly. He could always count on Daphne to tell him how it was in blunt no-nonsense terms.

Daphne shrugged, a small smile on her lips. "So you're stuck then because the only other way to regain her favour is to actually trust her and wait for a moment to demonstrate that to her."

Harry sighed again, unwilling to accept her words but knowing they were the truth. "I guess." He shook himself a touch as though that would shake away the melancholy of the realisation and picked up his quill again. "We should get on with this."

"Sobering charm?" Daphne suggested immediately.

And he was inordinately grateful to her for allowing him to change the subject. The rest of the Defence lesson flew by and before he knew it school was over for the day.

He fell into step with Daphne as they made their way to the Room of Requirement where they were due to meet up with the rest of the Potter alliance and his other friends for his second task preparations. Daphne remained quiet beside him as though she understood he needed the silence to consider what they had discussed.

The Room opened into its usual formation for the task discussions and Harry made his way to the dais where Draco, Neville and Hermione all joined him. Bill, who was ostensibly performing guard duty, entered at the end of the stream of Hogwarts students and closed the door behind him.

Harry's scar itched and he rubbed it before he cleared his throat noisily. The crowd in front of him settled down instantly. He smiled at them all; humbled and honoured at having so many people prepared to help him. "It's January now and the second task will happen in February so we only have a month and a bit to go now. I'd like us to regroup on where we are right from the start."

Hermione levitated the board with the clues to the front to remind everyone.
"Water, water, everywhere; of your prized possession take great care; for prisoners rarely work together; and time will not last forever."

"Right," Hermione said briskly, "let's begin from the top: location."

"There's activity around the Lake," Blaise answered promptly. "They're definitely preparing something."

"He's right." Natalie Warren asserted. "Robert and I have both been informed that the patrols are to keep students away from the Lake."

Bill nodded. "They've masked the whole area with an illusion that makes it appear that the Lake is undisturbed but it is."

"Is the illusion restricted to above or below the lake?" Theo asked calmly.

"Both." Bill cocked his head to the side. "Good point."

"So, we know it's the Lake, and we think that it's likely to be have both a below and above component." Hermione made a note, chewing her lips thoughtfully.

"The above component could be nothing more than a landing stage." Daphne pointed out.

"Or it could be integral to the task." Draco countered. "We don't know enough."

"So we find out." Neville responded. "What if we find a way to get around the illusion or break it?"

"I doubt any of us have the magical power to do that except for Harry." Hermione said before Draco could answer sneeringly.

"But Neville has the right idea." Blaise said, shooting the Gryffindor a quick grin. "We need to find out exactly what they're building."

"Bill, I'm guessing that you don't actually know what they're building?" Harry asked, leaning back against the table behind him.

"No. The security here have been told that they're building but not what." Bill said regretfully.

"Who exactly is building?" asked Daphne shrewdly.

"And can they be bought or bribed into giving the information over?" Theo nodded. "It would be a good plan."

"It's a Gringotts' team so I doubt it's feasible." Bill said thoughtfully. "But I do know that the illusion allows animals and mer-people to see through it without incident."

"A spy." Ron proclaimed, pointing a figure at his brother. "We can get Remus to talk one of the mer-people into spying for us!"

"I doubt the mer-people are going to be open to telling us what's going on." Draco drawled.

"He's right." Hermione sent Ron a quick look of apology for siding with Draco. "We have no idea if Remus would agree and even if he does, convincing someone in the mer-people to do it and then relying on them..."

"Fine," Ron threw up his hands, "it was a bad idea!"
"Not a wholly bad idea, Ron." Harry comforted his first friend with a grin. "A spy is a good idea, and we can try. If it doesn't work, we just have to think of some other means except Remus convincing a mer-person."

Ron seemed mollified by that.

Hermione took advantage of the silence and jumped in. "Right, we'll need to ask Remus and if that's not a go, we'll think of something else."

Harry nodded gratefully at her. "Thank you."

She blushed prettily and tapped the blackboard. "In the meantime, we have a list of spells to learn for above the water and below it. We need to step up practicing these." She tapped the blackboard again and it changed to the next topic. "Have we made any progress on what will be taken?"

Theo shifted. "In one of the study sessions, I found a draft letter from a student to a parent saying that Karkaroff apparently has told Krum's lot about the details of the original task before it was altered."

Harry inwardly flinched at the reminder that Voldemort had altered the tasks to make them more dangerous. He absently touched his scar.

"And?" prompted Ron impatiently.

Theo altered his stance. "The original task chose the person in closest proximity to the Champion at the moment that the Champion signed their name on the parchment that they used to enter into the tournament on the assumption they would be the most important person to the Champion. Krum apparently believes his original hostage might have been someone random in the library at the time he signed his name as that's where he was."

"Cedric's original hostage would have been Cho then." Susan broke in. "She was sitting right next to him when he signed the parchment before he went and entered his name."

"You must have been observing him closely to determine that." Blaise teased.

Susan shot him a dirty look but her cheeks had gone bright red.

"Well, that doesn't really tell us which of us would have ended up as Harry's hostage, does it?" Ron muttered. "He didn't enter himself! Who knows when he signed that parchment?"

"Well, it's probably something I signed officially." Harry murmured. "It's pretty likely either Sirius or Remus would be the hostage." It made his heart ache to think of Sirius being used as a hostage against him after the events at Christmas.

"But we know it's unlikely that Voldemort continued with the same plan." Hermione said briskly. "He may have taken the principle of hostages but turned it into something completely different."

"And we know that Crouch at least knew using the person closest to the Champion when he'd signed the parchment wasn't going to accurately target Harry's hostage enough for whatever they have planned." Daphne added.

"That's it!" Ron proclaimed passionately. "We've got to think about this like Crouch! Who would he want to put in danger?" He started to pace. "I mean, he's a Death Eater so he hates muggleborns and goes with the pureblood crap, and he hates Harry and Sirius that's a given, so…"

"Me." Hermione's chin lifted a touch.
Harry's heart dropped to his feet. No! Hermione couldn't be in danger! She couldn't! "You weren't my girlfriend at the time he gave the parameters to the cup though." He pointed out.

"But she is a likely candidate." Theo noted dispassionately. "She was announced as a Daughter of the House of Black, she's a muggleborn, one of your closest friends, and clearly someone who Lord Black favours. Crouch might have figured that was enough."

Hermione had paled and Harry wanted to reach out and catch hold of her hand to reassure them both that everything was going to be alright; that he wouldn't let her be harmed. The urge to send her away somewhere safe rose through him again but he wrestled it back. Sending her to a different country wouldn't help. The magic of the Goblet would simply return her to the competition and besides…it had been made clear to him that Harry had to trust Hermione could decide for herself.

"I guess I should practice all these spells with you." Hermione commented bravely, her brown eyes meeting his challengingly even though a flicker of fear was still there lurking in their depths.

"You'd do that anyway." Ron said oblivious to the undercurrent between his friends.

Harry nudged his glasses up and tried a smile. "You'll probably get them before me."

"Weasley should practice too." Draco commented.

Ron spun round and glared at the Slytherin. "What?"

Draco scowled at him. "Given the timing of when Crouch had to have put the parameters to choose in the Goblet, you are the other likely candidate, are you not? A blood traitor to the Dark Lord's cause, Potter's best friend, responsible for ensuring Lord Black was exonerated and also favoured by him given the alliance of friendship with your family and Potter?"

Ron went white under his freckles. "Blimey!"

"Malfoy's right, Ron." Bill said. "You are the other most likely candidate."

"I would think the other candidate is Lord Black." Theo said. "Crouch could have included him."

"I think it's unlikely that he would put Sirius into the task." Ron said, making a clear effort to move past the news that he was one of the most likely candidates to be taken as Harry's hostage. "He wouldn't want to risk putting someone who knew what they were doing in there."

"That makes sense." Harry agreed, relief seeping through him with the thought that Sirius wouldn't be targeted.

"Me and Hermione." Ron said bravely. "We're the most likely candidates."

And that worried Harry but in some ways it seemed right. It had always been the three of them getting into trouble and getting out of trouble. His gaze slipped to Hermione who stared back at him challengingly.

"So, we plan on that basis." Harry said abruptly, holding Hermione's gaze. "And you guys practice." He let his tone soften. "Wouldn't be the first time we had an adventure, would it?"

Hermione gave a sharp nod and breathed in deeply. "At least we have time to plan."

Ron grinned at him. "Let's just hope there's no spiders."

The whole room seemed to relax as Harry smiled reluctantly back at his best friends.
"What about the rest of the Champions?" Hermione asked suddenly. "I mean, if Crouch is targeting either me or Ron he's bound to have targeted the hostages for the other Champions with the same criteria."

"Which is likely to be best friend, or something to do with the sponsorship or alliances." Theo agreed.

It went unsaid that he'd find some way to inform the others but everyone nodded, understanding that Theo was couching his words given the clear instruction for Harry not to confer with his fellow Champions.

"Are we definitely saying that the prized possession then will not be an item of importance?" Blaise asked.

"It's unlikely." Harry said simply. "Voldemort changed the first task just enough to increase the danger but Professor Dumbledore confirmed that the original first task was to retrieve a golden egg from a dragon's nest."

"So going on that basis, the second task was going to be retrieving someone from the Lake, it's likely that he won't have strayed too far from that just ramped up the danger quotient." Blaise nodded far too cheerfully. "Got you."

"Right," Harry said, "I think we've exhausted talking about the task unless anyone else has anything?"

Nobody spoke up.

Harry raised his wand. "Defence practice then. Everyone split into pairs, we're playing dodge-spell!"

It always surprised him how quickly everyone moved. Within moments, they were all practising in small duelling domes that Harry had the Room construct. He and Bill walked around the various pairs providing instruction and guidance. The rules of the game were pretty simple: one person practiced hitting the other with a spell and the other person dodged. Once they'd been hit three times they swapped or when Harry whistled to signal a change in role.

There had been some muttering about using a game for instruction when they'd first started but as everyone had seen how effective it was at improving their aim and their ability to avoid being hit with spells, they'd all started to really enjoy it.

Harry helped Connor Sapworthy adjust his aim against his friend before wandering over to where Hermione and Luna were practicing. Both girls were quick and fierce.

Maybe Hermione was right. Maybe she could take care of herself. Or at least, maybe Harry should trust her to take care of herself more than he had been doing before.

Bill tapped Harry on the shoulder. "You alright there, Harry?"

Before he could reply, a chime sounded in the room. Instantly everyone stopped and more than a few groans punctuated the silence.

"Session's over!" Harry called out briskly. "You'll need to get moving for dinner."

There was an immediate steady trickle of students heading to the door. Draco nodded imperiously at Harry before leaving with Theo and Blaise. Hermione smiled at Harry briefly but didn't speak to him as she fell into step with Ron and Ginny.
Harry watched her leaving with a heavy heart. It wasn't too long before he and Bill were the only ones left inside the room. Harry swished his wand absentlly and the room melted away into a facsimile of Harry's room at Griffin House.

"Wow." Bill said impressed. "The room really can be anything you want it to be, huh? I'm guessing you're feeling a little homesick?"

"Things were simpler in the Summer." Harry grumbled. He threw himself down on his bed, sitting on the edge feeling very morose. He wasn't surprised when Bill pulled up the spare chair to sit in front of him.

"You want to talk about it?" offered Bill.

For a long moment, Harry wanted to brush off the oldest Weasley brother's concern, pretend everything was fine and wallow in his own misery. But the comfort of the familiar room, of a room that was truly his for the first time in his life, took him back to all the chats he and Bill had had in the Summer, and within moments the whole mess tumbled out including his conversation with Daphne.

Bill listened carefully without asking questions until eventually Harry fell silent a little mortified that he'd unburdened himself so much to the eldest Weasley. Bill simply reached over and patted Harry's shoulder comfortingly.

"Girl trouble, huh." Bill gave an exaggerated wince. "If it helps every guy goes through it."

A faint look of empathy flitted in and out of his blue eyes but it was enough to ease Harry's discomfort and tell him that maybe Bill had something of his own to brood about.

"Uh, are you and Alicia OK?" asked Harry tentatively.

Bill's gaze sharpened and Harry almost squirmed under the hard look he was subjected to before Bill sighed heavily.

"Coming to the end of the road, I reckon." Bill admitted with a grimace.

"If you want to talk about it…" Harry offered uncertainly.

Bill smiled. "That's a good offer but I'll pass. I'm sure you don't want me to bore you with the details of my love life."

"I bored you with the details of mine." Harry pointed out wryly. "I mean, you listened to me."

Bill laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, since you put it that way…" he shrugged. "It's not really a big deal. You know my Mum is really keen on me and Alicia settling down?"

Harry winced because he did. Ron's stubbornness had to come from somewhere.

"Well, neither of us is ready for that." Bill stated without prevarication. "So when Alicia and I first talked about how Mum was, I promised to ask Mum to tone it down, which I did, and she promised she would, and it was fine for a while." Bill explained. "But you know my Mum."

Harry winced because he did. Ron's stubbornness had to come from somewhere.

"So it's awkward at times and…I guess both of us are wondering if seeing each other still is worth the hassle." Bill shrugged, surprisingly calm about the impending break-up of his relationship. "I'm
predicting that I'm going to get the 'it's not you it's me' speech any day now from Alicia."

"Are relationships always this difficult?" Harry asked a touch grumpily. Remus and Tonks seemed at odds too lately with Tonks being very cold to Remus. Sirius had warned him to keep out of it, saying whatever argument the pair had had, they had to work it out themselves.

"They're always hard work." Bill confirmed. He tilted his head. "The first thing you've got to ask yourself is this: is what you and Hermione have worth the effort of fixing things with her?"

"Yes." Harry didn't even have to think about it. He really liked Hermione and he still wanted to be with her. He was prepared to do anything to make it right between them again.

"Do you understand what Hermione's problem with you is enough to fix it?" pressed Bill.

"I think so. Hermione's annoyed with me because I made a decision to push her away without talking with her first." He bit his lip. "Not so much the thing with sending her and the others back to Hogwarts because I was, uh, really upset and she understood that but, you know, after. Thinking staying away from everyone would protect them better, and telling her again we were over because I wanted to protect her." His cheeks heated again at the memory of what he'd done. He'd been so stupid…

"You were upset and grieving and your ability to make rational decisions was compromised." Bill said comforting. "Everyone understands that, including Hermione."

"But she hasn't forgiven me like everyone else has." Harry replied miserable.

Bill nudged him. "Why do you think that is?"

Harry sighed heavily again. "I really hurt her."

"And what do you think will fix that?"

"I think Daphne's right." Harry said. "Hermione knows I'm sorry but she's not going to think about getting back together until I've shown her that I trust her." He rubbed his head again. "She's not going to trust me not to do what I did again until she feels I trust her I guess."

"I think that's a good guess." Bill patted his shoulder again.

"So I'm stuck waiting until I somehow prove to Hermione that I trust her." Harry mumbled unhappily, and he'd known that before they'd started talking in truth – he'd just been hoping for a different answer.

Bill nudged him again. "Based on tonight's discussion about the task, I think you're going to get your opportunity sooner rather than later."

"He's going to target her isn't he?" Harry sighed and flopped back on the bed. "I just…I don't want anyone hurt because of me. Is that so much to ask?"

"It's not your fault, Harry." Bill said firmly. "Who knows what insanity is going through Crouch and You-Know-Who's head?" He tapped Harry's knee and waited until Harry got upright again before continuing. "Nobody disagreed with you sending your friends out of danger and I get why you did what you did at Christmas. But I know you know that it wasn't the best way to handle things. You remember that first meeting with the alliance kids? You told them you were stronger if you all stuck together and you were right."
"I know." Harry said, plucking at the coverlet on the bed absently. "I just…it feels like everyone gets hurt because of me and that sucks."

"You have to keep in mind that it's not because of you; it's because of Crouch and You-Know-Who." Bill reiterated. "Nobody blames you."

Harry nodded slowly. It wasn't as though he hadn't had the same conversation with Sirius, Remus and Dumbledore and…pretty much everyone. Maybe he should start believing it. His parents had told him the same thing hadn't they? His heart ached at the memory of seeing them in the cemetery but underneath the pain was the solace that they loved him; loved each other; that they believed in him.

"So I make sure Hermione – and Ron – both practice like mad and can take care of themselves." Harry said out loud.

Bill nodded.

Harry grimaced and absently rubbed at his scar again. He was going to have to wait for Hermione to fully forgive him that was clear. It was a disappointing conclusion but he guessed one he had to live with since he was serious about her. He looked back up at Bill.

"What about you and Alicia?" He asked curiously. "I guess you're not planning to fix things?"

The oldest Weasley shook his head. "As quick as you were to say you and Hermione was worth fighting for, I'd say the opposite about me and Alicia." He shrugged, an amused glint in his eye. "We're good together and we've had fun, and Merlin knows, I will always be grateful for her helping to heal me after the duel with Crouch…but I don't think we're meant to be together forever otherwise neither of us would be resisting my Mum so much." He shrugged again. "So I'll let her break up with me and I'll find someone else." He poked Harry in the knee. "You may want to consider that you're young yet too. Hermione might seem like the be-all and end-all of everything right now but there are other girls out there."

Harry shook his head. He liked Hermione. Besides, if he did go out with someone else during whatever this was – a break, a pause, a test? – then Hermione could go out with other blokes and he definitely didn't like the idea of that.

Bill smiled, amused indulgence all over his face before it melted away to concern. "Do you have a headache?"

Harry froze and frowned at him. "No. Why?"

"You keep rubbing your scar." Bill waved at his forehead.

Harry realised his hand had drifted up again. He yanked his hand down. "It just…it always kind of itches in here."

Bill's expression sobered immediately. "Really?"

Harry nodded.

"You know curse scars usually react in the presence of Dark magic?" Bill commented as he got to his feet, his wand already in his hand as he scanned the room suspiciously.

"Or the presence of the one who…" Harry blanched and leaped up, his wand falling into his hand. He took a breath and calmed himself. It was very unlikely Voldemort was hiding out in the Room of
Requirement. But if not Voldemort…

"The horcrux!" Harry blurted out. "He hid the horcrux here!"

"Bloody smart wanker, isn't he?" grumbled Bill, twirling his wand. "How do we know what kind of room he stored it in?"

Harry frowned. "Well, maybe if we both try exiting the room and thinking of somewhere to hide something?"

Bill nodded thoughtfully. "Might work."

They made their way into the corridor.

Bill looked back at the blank wall. "You want to give it a go?"

Harry considered all the possible options and shook himself. He was making it too complicated. He paced in front of the wall…

_I want somewhere to hide something important…I want somewhere to hide something important…I want somewhere to hide something important…_

The door appeared.

Bill waved Harry back and Harry bit down on his want to protest knowing Sirius would give him grief for not allowing the fully trained curse-breaker to go first. Bill opened the door and entered.

"You can come in."

Harry stepped inside eagerly and stopped abruptly beside a similarly shocked Bill. He took in the towering piles of books and trunks and broomsticks and…everything and anything! There were rows upon rows upon rows! Piles upon piles upon…

"Accio Ravenclaw's diadem!" Bill called out, weaving his wand through the spell movements almost unconsciously.

Nothing happened.

"Bugger." Bill swore roundly before grinning sheepishly at Harry. "It was never going to be that easy, was it?"

Harry shook his head and looked back at the seemingly endless room.

It wasn't going to be easy.

It was going to take a while and be hard work but he thought with furious satisfaction, they were closer to finding the elusive horcrux than they had been before, and he would only ever consider that a win.
Hermione scribbled another note to herself in the small notebook she kept for her ongoing list of things to do. Sitting cross-legged in the centre of her bed, she raised her eyes to gaze around the Gryffindor dorm and mentally compared it to her childhood bedroom she'd just left a few days before.

The solid dark oak beds, wardrobes and dressers might have made the tower room gloomy but they shined and gleamed with polish; the sunlight pouring in through the wide windows to highlight the wonderful gold grain buried in the wood. The bright red and gold Gryffindor colours blazed in the hangings and the linen; in the woven rugs of a griffin and a unicorn. It was wonderful and homey in a way her bedroom at home had ceased to be.

She grimaced. Crookshanks snored from his place at the bottom of the bed and Hermione looked at him fondly. Maybe, she considered, she should try asking for a redecoration of her bedroom at home for her next birthday or Christmas present. It would be nice to get it looking like the bedroom of the young woman she was rather than the child she'd left behind when she'd started Hogwarts.

She shook her hair and reread her notes. Daphne and Luna had done a great job at compiling the list of useful spells and she needed to ensure that she, Ron and Harry mastered them all. She tapped the quill against her chin and pursed her lips. Harry had already hated the idea of someone getting held hostage because of him and the fact that it was most likely her or Ron wasn't going to help.

Harry.

Hermione frowned.

She'd retreated to the dorm to work after dinner because their split was the talk of the Hogwarts' grapevine. If she had thought it was difficult dealing with the stares and attention when they were together, it was much worse with them being apart. Still, Harry had been a complete gentleman, letting it be known that he was to blame and that he still wanted to be with her once she had forgiven him.

She bit her lip, remembering the holidays.

It had been awful when Harry had been missing. She'd been so worried about him, alone and grieving for Sirius. And yet so angry. He'd physically and magically pushed her away. He'd broken up with her to protect her. He'd been a stupid, arrogant arse!

Hermione sniffed and then sighed heavily.

Despite everything, she understood. She did. Harry hadn't been thinking; he'd been devastated and he'd reacted on instinct in the moment he'd magically sent them back to Hogwarts. She could forgive him for that – had forgiven him for that.

It was the letter he'd sent after that she couldn't quite forgive him for when he'd continued to insist that he was protecting them all by staying away, and protecting her especially by no longer being her boyfriend. It had been a planned and deliberate statement, and one that had hurt her tremendously. All she'd known in the instant of reading it was that he didn't want her anymore. It had only worsened during the days of silence that followed the letter when they'd known Sirius was back and had found Harry. Then she had wondered if it was maybe all an excuse to break up with her.

Harry had denied that when he'd come over to apologise. He'd been properly contrite and remorseful...
but she couldn't forgive him for hurting her. But she hadn't wanted him to see how wounded she was and had covered her hurt with anger for his assuming he had the right to make decisions about her safety and protection without talking with her; for using that as the basis of their break up. She'd briskly informed him that he'd have to do better than a few flowery words before she'd forgive him and consider going out with him again. She'd told him she'd only consider it if he could prove that he trusted her to make her own decisions.

Hermione sighed.

She'd been so determined not to just give in that she'd rejected his every attempt at apologising. She absently ran a finger down the edge of the folded letter she'd put at the back of the notebook. She wondered now if sticking to her guns had been a mistake as her mother had warned her…

"You have to ask yourself, Hermione, what does Harry need to do before you'll forgive him?" Her mother tapped the half-written reply that Hermione was in the middle of writing. "You say you need him to prove he trusts you but you don't say how he can prove it." She sat down beside Hermione.

"Well, I don't know how exactly." Hermione replied angrily.

"You should be careful you're not asking him to do something that he has no hope of actually achieving." Her mother said. "If he doesn't know how to prove his trust in you, it may take him a long time to do it, and then you'll find that you're broken up for a lot longer than a few days. Is that what you want?"

"I just...he trusted me to go with him and help him rescue Sirius at the end of our third year without question – that's what I want!"

"Seriously?" Her mother countered, a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice before she took a deep breath. "Look, darling, he made a mistake in breaking up with you and pushing you away but he's apologised. If you can't set this aside and move forward without testing his sincerity then perhaps you shouldn't be with him."

"I can't believe you're taking his side!" Hermione said, folding her arms and glaring at her mother.

Her mother countered her glare with one of her own. "Believe me when I say I'm on your side. I don't like that he hurt you and he knows it. But he's apologised very sincerely and even if I didn't think he deserves a second chance, right at this moment I'm attempting to advise you as your mother and stop you from making a mistake you'll regret." She got to her feet. "Honestly, I'm not happy you want to put yourself in another dangerous situation in order for him to prove himself to you! You have to consider why you're really doing this, Hermione. Is this a way of punishing him for hurting you? A retaliation? Because right now, I think it is no matter that you're fooling yourself into believing it's justified."

Maybe her mother had been right.

It was just…

Not being trusted to help him with his grief and with being his girlfriend was in some respects the last straw; the final confirmation that Harry had stopped trusting in her and Ron. And she understood that he had Sirius in his life and that Sirius had drawn up rules around what they could and couldn't know about Harry's struggle with Voldemort and the people who wanted to hurt Harry. She even appreciated that perhaps there were reasons why Harry himself kept things from them. But it just all conspired to make her feel that he didn't trust her anymore.
The night of the Yule Ball she'd known something was going on with Snape and that Harry was worried, but he'd said nothing to her and both Neville and Sirius had been kidnapped and hurt. Yes, he'd taken them to London with him to find Sirius but only when they'd insisted – and he'd soon sent them back to Hogwarts. And he'd shut her out until Sirius had returned and brought him home again.

But he had been grief-stricken a small voice inside of her head reminded her briskly.

But Harry hadn't even confided the way he and Sirius intended to double-team Wenlock, she countered immediately. The Wenlock take-down had been nothing short of brilliant. Slytherin, mused Hermione with a hint of amusement.

Ah, said the voice in her head again, maybe if she'd forgiven Harry, he would have told her the strategy.

She poked the notebook with her quill.

Was she punishing Harry?

Hermione sighed.

Maybe.

Just a tad.

If she was honest with herself.

But her anger was mostly gone after seeing him again at the Wizengamot, the few family occasions they'd had, and since they'd been back at school. He was clearly sorry and he'd been really good at her respecting her wishes to remain civil and friendly. But it had also been so awkward between them. It was the last thing she wanted.

What she wanted was to go back to being Harry's girlfriend and for him to confide in her. But she didn't know how she did that after the stand she'd taken with him. She didn't want to cave and roll over on her position because that would make her look like an idiot...but on the other hand, did she really want to wait until Harry did something that she could say proved he trusted her? And her mother had a point; just how was he supposed to prove his trust in her without them being in danger somehow?

It was a mess, she thought morosely.

The door of the dorm flew open and Lavender rushed in, barrelling over to Hermione and squeezing her tightly in a lopsided hug before dancing around the dorm with glee, a letter clutched in one hand. Parvati followed after her more sedately and sat down on Hermione's bed with a sigh as Lavender continued cavorting around.

"What's going on?" asked Hermione curious.

"Ron asked her out." Parvati said. "Sent her a proper invitation by postal owl."

"Oh." Hermione felt her belly flutter unexpectedly at the news. She hadn't known Ron was going to do that but then the boys had all banded together since they'd come back to the school.

Maybe it wasn't just Harry who had stopped confiding in her, Hermione thought unhappily. She pinned a smile on for Lavender who had finally stopped whirling about.
"That's good news!" Hermione said brightly.

"Isn't it?" Lavender clutched the letter close to her bosom. "I mean, after the Ball I thought I'd blown it! But he says he doesn't blame me for choosing to go with Dean and he was an idiot for not asking me sooner."

Hermione hummed.

"We're going to Hogsmeade!" Lavender gushed. "Oh, what am I going to wear! I have to go get that catalogue from Katie!" She ran off again before Hermione could speak to inform her Ron wouldn't care about her outfit.

Parvati gave a sigh. "She's going to be like this until the date."

Hermione gave a small sound of sympathy. "What about you? Is there anybody you're interested in?"

"Neville," responded Parvati immediately, "but he and Hannah seem to be pretty entrenched so…" she sighed and looked over at Hermione with suddenly sharp eyes. "How are things going with you and Harry? You both seemed alright at the session tonight."

Hermione grimaced. "I was thinking I should have listened to my mother and not been so adamant about not forgiving him straight away."

"What did he do anyway?" asked Parvati. "You're all so tight-lipped about things…"

Hermione considered what to tell Parvati. She didn't want to tell her everything but surely she could say something?

"You know Neville was kidnapped and Sirius was injured?"

Parvati nodded.

"Well, Harry got it into his head that he was to blame and that it was better for people not to be his friends and…"

"And he broke up with you to protect you." Parvati concluded.

"Without even talking with me about it!" Hermione complained loudly before subsiding. "He's apologised and everything; told me he wants to get back together but…"

"But you don't know if you trust him anymore?" Parvati completed.

"No!" Hermione stared at her. "No! I trust Harry!"

"Then why…" Parvati began, perplexed.

"He didn't trust *me*!" Hermione said fiercely. "He should have talked with me! Let me decide for myself!"

"Hermione," Parvati remonstrated, "the one thing you can't say is that Harry doesn't trust you! He lets you lead the research into the task and to tell him what it all means – and he really does check with you when he doesn't understand something. He lets you show others how to do things when we practice! He trusts you!"

"It hasn't felt like it this past year." Hermione grumbled, flushing. "He used to tell me everything and
now…"

"And now he's the Head of an Ancient and Noble House, Heir to another, and has a parent and other
adult allies he can to turn to; grown-ups who've probably told him what he can and can't say about
things." Parvati's expression wasn't unsympathetic but Hermione winced at the direct hits.

"I know, and I know it's not fair to expect him to still tell me everything when things have changed
so much it's just..." Hermione sighed and brushed her hair out of her face. "I miss how it used to
be."

"You could just tell him you've changed your mind and you forgive him." Parvati pointed out. "He's
still crazy about you. Anybody can see that."

Hermione shook her head, her lips thinning. "I know I could do that but it just feels…"

"Like you'd be losing the argument if you did?" asked Parvati shrewdly.

Hermione nodded her head, her curls bouncing. "I've made such a big deal about him trusting me
that if I went back on it..."

"So I guess you have to decide which is more important." Parvati said bluntly. "Your pride and
winning the argument, or being with Harry."

Before Hermione could formulate an answer to that, Lavender burst back in and grabbed Parvati,
hustling her out of the room again with the babbled explanation that Katie would only allow her to
look at the catalogue in Katie's dorm, and she just absolutely needed Parvati to help her decide a
perfect outfit for the Hogsmeade weekend date with Ron.

Hermione shook her head in bemusement.

She was just contemplating whether to change for bed despite the early hour when a faint tapping
noise came from the window. She hurried over thinking it was an owl and almost froze when she
saw a black raven instead.

It was Harry!

She almost fell over in her haste to get the window open and usher him inside. He transformed as
soon as he cleared the window. She immediately punched his arm hard.

"What are you thinking!" Hermione hissed. "This is the girls' dormitory! You're going to get into so
much trouble!"

Harry yelped, clutched at his arm and glared at her. "What was I supposed to do? Ron said you'd
gone up to your room and I needed to talk with you!"

"You could have asked Lavender or Parvati to come and get me!" Hermione pointed out furiously.

"I didn't think you'd want to discuss us in front of the entire Gryffindor common room!" Harry
retorted, still rubbing his arm.

Hermione folded her arms and conceded the point with a sigh. With her immediate ire draining
away, nerves stampeded through her as she realised Harry had come to talk with her and here was
her opportunity to make things right with him. Her mouth went dry and the words she wanted to say
seemed to get jumbled in her head…
He took her silence as an opening. "Look," he reached inside his robe and drew out a pink rose, "I just wanted to apologise. Again." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "I know I was wrong pushing you away like I did and I realise that I, uh, hurt you, and I'm really, really sorry because the last thing I ever want to do is hurt you and I know I did."

Hermione took the rose and bit her lip. "Harry…"

"So you said you need time and for me to show that I trust you and I…" Harry straightened his shoulders and looked at her earnestly, "I don't know how I can do that exactly but I do trust you and I just want you to know that even if it takes a while, I'll wait and do whatever it takes."

All Hermione could see suddenly was how much Harry was hurting about their break-up underneath his sincere words of apology and regret; how much her insistence on staying apart was hurting him. And it was the very last thing he needed with the pressure of the tournament and the death threats and…

"Oh, Harry." Hermione lurched forward and hugged him.

He froze for a moment before he returned her hug.

"I'm sorry too, Harry." Hermione pushed herself back a touch to look at him. "You don't need to prove anything to me. I – I just…it's been hard knowing there's things you're not confiding in Ron and I – and I know you can't, I know, it's just…it sometimes feels like you don't trust us and you clearly knew something was going to happen with Sirius and Professor Snape at the Yule Ball…"

"I'm sorry." Harry repeated. "I maybe should have told you about that but…it's not like before when it was just us sneaking about on our own. A lot of what I can't tell you is confidential stuff I've been asked not to tell. It doesn't mean that I don't trust you."

"And I don't want you to get into trouble with Sirius, it's just…it's different." Hermione hurried out.

"But maybe I could discuss with Sirius telling you more." Harry offered. "It's worth a try anyway."

"Thank you." Hermione smiled at him, pleased at the gesture. "And I want you to know that I understand why you did what you did pushing everyone away but, well, it's just," her gaze dropped, "you did hurt me. A lot." She raised a hand to stop him interrupting her. "I know you didn't mean to and I know you're sorry and…I know you won't do it again?"

Her voice couldn't help rising at the end, making her statement a question that Harry hurried to answer.

"I won't. I promise." Harry said fervently. His green eyes shined with hope. "Does this mean…?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes; you're forgiven and," she felt her cheeks heat with a blush, "and if you still want to go out with me…"

"Of course I do!" Harry broke in, smiling goofily.

She smiled back. "OK, then. I guess we're back together." She didn't protest as he leaned in for a kiss.

It was chaste; just a press of his lips on hers but it was perfect.

They smiled happily at each other as they held hands.
Hermione glanced at the open window and shook her head. "I still can't believe you flew up here!"

Harry shrugged. "Well, when I was wanting ideas on how to get you back, Ron had this idea of me flying up here on my broomstick and trying to get you to come fly with me and I...well, I didn't think you'd go for that."

Hermione chuckled; her fear of flying was well known. "I don't know," she teased, remembering their flight on Buckbeak, "it might have worked." She nodded towards the outside. "It's just as well you didn't try it. It says in 'Hogwarts: A History' that there's an old magical shield around the windows which prevents anyone from entering from the outside by broomstick as part of the defence measures. It also prevents people from just jumping out of a window too unless there's a fire detected."

Harry nodded. "Remus mentioned that." He grimaced. "He overheard Ron. Said my Dad tried to get into my Mum's dorm by broom once and failed miserably."

Hermione hummed. "It's a bit of a flaw that the shield lets in an animagus if you think about it."

"You're right about..."

"HARRY!" Lavender and Parvati shrieked as they stumbled into the dorm.

Hermione flushed as they took in how close she and Harry were standing along with their clasped hands.

Parvati smiled. "You two make-up?"

They nodded.

Lavender bounced happily. "That's so great! You know what this means? Now Ron has asked me out, we can double-date!"

And as much as she had grown to appreciate Lavender more over the past school year, Hermione felt her insides turn over a little with horror and she didn't dare look at Harry.

"MISTER POTTER!"

They all froze and turned to the doorway where an irate Professor McGonagall stood.

"Professor McGonagall, Harry was only visiting..." Hermione began before she was drowned out by twin shrieks.

"It isn't what it looks like!"

"We swear they were only holding hands!"

Lavender and Parvati babbled out.

Hermione was caught between amusement at Harry's predicament and worry about his getting caught.

"I just want to say Hermione knew nothing about this, Professor. It was all my idea." Harry said courageously.

"NEVER IN ALL MY YEARS! NOT EVEN YOUR FATHER..." Professor McGonagall slapped her wand at the wall, switching off the protection where the stairs would turn into slides.
"DOWN THE STAIRS NOW!"

Harry grimaced and gave a small sigh. He squeezed Hermione's hand. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." Hermione answered softly.

He let go of her and hurried over to the fuming Deputy Headmistress who pushed him bodily out of the room.

Hermione hurried to the doorway until they disappeared from view, the Professor continuing to harangue Harry all the way down, her voice echoing back up the stairwell.

The whistles and cheers in the common room as the gathered students realised what Harry had done was loud and audible. Hermione couldn't suppress a grin as Fred and George's yell of approval floated back up the stairwell…

"WAY TO GO, HARRY!"

o-O-o

2nd February 1995

"...and I'd like to conclude with the announcement of a new schedule of knowledge sharing conferences between what the muggles refer to as scientists and our own Unspeakables who are now serving in the Muggle Counter-spell team." Arthur smiled brightly. "We anticipate this will give us both more understanding across both groups and enable us to maintain the Statute of Secrecy much better."

Sirius resisted the urge to squirm in his seat like an impatient child. The session had been intractably boring with even the transition of the Wenlock alliances to the House of Malfoy and the announcement that the House of Potter now held the Wenlock proxy anticlimactic. The reports from both Arthur's new Department and Dirk's had provided good evidence that the new approaches to muggles and creatures were making inroads into the prejudices that were embedded in the wizarding world but they hadn't exactly been the stuff of excitement.

Dullard cleared his throat. "The announcement is so noted." He turned to the Chief Warlock. "We have nothing more on the session agenda for today."

Albus beamed. "That concludes the February session of the Wizengamot. Unseal the doors!"

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't surprised when Richard Bones leaned across to him.

"And now you know what a relatively normal session feels like!" Richard joked with a teasing smile.

"Who knew taking over the wizarding world would be so boring?" Sirius complained good-naturedly.

Richard laughed. "You think if we told You-Know-Who he'd have a rethink?"

"It's a plan." Sirius dead-panned.

They got to their feet and started to make their way down the stairs where Amelia was waiting for them.

"What has you two you giggling like errant school-boys?" She asked dryly.
"Taking over the wizarding world." Sirius rejoined immediately.

Amelia shot him an amused look. "At least it's still not about how your son got into the Gryffindor girls' dorm room!"

"I didn't talk about it that much and it was a month ago now!" Sirius proclaimed defensively. "I don't know why people are still going on about it."

"Possibly because he's the only male in the history of Hogwarts to do it?" Richard commented. "And something to do with the fact that apparently you congratulated him for the feat when Minerva took him to you for punishment?"

Sirius battled with the flush that threatened to rise on his cheeks because praising Harry's ingenuity for accomplishing something the Marauders had never managed had been his first response. He glanced at Richard and they both broke down into another set of chuckles.

"You should have seen her face!" Sirius said. "I don't think even the Marauders had her looking so furious!"

Amelia gave a long-suffering sigh.

"Don't worry, Amelia," Sirius said, noting her disapproval, "Minnie clouted me over the ear and then stood over me while I gave Harry an appropriate punishment and a lecture about how he could have damaged Hermione's reputation."

"Susan tells me every guy in the school is trying to get in the girls' dorms now?" Amelia pointed out. "That's hardly a good outcome."

"The Weasley twins started a competition a couple of weeks ago." Sirius said dismissively. "It's all done in good humour. Apparently there's a sizeable book and Moody thinks it's good practice for the defences."

"Harry was sworn to secrecy presumably on how he'd done it?" asked Amelia, digging for information on the how anyway.

"Yes," Sirius said, "he was sworn to secrecy and he also had to promise to never use that method to gain entry into the girls' dorm again. Not that he can now. Alastor's had the security teams warding the castle against Harry's method since he did prove it was a bit of a gap in the defences."

Amelia led them past her secretary, absently picking up the messages the other witch offered her, and into the inner sanctum of her office. She took her desk chair and waved the men into the seats in front of her.

Sirius automatically put a privacy ward and grinned at Amelia's exasperation. "You know it's necessary…"

"Constant vigilance!" They all chimed, smiling.

"So I got your owl earlier saying you both wanted to talk to me after the session?" prompted Amelia. "Is this about the second task?"

"Actually, no," Sirius said, waving a hand, "the kids seem to have that under control." He grinned. "Between Hermione's lesson plan, Harry's training regime, and Theo's clandestine meetings with the other Champions' friends…I think they have it covered."
"I still can't believe Nott's son is so serious about his service." Richard commented, settling into his chair with a shuffling squirm.

"He's doing a good job." Sirius said. "He's got all of his father's cunning and ambition just for our side except for the whole pureblood thing, and I think having to interact more with Harry and Hermione directly is changing some of his preconceptions about that." He grimaced. "Truthfully, he sometimes reminds me of Regulus."

"Well, I have to admit I'm grateful Harry's giving them all tuition." Richard said. "Susan's DADA grades have shot up."

Amelia nodded. "All of the alliance members involved in Harry's group have matured in their duelling ability. I had difficulty against Hermione last week."

Sirius's lips twitched but he successfully suppressed the smile figuring Amelia would hex him if he didn't.

"So if this isn't about the second task, and I know it isn't about the progress or lack thereof in finding our hidden bunch of Death Eaters…" Amelia prompted again.

"You know I've been dealing with a French antiques dealer on behalf of the House of Black?" Richard began. "Well, yesterday I received a worrying communication from him."

Sirius cut to the chase. "Fevrier is insisting he'll only deal with me at a meeting in Italy to buy the Lumiere parchment, which makes me think there's something else behind his request since he's been content to date to deal with Richard and Augusta."

"You think this is a trap." Amelia quickly surmised.

Sirius nodded. "Fevrier would sell his grandmother out for a quick deal."

Amelia tapped her fingers on her desk. "They must have made contact with one of our missing Death Eaters. How else could they have received the mission to entrap you?"

"There are a few Death Eaters who escaped abroad." Sirius pointed out. "They could be acting independently trying to gain favour after hearing rumours of what's happened in Britain, or they could be tasked to capture me." He grimaced. "I don't mind being bait but given what happened last time…" he sighed, "I don't want to put Harry through a repeat."

"And presumably we still want the document." Richard murmured, frowning as his mind turned over the problem.

"And we have the problem of being on foreign soil." Sirius pointed out.

"How long do we have before we need to set up a sting?" Amelia questioned bluntly.

Sirius shrugged and exchanged a brief look with Richard. "We can probably keep him dangling for another month maybe? Between the protest at me being part of the deal personally and the price he wants and the commission…"

"It should be easy to stall for that length of time." Richard agreed.

Amelia nodded. "I think I have a plan but it'll need that long to pull together. I'll also need to talk to Bertie, Alastor and Cornelius."
"We've also got the second task as a good delaying tactic." Richard commented. "Anyone who knows you knows you're never going to leave Britain in the run-up."

Sirius nodded. He had absolutely no intention of going anywhere until Harry was done with the task.

"Let's work with that." Amelia smiled and Sirius was glad he'd never truly had her as an enemy. "I'll let you know once I've got the big things pinned down."

"That's fine with me." Sirius said firmly, trusting her to take the information and run with it. "I'd better head back."

Both Amelia and Richard said goodbye to him at the office and Sirius was glad of the solitude as he made his way out of the Ministry. Between his Wizengamot duties, the politicking with Cornelius, the estate responsibilities for numerous Houses, the Potter alliance, the War Council, and being a father, he hardly got any time alone.

That was probably a good thing, Sirius thought wryly. He didn't really do the whole alone thing well. And everything he was doing was important and interconnected.

As much as he hated the politicking with Cornelius, he'd grown to have a solid respect for the Minister's political acumen. It was still too self-serving for Sirius's taste but Cornelius had thrown himself into supporting the new regime with vigour. It was Cornelius who had advised which of Wenlock's alliances would provide the Malfoy House and its alliances with enough weight that they'd provide an effective counter-balance to the Potter alliance. And Cornelius had argued successfully about why they needed a counter-balance, Sirius considered grudgingly.

The Potter alliance held a majority; Harry's agenda of equality for all and respect for wizarding traditions was established and could only continue apace. But they needed a strong minority to force compromise when the alliance wanted to go too fast or too far. Sirius grumbled a little at that but politically he could see the need for decent democratic debate and more importantly for it not to appear that the House of Potter was establishing a tyranny. There was also the fact that as much as it would be nice to wave a wand and have their agenda immediately made reality, the wizarding world at large wasn't ready for that. Slow, steady progress was the way to go if it was going to be long-lasting.

Critically though the new political landscape made it difficult for Voldemort to gain a foothold as Sirius had intended all those months before when he'd constructed his 'taking over the wizarding world' plan. Voldemort's old cronies were relegated to the minority; they couldn't force through legislation any longer that married with Voldemort's aims or provided the old snake with an advantage.

Still, the last month had been hard work and the resulting session had been interminably boring. He'd persevere though. Making the world a better place for his son was worth doing and it was good that one element of the original plan was working when the others were struggling.

Tag the Death Eater had stalled with the search for Voldemort, Peter, Crouch and the escaped father and son Travers duo going nowhere. All they knew for certain was that one of them was probably on the Durmstrang ship keeping Karkaroff under control. They still didn't have enough to force an official warrant to search the ship and Bogdan's unofficial efforts were taking time. There'd been no further communication to Snape except a cryptic note from Crouch partially congratulating him for surviving, and partially telling him again to stall on the antidote creation that would awake the sleeping Crouch elf and the pregnant Summers woman. Fenrir was also still in the wind and much of his former pack had sought sanctuary at the Black farm in Bulgaria. Maybe the trap with Fevrier would be helpful.
Finding the Lost and Found room, as Bertie had called it, had helped the Treasure Hunt. They knew for certain the diadem was somewhere buried in the collective junk, they just had to find it. Bill and Caro were still working their way through the mess and Sirius figured he'd stop in and check on their progress.

Sirius frowned as he tossed some powder into the floo and stepped into the flames. He exited into the cosy rooms he and Harry shared at Hogwarts. A brief check with Dobby provided him with Harry's location – down by the lake practicing spells with the rest of the alliance kids.

He almost decided to go to the Lost and Found room straight away but he decided to change and took the stairs up to his room. Within moments, his Wizengamot robes had been discarded for less formal wear – black boots, black jeans, white t-shirt and a black leather blazer. He took a moment to release his hair, running his fingers through it and allowing it loose. He reholstered his wands and deeming himself presentable enough for Hogwarts skipped downstairs only to slow as the sounds of Remus and Tonks arguing reached his ears.

They'd been at odds for weeks and he was certain something had happened between them in early January just after the newspaper article – not that either had confided in him when he'd asked. Tonks had barely been civil when she'd told him to keep his nose out of it and Remus avoided every attempt to pin him down. He'd held his tongue figuring they were both adults and could sort it out on their own. Maybe, he considered with a wince as they got even louder, that had been a mistake, although hopefully this was them clearing the air. He hovered on the stairs, torn between going back up and letting them have it out finally or continuing down and potentially interrupting.

"…and I told you I don't want to talk!" Remus gestured passionately.

"I know you don't want to but I need to talk to you!" Tonks argued, her hair changing to an angry red.

"I tried talking to you weeks ago and you gave me the cold shoulder!"

"Because we spent one night together and then you changed your mind about asking Sirius for permission to date me for no good reason!"

"Just because you don't understand it doesn't mean it isn't a good reason!" Remus retorted furiously. "And I would expect you to respect my choices as I respected your choice not to talk to me for the last few weeks!"

"I want to talk to you now!" Tonks pointed out with a fair amount of exasperation.

Remus folded his arms over his chest and raised his chin belligerently. "And now I'm not interested in talking to you!"

"OH! Could you be more childish!" Tonks yelled.

"I'm not the one being childish!" Remus snapped. "What possible reason would I have for agreeing to talk to you now?"

"BECAUSE I'M PREGNANT, YOU FUZZBALL!"

And with that revelation, Sirius determined that it was time to stage an intervention. He marched down the stairs and into the shocked silence.

Both Remus and Tonks paled and went red before paling again as they realised they'd been overheard.
"Padfoot…" Remus began, a note of pleading in his voice that Sirius hardened himself against reacting to since he needed to deal with the situation as Lord Black, not as Remus's old school friend.

"Don't." Sirius ordered gruffly. "You know what I need to do here after what I just heard. Wait for me in the study, Remus."

Remus stiffened, but a darting glance at Tonks who ignored him had his shoulders slumping in defeat. He nodded and left the room.

Sirius gestured for his cousin to take a seat on the sofa. He stood in front of her with the chagrined thought that he looked like a disapproving father and settled into the nearby chair as a compromise.

"This is what's going to happen, Nymphadora…" he ignored her glare at using her given name, "you are going to explain to me exactly what happened between you and Remus…"

"It's none of your business!" Tonks proclaimed.

Sirius met her glare for glare. "It is my business! I'm your Head of House! I know you weren't raised with the protocols, but you have to know that when a member of the House falls pregnant out of wedlock to the steward, it's not something the Head of House can just bloody ignore!"

Tonks flushed bright red, her hair cycling through a number of colours before it settled into its original brunette. She turned away from him. "I don't know for certain that I am." She mumbled miserably.

Sirius closed his eyes briefly and prayed for patience. He opened them again. "Look: when you started all this I thought you and Remus could be a good couple. He needs some fun and laughter in his life and, well, frankly, you need some maturity and I figured being with Remus would force you to grow up a bit…"

"Thank you so much!" Tonks snapped.

Sirius glared her back down. "But clearly recent events have me reconsidering. Now, I have been patient and kept out of it as you both requested and I've given you both plenty of time to resolve things on your own but that's not happening. So, you're going to calmly tell me what happened between the two of you before I rush to snap decisions which won't benefit anyone."

Tonks glanced back up at him and whatever she saw in his expression must have convinced her to concede. She slumped back against the sofa cushions and fidgeted with the edging on her red robe.

"You remember the day the article came out?" Tonks said quietly.

"I remember." Sirius said. He bit down the retort that he was hardly likely to forget.

"Well, that night we – Remus and me – we were back at the School House and we were alone for the first time since Sian had gone to the sanctuary."

Ah. All became clear.

"So you made your move." Sirius stated.

Poor Remus. He'd been a mess the day of the article; guilty and horrified because of the political impact for Harry and Sirius; and mortified on his own behalf at the attention. Sirius had thought about staying at the School House himself that night and having an evening of drinking and commiserating with his old friend. But Sirius had had Harry to think about and he hadn't wanted to
leave his son alone so soon after Harry had believed Sirius had died. Harry would always come first but Sirius realised his choice had left Remus lonely and seeking solace.

"Anyway, he turned me down at first but eventually I got him to agree to give us a go as a couple. We even agreed him talking to you for permission." Tonks continued.

"All sounds pretty positive." Sirius commented as Tonks fell silent.

"Yes, well, uh," she looked up at the ceiling avoiding his gaze, "I offered to sleep with him – not sex! Just sleep for comfort."

"And I'm going to guess that it didn't remain just sleeping." Sirius surmised with a heavy sigh.

Tonks shook her head and he saw the shine of tears before she ruthlessly suppressed them. "It was me, my idea. Once we were in bed and…"

Sirius held up his hands. "I don't need details."

Tonks flushed but nodded unhappily. She sniffed. "In the morning we were late and he said we'd talk about what happened when we got back from the Wizengamot, and we did." She looked heartbroken. "Which is when he told me that after everything that had happened, he couldn't take the risk of politically embarrassing the House further by getting involved with one of its daughters right then."

The last part sounded like a direct quote and Sirius could well believe Remus. Poor honourable Remus…

"So I yelled at him and…" Tonks grimaced, "I stopped talking with him except when we needed to discuss something professionally as part of my guard duty." She squirmed and sat forward, hunching over. "Then yesterday I realised I was late." She blushed furiously. "I've been trying to get him to stop and talk to me since and, well, you heard the last attempt."

Sirius sighed. It was a mess. He'd been wrong about them, Sirius realised. Tonks was too young; too immature. She'd seduced Remus when he'd been vulnerable, and maybe she'd done it with the best of intentions to comfort him but he figured he was being generous to her. Not that Remus was blameless – the wolf could have said no and having said yes only to take it back because of noble loyalty to the House's reputation – Sirius could understand why Tonks had gotten hurt and mad at Remus.

"What are the chances that you are pregnant?" asked Sirius bluntly.

Tonks sighed and pushed her hair out of her face as she turned to look at him fully. "I'm a metamorphmagus, Sirius. I know my body and I can already feel the changes small as they are. I haven't had the official say-so but I'm sure."

Sirius nodded. "You have options. Will you…"

"I'm keeping the baby." Tonks said immediately. She looked away from him again, shame written all over her face. "It's not how I wanted to have a kid but I'm not sorry it's happened."

"You know Remus will offer to marry you." Sirius said almost idly.

Tonks' eyes widened, emotions flitting through them and telling Sirius everything he needed to know even as she started to protest it wasn't necessary. She really was crazy about the wolf.
Sirius held up a hand. "For the sake of the House's reputation, you should consider accepting." He saw the glint of rebellion and glared at her forestalling her reply. "I know you haven't given the House any thought in your actions because that's pretty evident in everything you've said. And I can give you a pass on not understanding some of the implications because you haven't been raised under the protection of a House, and while Andy's taught you some of the protocols, she hasn't taught you the politics."

Sirius got to his feet and paced to the mantel-piece and back as he considered what he was going to say.

"You know everyone got caught up with what happened with Wenlock in January but the important and key thing was that we got the new creature and race classifications through. A classification that means Remus is no longer considered a Dark Creature with no rights, someone an auror shouldn't even consort with, never mind date, marry or have a child with. It means that werewolves are no longer restricted as they were but only restricted in ensuring they harm no-one during their transformations." Sirius began. "Even then the law passed by the slimmest of margins and only with the enforcement of the Potter alliance, where there were even a few members who still didn't agree but complied with their oath to support Harry's agenda. So: the law changed in January." He paused and made sure he had Tonks' full attention. "But our society's culture and perceptions did not."

"Sod them! Isn't that all the more reason…" Tonks cut in heatedly.

"Shut up and listen!" Sirius barked. He gestured an apology for his curtness but he didn't back down. "What Remus noted in January at the session was that we had barely held it together in the court of public opinion. The tide turned in our favour thanks to Wenlock making such a huge mistake that there was no other way for it to turn. And with that, we got the law through, everyone accepted Remus had made a mistake the night he didn't take his Wolfsbane, and grudgingly allowed that maybe we are providing sanctuary and not building a werewolf army as Wenlock wanted them to believe. But it was close!"

Tonks frowned, puzzlement written across her young face.

"And Remus realised that should it be made public that the same werewolf who'd made such a mistake had started to openly date a daughter of the House, that attention wouldn't shift from him; the Prophet would continue to focus their attention on him. More publicity and attention and focus, and maybe the wizarding public would consider that we were rubbing their noses in the change we'd forced through. The potential for us to lose political ground and public opinion was huge." Sirius pointed a finger at her. "That's why he told you 'not now'."

"It shouldn't matter what people think!" Tonks said stubbornly.

"And there speaks the voice of youth." Sirius replied smoothly. "I can't even begin to tell you how many times I said the same thing to Remus at school, or even after school before it all went tits up." He gestured. "I'd tell him, 'Bollocks to the lot of them!' and rage against the laws even as I didn't do a thing truly to change them and I knew even then if our side won the war it wouldn't be much better for him. I resented the hell out of Remus for spending time with the packs and I wanted him to pretend to be normal." He held her gaze. "I was an idiot."

The implication she was acting just as idiotically led to a dull flush spreading over her face and down her neck.

"Of course, I was rebelling against my family and against my training in politics. So I forgot that my Grandfather who spent years grooming me as his Heir taught me that you have to remember society is more often a tortoise rather than a hare."
"What?" Tonks muttered, confused.

Sirius sat back down. "Ever heard of The Hare and the Tortoise? No? The hare was an arrogant cocky son of a bitch – actually a bit like me as a youth," he smiled ruefully, "he's the fastest and the best, can run rings round the rest of the animals. And he bullies the tortoise who is slow and steady. So the tortoise challenges the hare to a race. The hare agrees and they set off and the hare speeds into the lead. Only he gets a little complacent being so far out in front and decides to have a nap. While he's sleeping, the tortoise wins the race."

It was, Sirius mused, exactly what had happened with him and Peter back in 'eighty-one; Sirius had been too damned cocky and Peter had won.

Tonks frowned. "I don't know what this has to do with the price of eggs."

Sirius sighed. "Right now you're a hare just like I was and you want everything to happen now, for people to treat Remus the right way now, for you to be able to date without repercussions now. Now, now, now." He gestured at her. "Only society is the tortoise – it's nowhere near that finish line. It'll get there eventually but not today and not tomorrow, and maybe not soon enough for you to date and have a child with Remus without any backlash. And if we're too hare-ish, if we are perceived as being arrogant, as taunting and bullying the tortoise, we take the risk of pissing off the tortoise and may find ourselves challenged in return." He paused as he didn't think keeping up the analogy was useful. "Do you understand?"

Tonks nodded slowly. "So I've stuffed it up is what you're saying." There was a look of creeping comprehension across her natural face; its sharp angles and grey eyes so reminiscent of the face he saw in the mirror every morning.

"You've made mistakes but so have I." Sirius said firmly. "I shouldn't have indulged your pursuit of Remus. I found it funny, thought you'd make a good couple in the abstract and figured there'd be no trouble within the House if there was flirtation and a bit of a dalliance," which he'd been wrong about given the frosty atmosphere of the past month, "but I gave it no more serious thought than that, when really I should have thought about the bigger picture and stepped in."

"Remus thought about the bigger picture." Tonks said miserably. She hunched forward again. "I am an idiot. I pushed him into this and…now there's a baby and he doesn't even want to talk to me…" her voice went thick with tears.

Sirius pulled her into a hug and roughly rubbed her back. "Hey. It's going to be OK." He gave her a squeeze as she sniffed audibly. "Remus is one of the good guys you know."

"I know." Tonks said. "That's why I like him."

Sirius conjured up a handkerchief and offered to her. She took it and blew her nose loudly.

"What happens now?" Tonks asked, sounding utterly depressed.

"Right," said Sirius, "I'm going to go and talk with Remus. You can stay here and have a mug of hot chocolate. It'll make you feel better. And after Remus and I are done talking, the three of us are going to work out what to do next." He patted her on the back and disentangled himself from her.

He walked over to his study and taking a moment to breathe in deeply and centre himself, opened the door and entered. Remus sat in the chair by the fire, head in his hands.

Sirius sighed and made his way over, sitting on the edge of the sofa.
Remus dropped his hands and raised his eyes to examine Sirius's face searchingly. "Is she really…"

"Yes." Sirius said simply.

"I'll resign immediately, of course and…"

"Oh will you stop doing that every time something goes wrong!" Sirius said snappishly. "You're not resigning."

Remus gave a shaky laugh that bordered on the hysterical. "I just knocked up an unmarried daughter of the House I serve, Sirius, if that's not a reason to demand I resign…"

"She admits it was mostly her idea." Sirius said exasperated. "And I can well believe it since she caught you at a vulnerable time."

"I didn't exactly say no." Remus said, his face turning a violent red.

"And didn't remember a contraception charm either!" Sirius said dryly. "Bloody Merlin's balls, Moony! After the whole talk we did with Harry, how could you just forget!?"

Remus dropped his eyes, shame-faced. "I'll marry her, of course."

"Do you want to marry her?" asked Sirius bluntly. "Because I've never had the impression that you were that keen on pursuing something with her despite her interest."

Remus stiffened and nodded jerkily. "I can see why you have that impression but…" he motioned towards the study door and the woman on the other side, "that night, I mean before, uh, we'd discussed my concerns and she had an answer for every one of them. And I do like her. She's smart and funny and she accepts me. I still don't think I'm good enough for her but I do care about her, Padfoot."

Sirius believed him. Remus had never been the type to sleep with someone without genuine feelings being involved.

"And the baby?" questioned Sirius soberly. "Are you prepared for fatherhood? Is it something you've even thought about?"

Remus shook his head as Sirius knew he would. "You know I've never considered it with my lycanthropy." He frowned heavily. "What do I know about being a Dad?"

"You don't do badly with Harry." Sirius pointed out. In fact, most of the time he thought Remus did better with Harry than he did.

"It's not the same," Remus said hysteria edging into his voice, "you're responsible for Harry not me and…I don't know how to be a Dad."

"And I'll tell you what I told James when he fell through the floo half-pissed on firewhiskey and saying the same thing: you do know. You had a great Dad," unlike Sirius, "and you're not alone. You have us – me and Harry to help – and you have, well, Tonks will be around as Mum even if you two don't make it as a couple."

"I…I'm not even sure the pregnancy is medically sound, Sirius. I could have transmitted my lycanthropy to the foetus and…"

It was a valid concern.
Sirius sighed. "Come on." He got to his feet. "I don't want to leave Tonks alone for too long; she was pretty upset especially once I shoved the wider political implications of you two being in a relationship right now down her throat."

Remus paled again but obediently followed Sirius back into the main living area.

Tonks got to her feet as they approached, her natural silver gaze on Remus, Sirius's conjured handkerchief still clutched in one hand. "I'm really sorry, Remus. This is all my fault and…"

Remus took a couple of quick steps to her side and reached for her free hand. He picked it up and held it gently. "It takes two to duel as they say, Dora, and you were right before; I was being childish and I'm sorry I wouldn't listen to you."

"Good." Sirius said, feeling a rush of relief as the two of them smiled shyly at each other. Maybe the two of them together wouldn't be a complete disaster. "Now you've apologised and you're talking to each other again, I suggest a visit to Madame Pomfrey to get it confirmed officially and to allay any concerns regarding the effect of the lycanthropy on the newest member of the Black family. Then, you can both sit down and work out what you want to do and how you suggest we handle this publically."

Tonks stared at him. "You— you want us to decide?"

Sirius smiled at her. "I might be your Head of House but I do remember making your mother a promise that you would decide who you'd marry." He gestured at their clasped hands. "Your lives, your baby: you get to make some decisions. Two things: one, I won't be disowning you or firing Remus; two, I need you to consider in making your decisions the potential impact on the House's reputation. I think it goes without saying that I'm not going to be happy if your decision publically embarrasses us and trashes Harry's political agenda."

Remus squeezed Tonks' hand and nodded. "We understand, Sirius. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I'm not keen on rushing either of you down the aisle at wand-point just because of a baby." Sirius commented. "On the other hand, I'd like to mitigate the scandal as much as possible." He sighed. "You might want to consider leaving Britain and moving to the sanctuary for a while the two of you. It'd keep you out of the public eye and provide a measure of safety since Greyback's still after Remus and if he gets wind of a child..."

Remus blanched and Tonks looked more serious than he'd ever seen her.

"Now, shoo!" Sirius made wafting gestures towards the door. "Go get checked out, go home and discuss everything. Come back after dinner and let me know what you've decided."

He waited until they'd left before he made his own way out, easily navigating Hogwarts to the seventh floor corridor housing the Lost and Found room.

Sirius stepped inside and almost barrelled straight into Caro. "Sorry!"

Caro grinned and winked. "Not a problem, Sirius."

"The pleasure would have been all mine." Sirius flirted, enjoying Caro's light-heartedness after the situation with Remus and Tonks.

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true." Caro blatantly looked him over.

Sirius gave a bark of laughter. "You," he wagged his finger at her, "are going to get me into
"She gets me in enough of it." Bill's amused voice had them both turning to see him levitating another dozen broomsticks to the front of the room.

He placed them on a wooden platform and they disappeared.

"Amazing contraption." Sirius commented. "It transports it all straight into a Gringotts' vault?"

Bill smiled. "It makes getting the treasure out of inaccessible places a lot quicker."

"All I can say is thank Merlin we have some way of clearing this place," Caro commented. "Croaker's down that aisle there. He found some old books and got distracted." She pointed to the furthest row.

Sirius gave her a mock salute and went to find the Head of the DOM.

Bertie had found an old leather chair and had made himself comfortable reading a huge book with beautifully painted letters on parchment etched in gold. He didn't look up as Sirius approached, his attention completely subsumed by his find.

"Interesting book?" asked Sirius dryly.

Bertie hummed. It took another moment before he jerked his head upwards, blinking wildly as he suddenly mentally made the connection between the question and Sirius's presence. "Sirius!"

"I see you've found…something." Sirius said, staring at the book dubiously.

"One of the first potion books written by Slytherin!" Bertie shook his head. "It's remarkable!"

"What was it doing in here?" asked Sirius, glancing around the still never-ending piles of stuff around them.

"This item I rather suspect was hidden away by Riddle." Bertie murmured. "I suspect its original home was the Chamber of Secrets."

"That would make sense." Sirius commented. He motioned down the aisle. "Any luck with the diadem then?"

"It's not in this vicinity." Bertie said with a sigh, closing the book. "We have an accurate picture of the diadem, it is just a matter of locating it."

"He can't have come too far into the Lost and Found room." Sirius said. "Whether he stowed it on the way in or the way out, he was pressed for time."

"Indeed, although I suspect he cast something stronger than a notice-me-not charm so people wouldn't take note of it." Bertie said. "And, by the way, the elves have told me off; apparently this room is designated as the Come and Go room or the Room of Hidden Things depending on which elf you speak to."

Sirius waved away the discussion on the room name. "Perhaps Voldemort cast something that means the searchers get distracted by other interesting finds." He suggested good-humouredly, pointing back at the book Bertie still held.

Bertie grinned back at him. "Perhaps. Even so, I have hopes it'll be found this side of Easter with the system Caro has devised." He smiled. "Albus might want to argue for Caro and Bill staying on and
clearing the room completely. There are some valuable finds here – both historical, sentimental and monetary. Some of the latter might very well help the Hogwarts budget."

Sirius nodded his agreement. "Once we have the diadem, there's only the snake."

"And Voldemort himself." Bertie said grimly. "We are going to have to start thinking of strategies to trap him and turn the tables once and for all."

"We haven't made too much progress on the whole 'power he knows not' thing." Sirius sighed. "I would really like to make the acquaintance of a Veela who can introduce me to Lumiere's descendent so I can try for the original story of the Hallows."

"You know it may not even be that." Bertie pointed out crisply. "There's time yet."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I just came to see how it was going." Sirius said. "I should get back. I'm expecting Harry home for dinner."

"How's he getting on?" Bertie asked with genuine interest.

"Good," Sirius said with a fair amount of pride, "he's mastering magic above his year on a daily basis. His theory knowledge is still an issue but he's keeping pace with his year mates. Once we get this whole Voldemort thing out of the way, he might be able to sit OWLs in the core wand subjects by Christmas." He was suddenly eager to get back to his suite of rooms and his son.

Bertie waved him away with a knowing look.

Sirius changed back into Padfoot on the way back, happily scampering through the corridors and up the stairs in his Grim form and ignoring the occasional shriek of a student.

Dobby greeted him as he walked back in the doors. "Master Harry Potter being upstairs."

Sirius thanked the elf and bounded up to greet Harry, a little surprised that he was alone since there was still some time before dinner.

He found Harry sat on the window seat staring out into the darkening sky. He shifted his legs so Sirius could join him on the same seat.

It was clear from the frown lines creasing Harry's brow and the pensive expression pinching his face into tense angles that there was something bothering Harry. Sirius hoped it wasn't girl trouble again. He'd been more than thankful when Harry and Hermione had made up and he'd had enough drama after the shenanigans with Remus and Tonks.

"You want to talk about it?" prodded Sirius gently, nudging Harry's knee with his own.

Harry nudged back and turned his gaze to meet Sirius's. "Ron can't sustain the Bubblehead charm."

"It's a tricky one." Sirius agreed. "I'm pants at it myself."

"If it is Ron who gets chosen for the second task…" Harry trailed off, worry shining from his green eyes as he bit down on his bottom lip. "Out at the lake there was this moment where I thought it would be better if it was Hermione or Neville because then at least I know they can do the charm and be fine which is mental. I shouldn't even be thinking that."

Sirius hummed. "There was a time in our fifth year when the Marauders got caught out in the grounds by a pack of seventh year Slytherins. One of them went to use Crucio on your Dad and
Remus pushed him out the way and took the curse. After, I was pleased it was Remus and not your Dad because Remus knows pain and can take it whereas your Dad was innocent that way right then. No one had ever tortured him with pain before. Of course I felt rightly bad about thinking it was better that it was Remus so I know how you feel.

Harry's tension had eased with the story and he sighed. "It's a bit ironic, isn't it? I mean, a month ago I was dreading Hermione being part of the task and now I'm thinking better her than Ron."

"You know she's a better witch than he is a wizard. You know she's going to be more prepared and have more in her arsenal to help her deal with the unexpected." Sirius shrugged. "Ron's a good mate, surprisingly excellent at strategy and always willing to throw himself into a challenge, but he's lacking in her smarts and her power. I think you should want the person best qualified to survive be the one picked and not the one who is more likely to struggle." He pushed Harry's knee again. "The trick is not to feel guilty for the thought when it's not your fault that either of them might be picked."

Harry sighed but he nodded, his messy black hair bobbing up and down. "I just wish I knew more about what they were building on the lake."

Sirius nodded. The attempts to find out what was being done by the lake hadn't been that successful. Despite animals being able to see through the illusion, an animagus could not. A casual approach to the merfolk had also been turned down.

Harry gestured at Sirius. "How was your day? Did it go OK at the Wizengamot?"

Sirius made a show of pulling a face. "I complained to Richard that taking over the world was boring."

Harry chuckled. "Well, it's good it's settling down now though."

"You're right," Sirius conceded cheerfully, "and I have to admit a session without the family totems showing up unexpectedly and criminal confessions was slightly more relaxing. The most excitement we had was Griselda threatening to strangle Albus with his beard."

"What did he do?" Harry asked, amused.

"Complained again about the House of Potter holding the Wenlock proxy." Sirius said unconcerned; Albus's disapproval didn't matter to him. "I think Griselda and Tiberius are planning on calling him out one of these days." He shifted, poking Harry in the knee with a finger. "The more exciting drama happened after I came home." He proceeded to fill Harry in on what had happened with Remus and Tonks.

"She's pregnant?!" Harry was wide-eyed, his mouth falling slightly open before he snapped it shut again. "But you and Remus lectured Nev and me for hours."

"It wasn't hours," Sirius said defensively, before sighing, "and you have a point. He wasn't responsible and now you're going to get a real life lesson about living with the consequences. I've already told Remus that I don't approve of his teaching technique."

"Are they going to get married?" asked Harry, contemplating the issue.

"Probably." Sirius expected that they would. He understood from conversations he'd had with Hermione's parents, among others, that single parenthood and unwed pregnancy was losing the stigma it had once had in the muggle world. The wizarding world was still fairly old-fashioned in its mores though, and while Sirius wasn't going to force his oldest friend and his cousin down the aisle, he expected a backlash if they didn't wed.
"Stacey Polkiss – Dudley's friend's sister – she had to when she got knocked up." Harry mused out loud. "Aunt Petunia called it a shotgun wedding."

"We usually call them wand marriages," Sirius said, "because they take place with the groom held at wand-point by the father of the bride."

"It was a huge scandal on Privet Drive – kept the neighbours talking for months." Harry said. "Is it…?"

"It will be." Sirius confirmed. "But we'll just have to weather it." He hoped the pair would take his advice and go abroad. It was an old-fashioned solution to the problem – he remembered talk of the Head Girl Justine Markby leaving Hogwarts suddenly to go to France back when he was a third year; he'd run into her a few years later in Diagon Alley and she'd had an adorable child attached to her hip. It had been fairly easy to put two and two together.

"Well, we can let Moony and Tonks know they've got us, can't we?" Harry said firmly. "You said they're coming back after dinner?"

Sirius nodded and smiled proudly at Harry. "You're a good man, Harry; a good friend. Both Moony and Tonks are lucky to have you."

Harry coloured a touch at the praise but he poked Sirius back. "Dinner?"

Before Sirius could reply, his stomach growled loudly and both Harry and Sirius laughed as they clambered off the window seat.

"Come on then, Padfoot," Harry said brightly, "let's get you fed!"

Sirius slung an arm around Harry's shoulder in happy camaraderie. "Hey! I'll have you know I deserve a feast; I've had a very hard day!"
24th February 1995

Dear Harry,

Remus is going to mirror-call you later to say good luck but my Mum always sent me a letter when I was at Hogwarts and I thought I'd do the same.

As Remus has probably told you, life at Black Farm aka the Potter-Black Werewolf Sanctuary is settling back down after our arrival. I guess our turning up as a couple and with me up the spout really was like a boulder being tossed into a pond.

All the pack have pretty much accepted me now and I've heard no grumblings for over a week – not even from Sian!

Clara is fantastic. She and I have just clicked. We're best buds and she's appointed me as a teacher in the school they've set up here. It's mostly basic charms and transfiguration but it's keeping me busy.

Patrick, Remus's beta, is also a good laugh. He reminds me a bit of the Weasley twins – he's quite mischievous but very likeable. We're conspiring to cheer the place up a bit and ensure there's some fun every day.

The entire pack – and Gregor's pack – have gone crazy about the baby anyway. I've had to threaten hexing anyone who dares to refer to the kid as a cub but that's really what the pack considers the sprog. Martha, Gregor's wife, has started knitting up a storm which is good as neither Mum nor I can knit to save our lives.

Dad tells me Mum is still cross with me but will have come round by the wedding at Easter –

Speaking of the wedding, I've got to tell you this!

We had the Minister of Bulgaria over for tea the other night – apparently Bogdan and Remus get on like a house on fire – and Remus asked him if he knew of anybody willing to officiate and the next thing I know Bogdan himself is saying he'll do the honours! Remus has had to allow Gregor to make some kind of speech otherwise there'd be hurt feelings what with Gregor being the Alpha wolf in these parts (apart from Remus himself).

I really love Bogdan and his wife Hilde. They're really lovely. Hilde even told me that in old alliance relationships here it was traditional for the woman to prove her fertility before the union was given the official seal of approval with a marriage, and so nobody'll blink an eye around these parts at my walking up the aisle with a bump! And I have an open offer of a room at their estate every full moon which has relieved Remus I think since he was nervous of me about on the grounds of the farm even as protected as I would have been.

Well, that's my news exhausted for now. Sorry for rambling on!

Hope it all goes well with the second task! I'm sure you're going to knock 'em dead! And really, really, really sorry again, Harry, that we can't be there to cheer you on in person.

Keep your head above water if you can and in a Bubblehead if not!
Harry set the letter aside on his desk and stroked Hedwig's feathers as she nuzzled into his hand. He missed Tonks and Remus although, if he was honest, he missed Remus more. He'd gotten used to the older man being there and there was a definite Moony-shaped hole in his and Sirius's every-day life. It was weird coming back from classes and not seeing Remus in Sirius's study discussing something to do with the estates or with the alliance or the tournament plan or just musings in general. While Remus hadn't joined them for every meal, his absence was even more noticeable at the dining table, especially at the family meals. But, the main problem with Remus being gone was that his absence meant that Sirius was lonely. It was obvious to all that Padfoot missed Moony despite the daily mirror calls between the two.

He heaved a sigh and pushed his chair back from his desk. Hedwig had arrived early that morning and there was still a couple of hours to go before he was expected to head down to the lake for the beginning of the second task.

He opened his door and stopped short at the sight of the black Grim curled up on the landing, snoring. Harry's lips twitched even as a flood of affection swamped him. Sometimes he wondered which of them worried more about the tournament – him or Padfoot. Probably Padfoot, Harry determined. He stepped over the Grim and happily entered the bathroom first.

He missed Griffin House and their individual bathrooms more than he had ever thought he would. Not that he minded sharing with Sirius but Merlin knew that Sirius could take forever in a morning.

After making use of the facilities, Harry tapped the shower with his wand and a waterfall of water at exactly the right temperature rained down on him. He tilted his face up to the water and let it course over him for a long moment before he set about the actual task of washing his hair and body. He muttered over his favourite shower gel depleting again due to Sirius's liberal use.

It would be good to visit the farm at Easter, he mused. Not only for the wedding (which in truth he wasn't looking forward to attending much) but to see the sanctuary and to meet Remus's pack. It would also be his first holiday anywhere in Europe and he was keen to see how Bulgarian wizarding society differed from British. Viktor had offered to show him the Bulgarian Quidditch headquarters and stadium which he was really looking forward to seeing. Sirius had also mentioned that they might pop to another couple of countries during the holiday and spend the entire break abroad rather than at home in England. Harry figured it was Sirius's way of providing him with an incentive to look beyond the second task.

Doing a final rinse, he shook himself lightly and tapped the shower to shut it off again. He grabbed hold of one of the big fluffy robes and went over to the sink and mirror.

"You're looking pale this morning." The mirror tsked loudly.

Harry grimaced. He brushed his fingers along his jawline and did the shaving charm Sirius had taught him to remove any hint of bristles. He still didn't need to shave often but it was good to know he was developing in the right direction. He dried his hair and tried to style it before giving up on it.

When he reopened the bathroom door, Padfoot was missing from the landing and Harry figured Sirius had woken with the noise of the shower.

"Bathroom's free!" He called out loudly before diving into his own room to pull on a robe for breakfast.

He skipped down the stairs and settled himself at the table. Dobby immediately popped in and put
down a large bowl of porridge with berries thick in their syrup.

Harry's mouth pouted as he'd been planning on plain toast but Dobby looked at him sternly. "Master's Paddy bes telling Dobby yous be needing the energy in the cold water."

Yeah... he wasn't getting out of the porridge. He picked up his spoon dutifully and began eating. It was a stunningly good porridge; creamy and warm and with just a hint of ginger and cinnamon. He pulled over the Prophet and pushed it away when he realised the front page was dedicated to excitement about the task that day. Sirius's footsteps on the stairs had him lifting his gaze from his bowl momentarily.

"Morning."

"Morning, Pronglet." Sirius presented a hand mirror with a flourish. "For you."

Harry took it eagerly and smiled widely at the sight of Moony. "Morning, Remus! Tonks said you'd be calling in her letter."

"I'm glad it reached you alright." Remus said, his face blurring for a moment as the mirror stabilised. "She was worried."

"She said the Bulgarian Minister is going to officiate your wedding?" Harry commented.

Across the table, Sirius choked on his coffee.

"Bogdan has offered and we've graciously accepted." Remus confirmed. "Gregor will play Master of Ceremonies. Padfoot will be Best Man and you'll be a groomsman along with Patrick." He paused. "It was supposed to be a small affair." He sounded somewhat bewildered.

Sirius grabbed the Prophet and gave a snort of disgust.

Remus cleared his throat. "Anyway, I called about you not about me. Are you all prepared for today?"

Harry nodded. "I'm just waiting to see who is picked as my hostage. Apparently there's going to be some kind of ceremony to begin the task and we all think that's when the Goblet will choose them."

"I know you and whoever is chosen will do their best." Remus said calmly. "Just remember that Voldemort is bound to have stacked the deck somehow like he did with the Horntail. It's not going to be over until you're back inside the castle."

"I'll remember."

Remus's expression turned sad. "I'm so sorry I can't be with you."

"It's OK." Harry assured him.

"No, it's not," Remus contradicted him, "but Tonks and I need to stay out the public eye right now until we're respectable so... it can't be helped. I expect to hear all about it right after it's over though."

"I'll mirror call you afterwards." Harry promised.

"Stay safe, Snitch."

And with that the mirror went dark.
Harry handed it back to Sirius who placed it down on the table gently. Harry went back to his porridge and wasn't surprised when the empty bowl was replaced by a plate of waffles, crispy bacon and maple syrup. He made a good attempt but couldn't stomach anything more than a few bites. He pushed his plate away.

Sirius discarded the Prophet, sipped his cup of coffee and regarded Harry over the rim of the cup. "How are you holding up?"

Harry shrugged. "I'll be glad when it's all over." He fingered the cutlery lightly. "Did you see the Prophet?"

"Rita's not been kind to Diggory." Sirius agreed. "She can be a total bitch. Hopefully Cedric will be able to ignore it all."

Harry knew the bad publicity surrounding his father had distracted Cedric in his preparations through scuttlebutt in the Hogwarts' corridors. He just hoped it hadn't distracted the Hufflepuff too much.

"I'd best get ready." Harry allowed morosely.

Sirius nodded tensely, and Harry wished again that Remus wasn't abroad if only so Sirius would have someone to lean on.

He headed back up, paid another visit to the bathroom since his task outfit was going to make any further visits difficult and went back into his room where Dobby had laid out the clothes.

The first item was a thermal under-suit made of leggings and t-shirt, followed by a muggle dry-suit used for cold water diving which had been modified by magic to be as thin and as light as it could possibly be. He was assured that all the alliance would be wearing something similar on the off chance that they could be chosen as his hostage. It was a bit of a struggle to get into the garment but Dobby helpfully popped in to help zip him up.

Harry completed the outfit with a woolly hat, gloves and heavy winter cloak that covered him neck to toe. He shoved his feet into footwear made of the same materials as the diving suit but with a pliable rubber sole. All the outer-wear had been bespelled with in-built warming charms and staved off the cold.

He made his way back downstairs and wasn't too surprised to find Andy and Ted waiting for him along with Sirius.

"Cissy sends on her and her family's well wishes," Andy said as she greeted him with a hug, "they wanted to get a good seat. Shall we?"

Harry gently let himself be led out. Andy kept up a stream of light conversation which never touched upon Tonks, Remus and the baby or anything to do with the task. It wasn't too long before they got to the edge of the Lake.

"Champions over here, please!" Bagman yelled jovially.

Sirius was the last to hug him. "Good luck, Pronglet."

Harry nodded an acknowledgement, too choked up to reply. His nerves had his belly churning and he regretted the porridge. He should have stuck with toast…he yanked his mind off his nausea and took the opportunity to look around him finally.

Almost the entire lake had been edged with stands and they were filled to the brim with spectators.
The Durmstrang ship had been moved to the far side of the lake out of the way and visitors for
Durmstrang were housed on its deck. The lakeside closest to the castle had been transformed with a
massive landing platform jutting out across the lake; the judges' desk sat to one side with the Goblet
upon it, a VIP section to the other. Out in the centre of the lake there appeared to be a floating
wooden cabin.

Bagman waved Harry forward and lined him up next to a white-faced Cedric whose eyes were
pinned on the Champions' box which was right next to the landing platform.

Harry glanced over and saw Amos Diggory sat next to his wife. "It's good to see your Dad looking
better and out and about again, Cedric."

Cedric relaxed a touch. "Thanks, Harry."

Fleur shivered. "Weell they not get on wiz eet?"

Viktor nodded his grim agreement.

It took another ten minutes though with the judges taking their seats before Bagman finally
performed the sonorus spell to make himself heard.

"Good morning distinguished guests, professors, students and, of course, our four Champions!"
Bagman began.

There was a loud cheer.

"Now, some housekeeping before we start. Today's task is going to take place in and upon this fine
body of water in the construction you see in the centre and a matching one underneath. A magical
barrier has been placed around the stands to prevent any spectators from interfering. However as we
are aware it is difficult to see what is going on, events within the structures will be projected above
the lake in the same manner as some of the more expensive memory pensieves, although
unfortunately we haven't been able to get the audio to work."

There was another roar from the crowd. Harry wondered whether seeing what was happening was
going to make it better or worse for Sirius.

"Right, now to business!" Bagman said. "The task today involves each Champion rescuing a
hostage, more specifically the one who they have thought of most between Yule and the second task.
Who this hostage will be has to be determined by the Goblet itself. Once they have been chosen, the
Goblet's magic will transport them into the task." He whirled around to the judges' table and smiled
widely and falsely at Madame Maxime. "Perhaps it should be ladies first?"

"In that case it should be Karkaroff." Viktor muttered under his breath.

The Champions exchanged amused looks.

"My dear Headmistress if you'd be so kind to tap your wand against the Goblet, it will display the
name of the hostage for your Champion in flame." Bagman continued cheerfully.

The Headmistress followed the instructions. The Goblet surged to life and bright blue flames erupted
into the sky. They danced for a moment before spreading out and forming letters…Gabrielle
Delacour.

"NON!" Fleur said hysterically. "Non, ma petite soeur!"
But it was too late. There was a shriek from the Champions' box and the magical projection shot into being in the centre of the lake showing a bewildered miniature Fleur arriving into a room where a brief glance at the windows with fish swimming beyond the panes of glass, clearly showed it was on the bottom of the lake.

Harry frowned as he tried to ignore Fleur's panic; he tried to memorise the projection – the shape and size of the room, the details he could see…

"Headmaster Karkaroff," Bagman's smile had dimmed after the revelation of the Beauxbatons' hostage, "please do the honours."

Karkaroff immediately tapped the Goblet and it flared to life once more. The flames were purple but they immediately formed a name…_Natalie Warren._

Harry's eyes shot to Viktor's stony visage as the name of the Hogwarts' Head Girl blazed and the magic took her into the room. Fleur settled as the projection showed Natalie immediately moving to calm a visibly crying Gabrielle.

"I am courting Miz Varren." Viktor said quietly, providing an explanation.

Cedric grimaced and tensed. "I think I know who my hostage is likely to be."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Mine too." He muttered.

Dumbledore tapped the Goblet and because he represented both Harry and Cedric, he called out Cedric's name clearly. A brilliant yellow flame shot into the air and slowly transformed into words…_Susan Bones._

Cedric went bright red. "Cho is going to kill me!" He hissed. "I mean, Sue's been great about my Dad and spending time letting me rant at her but I didn't realise I was thinking about her that much!"

Harry could only nod dumbly. His attention was back on the Goblet; his flame was a brilliant red which immediately turned into…_Hermione Granger._ It took less than a second for her to join the others in the underwater room. He wasn't surprised when he saw her immediately take control and start to organise the others. He smiled ruefully; that was his Hermione.

"Mon Dieu! She speaks French!" Fleur babbled relieved at the sight of Gabrielle's face brightening as Hermione crouched down and talked with her.

"Yes. She loves France. She and her parents often holiday there." Harry said.

Bagman cleared his throat and wrenched his eyes away from the projection where Hermione, Susan and Natalie had all discarded their outerwear to reveal the form-fitting dry-suits. The sight of the three witches had many young wizards in the crowd wolf-whistling and shouting appreciation.

Harry decided the best thing to do was reveal his own matching outfit so he removed his own outerwear without any fanfare.

The realisation that the Potter alliance had planned, planned together, and planned well settled on the crowd.

Bagman jumped into the hushed silence. "Right! The rules of this task are fairly simple. Each Champion must exchange places with one of their opponents' hostages by performing a task within the uppermost structure. As soon as the first Champion is exchanged, the underwater room will begin to fill with water. If a Champion decides to leave the underwater room ahead of the other
Champions, they will flood the room and face an underwater obstacle path back to this landing deck where upon standing safely upon it, their hostage will be magically transported to them and the other Champions will be deemed to have lost and the hostages, uh, eliminated from the competition.

Well, that didn't sound ominous, Harry thought grimly. Knowing Voldemort, elimination was probably something permanent.

Bagman hurried on. "If the Champions leave the room together, they will need to be back here within an hour for all their hostages to be deemed safe and transported here. Any questions?"

"Do the hostages know what's involved?" asked Cedric pre-empting both Harry and Viktor – Fleur's attention was pinned to the projection where the three older girls had transfigured her sister's clothing into something close to the suits they wore.

"Yes. There is a copy pinned to the wall in both rooms." Bagman assured them. "If you're ready?"

The Champions all nodded.

Bagman waved his wand at the Goblet and a rush of sparkles gushed forth. "We begin!"

A surge of gold rushed around the Champions obscuring them and Harry felt the world melt away as the magic took him away.

o-O-o

Hermione smiled reassuringly at Gabrielle who was now decked out in a dry suit that would keep her warm and would assist her buoyancy if they went underwater. "You look very beautiful." She said in French.

"But of course." Gabrielle agreed with a Gallic shrug.

Hermione bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. "A moment, please, Gabrielle. The others and I need to confirm what we are doing here and how our Champions are going to rescue us."

Gabrielle nodded but she slid her hand into Hermione's.

Hermione led them over to the wall where Susan and Natalie were already considering the task description.

"Right," Natalie said briskly, "we're in the structure below; they're in an identical structure above." She pointed with her wand at the diagram. "They'll get a clue and instructions which will give them the information they need to proceed. There are four spells. A Champion must cast a spell upon another Champion. Each spell will handicap that Champion to some degree but the hexed Champion is exchanged with a hostage." She frowned. "No statement that they're exchanged with their own hostage though."

"It's possible each spell would be linked to a specific hostage though." Hermione mused out loud. "Cast the one that makes you vomit slugs, for instance, and be exchanged with me. Or cast the one that makes your skin purple and be exchanged with Sue."

"Somehow I don't think these spells are going to be that benign." Sue pointed out.

"There's nothing to say either way but this part of the task is clearly designed to encourage the Champions into hexing each other in order to get their hostages exchanged." Natalie said crisply. "Are we certain that they'll work together?"
"Unless one of them panics." Hermione confirmed with a nod. Theo had done a really excellent job at ensuring information was passed in a way that didn't contravene the instruction for the Champions not to collaborate in preparing for the task.

"Right then." Natalie continued. "So, we expect them to work out a way for them all to get down here. As soon as the first hostage is exchanged, this place will start to fill up with water." She glanced down at the young French girl. "Hopefully they'll take her topside first."

Hermione translated the discussion to Gabrielle, who unsurprisingly looked fearful about what would happen if she was in the room when it filled with water.

"Do not worry I can cast a Bubblehead charm on you to make sure you breathe." Hermione reassured her.

"Let's hope they take me next because I'm pants at the Bubblehead." Sue commented with dismay.

"Didn't you bring the back-up Gillyweed?" Natalie asked.

Sue shook her head despondently. "I didn't think I'd get picked. I mean, I was so far down the list for Harry and I never considered…" she coloured profusely. She grimaced. "Forget this task, Cho is going to kill me."

Natalie and Hermione exchanged a semi-amused look.

"Let's worry about that once we're out of this." Natalie said firmly.

"Harry knows about your problem with the charm." Hermione reminded Sue. "I'm sure he'll make sure you get exchanged second."

"And either Hermione or I can cast it on you if you are stuck down here for a while." Natalie said. She turned back to the wall. "If a Champion leaves before all of the hostages are exchanged, this room floods, and there's an obstacle course back to the landing deck. Let's assume that's not going to happen so once all the Champions leave they need to reach the landing deck within the hour of the task starting to trigger the magic that takes us from the room above back to the deck." She nodded. "All fairly straightforward."

"We should be on our guard though." Hermione pointed out. "The last task was sabotaged and we don't know how else this one might be."

"True." Natalie twirled her wand. "Right. Wands out then."

Sue nodded grimly. "And we protect the little one."

"Agreed." Hermione turned back to Gabrielle and translated the discussion again, finishing with their promise to look after Gabrielle until she could be returned safely to her sister.

They'd just finished when Viktor popped in and in a swirl of blue flames, Gabrielle disappeared.

Harry had landed in the task room and had been relieved to see he wasn't the only one who had stumbled. They had quickly agreed to working together and saving everybody. Harry still hadn't acknowledged that he had taken charge with no conscious thought about doing so nor that the others had let him despite him being the youngest. Having reviewed the instructions, it had been simple enough to find a clue under the statue of four monkeys.
"Speak no evil, brings the oldest monkey. See no evil, brings the smartest.  

Hear no evil, brings the youngest monkey. Think no evil, brings the kindest."

A list of associated hexes had been showed up on the wall as soon as they spoke the clue out loud. Having established which hostage was linked with each hex, they'd all agreed on the disability that they could each cope with best.

With Viktor hexed and gone, he and Cedric swapped relieved smiles at the sight of Fleur hugging Gabrielle and reassuring her in a torrent of French.

Cedric coughed. "Apologies," he said in slow accented French, "we need to continue the exchange or we will run out of time." He pointed at a conjured alarm clock that Viktor had conjured up.

"OK," Harry said, "so it looks like we were right about the hexes and how they're linked with the hostages."

"Viktor should be deaf now. That got us Gabrielle. We need to get Sue which means you're next Cedric since you're the one who can deal best with the happy hex and we think she's the kindest, uh, monkey."

"You mean I'm the only one who can't do blind, deaf or muteness." Cedric grimaced. "OK. Let's get on with it. Just…" he grimaced, "can you let Sue know I'm sorry about this?"

Harry nodded quickly, too aware that they were running out of time. He braced himself and performed the happy hex otherwise known as the Fool's curse. Until Cedric received the counter-hex nothing would phase him; a poisonous snake would be treated as his best friend, a sharp knife like a favourite teddy bear. It was a dangerous state of being and Cedric was going to have to rely on the rest of the Champions keeping him from putting himself in danger.

As soon as the hex hit, Cedric popped away and there was a rush of yellow flames as Susan appeared.

"Harry!" Sue hurried over leaving wet footprints on the wooden floor, and Harry hugged her briefly.

"You OK?" He asked, urgency creeping into his tone.

Sue nodded, rubbing her upper arms briskly to keep warm. He fired a warming charm at her and she smiled back appreciatively.

"Cedric said sorry." Harry murmured.

Sue blushed. "It's not his fault."

Harry simply nodded back in absent agreement. "Fleur and I have to get on with this."

"Don't worry," Sue said firmly, "all of us hostages know the score. We'll take care of each other."

"Zank you." Fleur led her sister over to them. She crouched in front of her sister and said something in a stream of French which sounded reassuring and comforting. She wiped away Gabrielle's tears and nudged her sister over to Susan. "Pleez, look avter her."

Sue wrapped an arm around the youngest hostage and nodded. "We will."

Harry and Fleur stepped away so they were both clear of the other two. Neither wanted to hit one of the hostages by accident.
"We'll cast together on the count of three." Harry said, struggling to keep his tone calm as his nerves shot up. In a moment he'd be mute and Fleur would be blind. He pointed his wand. "One, two, three."

Spells of lilac and pink snapped through the air and landed with precision.

For the second time that day Harry felt his world disappear.

o-O-o

Hermione sighed with disappointment as the red flames cleared and she found herself in the uppermost room with the other hostages. She had been up to her waist in water in the room below and it dripped down on the floor where she stood. She quickly did a drying charm and shivered.

She'd hoped that she and Harry would be able to spend a few moments together but because she had guessed that the final two Champions would have to hex each other at the same time, she'd known it was unlikely.

She gazed out of the small windows at the blue sky. A small hand crept into hers. She turned and smiled at Gabrielle. "OK?"

"My sister is very brave and she will rescue us all." Gabrielle replied with a certainty only youth could provide.

"Certainly." Hermione agreed lightly, glad that Gabrielle at least had had the opportunity to be reassured by her Champion. She repressed another sigh and looked at the concerned faces of her fellow Hogwarts' students. "I guess now we wait."

"Well, this just sucks monkey balls." Natalie said bluntly. "Are we just supposed to sit here like helpless idiots waiting for them to rescue us?"

"What are you suggesting?" asked Hermione, suspecting she already knew.

"They should all be swimming now for the deck, right? And no-one on the outside of the magical barrier surrounding the lake can help them." Natalie waved a hand around the room. "We're on the inside."

"But we're locked in." Sue protested.

"So let's find a way out." Hermione countered, seeing where the Head Girl was going immediately. "Professor Moody did say in his lesson on being in a hostage situation that if you are left alone, it's only sensible to check your environment thoroughly and ensure that there's no way to escape. And if we can leave the room, like Natalie says we can provide Harry and the others with support in the lake and – oh, they're all going to be swimming with a handicap so it'll be much harder for them! – and we can make sure that we're free in case of any sabotage!"

Sue's face settled into determined lines that reminded Hermione of the Director of the DMLE. "I'm in." Her eyes suddenly narrowed on Hermione.

"What?" Hermione asked nervously.

Sue reached out and grabbed something in Hermione's hair, tugging at it slightly and making Hermione wince. Sue immediately clapped her other hand over the one holding the something to keep it from escaping. "It's some kind of bug. Maybe I should just crush it but…"
"Let me see." Hermione asked.

Sue carefully opened her hands just enough for Hermione and the others to peek inside.

Hermione started grinning. "It's Luna's beetle! She's seen it a couple of times. It's a shame we haven't got something to put it in."

Natalie looked around and picked up the figurine of the four monkeys. "I can use this." She transfigured it into a jar and pierced the lid with some breathing holes.

Sue carefully transferred the beetle into it. "I'll hang onto it."

"Thank you." Hermione said, grateful since Gabrielle was once again holding her hand and clutching onto her.

Natalie grinned. "Alright. Now that's done. Let's start checking this place out for weak points."

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In the box, Alastor gave an amused snort capturing Sirius's ear. "I'll have to give those girls some points. They're doing a good job! Damsels in distress, my arse!"

"Alastor!" Andy complained half-heartedly.

Sirius's attention wasn't following the girls though; he was tracking the second projection which was following the Champions. His throat was too closed up with fear to speak. He was right at the front of the box, hanging onto the railing in front of him so tightly he figured there would be dents in the metal when he let go.

His son couldn't speak. Harry had been hit with a hex that took away his voice.

Harry was good with non-verbal casting, Sirius reminded himself for the umpteenth time since the hex had been cast. Ever since Harry had learned it was very useful in a duel, he had focused on making himself good at silent casting. He'd even managed the complicated Bubblehead charm non-verbally which was horrendously difficult.

Natalie had done the honours for Viktor (who apparently was just as pants at the charm as Sirius himself was) and Cedric (who was absolutely loopy under the influence of the Fool's curse) before she'd been transported away.

Ted breathed out heavily beside Sirius. "It's good to see they've employed a buddy system for the swim."

Sirius nodded jerkily.

Cedric had been teamed with Viktor. The Durmstrang student had cast a translation spell which enabled Viktor to see what Cedric spoke in Bulgarian, words appearing in the air above Cedric's head. The burly Quidditch player was able to keep Cedric in check, quickly pulling him back on track when Cedric's non-existent attention span had him distracted by something at the bottom of the lake.

More importantly to him, Harry and Fleur had been teamed together. Harry had cast a spell which enabled him to act as Fleur's eyes and they kept in synch with each other as they swam through the murky waters.
Viktor and Harry were using Quidditch hand signals to communicate. It was an excellent example of intra-school cooperation and Sirius wondered vaguely how the judges were going to score it.

A flash of something in the corner of the projection caught Sirius's eye and he reared back. "Isn't that…?"

Andy gave a horrified cry at the sight of an attacking sea snake. "I thought the swim was supposed to be without obstacle if they went together?!!"

"It was." Alastor said grimly. "But looks like we've got another case of sabotage!"

Sirius swore under his breath; his eyes pinned to the sight of his son stopping and turning to meet the newest threat to his young life…

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Harry heard the snake before he saw it.

"Tasty, tasty snacks!" The sea snake sounded vaguely Scottish.

He whirled around immediately, bringing his wand up. Fleur grabbed at him, horror written all over her face as she saw the threat through his eyes; easily the same size as the basilisk he'd faced, the snake was a silvery grey, its mouth was filled with a million sharp looking teeth, with black eyes dead and dull, razor sharp fins covered its entire spine.

Viktor swam up beside Harry. He signalled a 'what attack?' query and Harry shook his head. He pointed at Cedric who was clapping his hands with glee and cooing at the charging snake. Harry signalled for Viktor to take both the other Champions and to make a run for it. For a split second it looked as though Viktor would argue but he gave a sharp nod instead. He snagged Cedric, who had started toward the snake, with one hand, and Fleur with the other.

Harry turned his attention to the snake, missing the moment where Viktor directed Fleur onto his back and began swimming away. Instead, his attention was on the approaching monster. He swallowed hard, gripping his wand as he considered his options. He bet anything the snake's skin was magically resistant. The last time he'd had Fawkes but a phoenix couldn't appear underwater…

He could blind it though.

He cast quickly, sending the spell first into one eye and then into the other. The snake thrashed wildly, an underwater ripple bombarding Harry and pushing him away momentarily.

But Harry regained his position and swam against the push of the water. He wondered how he was going to finish the snake off as it readied itself to charge again.

And suddenly there was a white mist between him and the snake…

The form of a woman took shape, translucent and beautiful…ethereal with her old-fashioned robes, hair in ringlets that floated in the water, a warm and friendly smile…it wasn't Morgana but someone who looked very like her. More importantly, she held out a real gleaming silver sword with an ornate hilt.

Harry took it from her with a nod of thanks and saw a flame of writing appear along its blade…Take me up.

The woman dissipated into nothingness, revealing an angry snake in the water behind where she'd
Harry grasped the sword and dived out of the way as the snake made its first strike…

Tail, he remembered frantically, and pushed himself upwards just before it could hit him.

The snake circled him. "I can't see you but I can taste you! Give up little prey and let me have you!"

Harry adjusted his position, grateful more than ever that Sirius had taught him not only to swim but how to play pranks in the water. He manoeuvred himself with slow movements, first one way then the other…

Slowly…

Carefully…

The snake circled again, its tongue flickering out to taste the water…to scent Harry…

Slowly…

Its left eye so close…

An inch more…

Just a smidgeon…

Harry thrust the sword into the beast's eye and into its brain!

It screamed and thrashed tossing Harry away on a wave of water.

Harry stabilised himself hurriedly, trying to prevent the sword from dragging him down. He looked back and saw a stream of blackish red mixing with the murky green of the lake water. A rush of nausea almost caught him but he turned away and forced the snake from his mind.

He was running out of time!

He quickly got his bearings and struck out again for the landing deck. The sword seemed lighter somehow and he swam holding it out in front of him horizontally as though it was a floatation device. It gave his legs a lot of power that way and he could kick forcefully. He saw the bottom of the lake start to incline and his feet suddenly connected with the rocky ground. He was pleased with his rubber boots that kept his feet protected as he got his footing and stood, striding the rest of the way through the shallows until a goofily beaming Cedric and a sombre looking Viktor helped him up onto the landing deck, Fleur immediately moving to cover him with a warm towel.

As one they turned back to the upper structure and their hostages…

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The search of the room hadn't been fruitful.

There was no visible door – Hermione had even tried the way to get into the Room of Requirement, it hadn't worked – and the windows were magically warded. Magic bounced off them as they'd found the one time Natalie had tried shattering it. The glass was also unbreakable as Hermione had discovered when she'd transfigured a shoe into a rock and tried to throw it through the pane.

Eventually with all their efforts exhausted, Natalie conjured up some string and the three older girls
tried to distract Gabrielle by playing an elaborate game of Cat's Cradle. Unfortunately the room suddenly rocking violently as the usually tranquil lake turned as rough as the open sea, put paid to their attempt.

Gabrielle screamed and threw herself at Hermione.

"It's alright, Gabrielle," Hermione hugged the little girl to her, "the room floats and is very secure. We will be fine."

"What do you think caused that?" asked Natalie, shivering. For the first time since the task began the Head Girl looked disconcerted.

"Maybe the Squid?" Sue offered, touching Natalie's arm gently to comfort the older girl.

"Right," Natalie nodded, "I mean there's no need to assume anything bad."

"How much time do you think we have left in here?" Sue asked.

Hermione brushed her hair away from her face and cast a tempus spell. It was just gone nine o'clock. "The task started at eight, so allowing for our selection and the task officially beginning, they all need to make it back by around quarter past I think."

The room rocked again and Hermione tightened her grip on the little French girl. It was frightening and she wished with all her heart that Harry could have been beside her. She would have been scared – she always was – but somehow having Harry around made it all seem possible that they'd survive their adventures.

"Zou should tell, um, book." Gabrielle said suddenly in heavily accented English.

"A story?" Hermione asked softly.

"When I 'ave ze nightmare Maman et Fleur read to me." Gabrielle explained; the imperious command that Hermione should follow their example implicit in her tone.

Sue and Natalie exchanged amused looks with Hermione over the little girl's head which was buried in Hermione's shoulder.

"I guess I could tell a story." Hermione agreed. Her mind raced with ideas before settling on one. "Once upon a time, there was a young girl called Hermione and she was a witch. And she was so excited to be a witch that she read all she could and practised her magic all the time until she could go to school with other witches and wizards. Only because Hermione was very smart about books, she sometimes wasn't smart about other things like making friends."

She ignored the sympathetic and, what she assumed to be pitying, gazes of the other two girls. "One day she felt so very lonely that she spent all day crying in the bathroom. But because she was in the bathroom, she didn't know that an evil wizard had brought a huge troll into the school until it entered the bathroom."

"Was zee scared?" Gabrielle asked.

"Very scared." Hermione said, the memory of it sending a shiver through her, "but just before the troll could hurt her, two boys suddenly appeared, one with hair which was as dark as the night called Harry, and one with hair as red as a fire called Ron. Harry jumped on the troll's back and told Hermione to run but she was very scared and couldn't move. But just as she thought all was lost, Ron managed to use his magic and knocked the troll out with its own club!"
"Ron?" asked Sue a little sceptical.

"Wingardium Leviosa." Hermione said dryly. "He actually got the pronunciation right." She turned back to Gabrielle. "And ever since that day Hermione has always remembered that books and cleverness are all very well, but what matters most is..."

Flames surrounded them suddenly and the world melted away...

O-O-O

"...friendship, bravery and...oh!"

Harry grinned at the sight of Hermione, none the worse for wear standing on the deck beside him wearing one shoe, and without even hesitating he wrapped her up in a hug, transferring his warm towel to her.

"Harry!" Hermione hugged him back hard. "Are you alright? I take it you had no problems with the Bubblehead charm and what disability did you..."

Harry pointed at his throat.

Viktor's conjured alarm clock began to ring...

"Oh, you can't talk!" Hermione proclaimed almost excitedly. "That's so..."

BOOM!

Harry spun around, his wand in his hand and the sword at the ready.

"Oh God." Hermione murmured, grabbing hold of his arm.

The floating wooden structure that had housed the hostages had blown up, wooden splinters littered the lake and the debris was aflame.

"Look at the pretty fire!" Cedric said cheerily, clapping his hands. "We should have marshmallows!"

Hermione tried not to smile, biting her lip in sympathy for Cedric's unwittingly amusing commentary.

Dumbledore stood and waved his wand.

"Merlin!" Cedric sagged. "That was...weird." He suddenly caught Sue's gaze and they both went bright red.

Harry hid his smile at their discomfort.

"Merci, Professor, I can see again!" Fleur said, clutching her little sister close.

"Und I can hear." Viktor tenderly held Natalie's hand.

"And I can speak." Harry said with relief.

Dumbledore smiled at them all benevolently.

"Excellent!" Bagman said with more false bonhomie. "If the judges would take a moment to confer..."

They all turned back to the scene in the middle of the lake. The still burning debris had them all
sobering quickly.

"Wow." Hermione said softly. "If you hadn't..."

"Don't even think about it," advised Harry, wrapping his wand arm around her waist and taking comfort in the fact that she was alive and breathing and fine, "it'll only drive you insane." And be the stuff of nightmares, thought Harry grimly.

Bagman's voice suddenly echoed loudly around the lake. "The scores are in! As all our Champions and hostages displayed honour in working together to bravely navigate this task, they are all awarded full and equal points!"

A huge roar went up from the crowd and there was thunderous applause. Harry broke out into a pleased grin and he happily accepted handshakes from his fellow male Champions and Gallic kisses from Fleur and her sister. Finally, he drew Hermione close again and grinned at the sight of Viktor being crushed in a Gabrielle hug.

"Harry." Hermione murmured.

"Hmmm?"

"Why have you got a sword?"

And Harry suddenly remembered the blade he held in his hand. He raised it to his eye level and gazed at it anew.

It was beautiful.

Shining silver with a pommel of bronze and silver and gold.

"Where did you get that sword, Harry?" Cedric asked, moving to stand next to Hermione as he realised what they were discussing.

Fleur and Viktor moved to stand beside Harry.

"Eet is very magnificent." Fleur commented.

"Vou defeated the snake vith it." Viktor stated with certainty.

"Snake?" asked Sue, her voice rising.

Harry shrugged. "Don't worry, the snake's dead now." He raised the sword a touch, turning the blade so it caught the light. "It's why I needed this though."

Words suddenly ran along the blade in flame and Hermione gasped.

"Take me up. Cast me away." She repeated. "Oh Harry, do you know what sword this is?"

My first name has been lost to Time but the last was Excalibur, the words whispered into his mind.

Harry almost flinched and there was a distinctly masculine chuckle that followed.

Well met, Child of Merlin and Heir of Peverell, but unlike the Hallows that are of your blood, I am not meant for you, Wizard. Cast me away so I can one day serve our King again.

Thank you, Harry thought loudly, hoping the sword heard him somehow.
"Harry?" prompted Hermione.

He was unaware of the crowd's attention; the preternatural silence that had hushed every single witch and wizard, every single creature looking on…

"It's meant for the King," Harry said, oblivious to the glow of power in his eyes, the magic flowing around him, "not for me." He took a step forward to the edge of the deck and raised the sword above his head. He flung it as hard as he could towards the body of water.

The sword arched across the sky, turning and turning…

A hand rose from the lake to claim it, plucking it from the air with grace and surety…

The hand and the sword sank beneath the water.

And suddenly there was noise unlike anything Harry had ever heard as the crowd yelled and cheered and applauded and stamped their feet and whistled…

Harry searched out Sirius and grinned at his proudly beaming father who was clapping as though his life depended upon it. Satisfaction settled on Harry like a cloak. The second task was over and Voldemort hadn't won; he was still alive, Hermione was still alive, everyone had lived.

o-O-o

5 th March 1995

Dear Snitch,

Apologies for the password but security is key regardless that I've been nagged into writing a proper letter. Apparently Dora is of the opinion that a letter trumps a mirror call, and remembering how I often I have savoured notes and correspondence from loved ones, perhaps she has a point.

Firstly, I have to tell you that whatever Narcissa said to Andromeda it has worked a treat. Dora is fairly giddy at her mother's turn around. I have an idea that a Slytherin sly hint that Hilde was stepping in as Mother of the Bride and expectant Grandmother might have something to do with it – but don't ever tell anyone I said that!

I'm glad Hermione is pleased with her role as Bridesmaid. It seems as though the wedding party will almost be an entirely Black affair since I have you and Sirius, and Dora invited Anna to be Matron of Honour and she accepted (Simeon apparently is really looking forward to your anticipated trip to the Quidditch stadium).

Gregor has advised me to send invites to the other Alpha wolves so they'll be attending and Sirius mentioned the other day about inviting more of our allies since with Bogdan officiating we've had to invite Cornelius. So much for a small quiet wedding!

Luckily Dora is taking care of the details. I remember it was much the same with your Mum and Dad's wedding. Lily organised everything and James just nodded in the right places. He was just chuffed she'd said yes! Bit different with Dora and myself, but I want to assure you we're committed to making this work, and I count myself lucky.

On the pack side, I have to admit that living day to day at the farm has given me new insight, not only into our pack dynamics but the individual characters and the benefits of pack life. I confess suddenly being thrust into my Alpha role full time has been challenging but surprisingly much more rewarding than I expected. Clara and Patrick are wonderful and I couldn't run the pack without
them. They've been brilliant with Dora, and Patrick has taken Sian in hand so I don't have to worry about her making Dora uncomfortable here anymore.

I'm glad Ron liked his birthday present. The Bulgarian Quidditch World Cup Journey was apparently a best seller here right after the event. It was very nice of Viktor to sign it for him. I hope the final match of the season goes well for him and Ginny and that Gryffindor wins next week!

Speaking of fortuitous events it's an amazing stroke of luck Fleur's mother being able to provide an introduction to her "Grande-Tante" Vivien. After all the searching we did to find someone who could introduce us to Lumiere's last descendant and Fleur was right under our noses all along! Of course it probably helped that her mother was so grateful for the way you and Hermione helped save both her daughters! And yes, I think Sirius knew exactly what he was doing when he asked the Delacours if they knew Vivien when they joined you for the 'We Survived the Second Task' celebration meal – he's sneaky that way.

I've attached my suggested training and lesson plan for the final task for you to compare with Hermione's. Stay safe. And don't worry about Padfoot – I talk with him every day, I promise.

Love, Moony x

Hermione handed Harry the letter back and perused the plan with pursed lips, settling back into the comfortable cushions of the sofa in the quarters Harry and Sirius occupied in Gryffindor tower. She pushed a hand through her hair, her fingers tangling in curls before Harry gently extricated them. She tossed him an absent-minded smile and continued reading.

Much of Remus's plan involved physical training to build stamina, Dark creature spells – defensive and offensive – curse-breaking spells, and general navigation. Hermione nodded, pleased.

It all correlated with the research group's findings that the third task invariably was some kind of all-round challenge through some kind of obstacle course. Variations of mazes and gauntlets had been used several times, the surrounding countryside around a school was another popular choice (there was a historical record of the Forbidden Forest being used which was just mind-boggling), the inside of a school on very rare occasions, and an underground labyrinth just the once.

"This is very comprehensive." Hermione said, handing it back to Harry. "I have a similar list the research group has compiled. We'll go through them next week at the alliance session."

She hid a smile as Harry read through the plan himself. Just a year before he would have discarded it, uninterested and simply trusting her to tell him what was needed. She did miss that note of absolute trust, she acknowledged honestly, but she had decided she was more pleased about Harry's improved academic performance and his maturity too much to miss it all that much. She pressed into his side.

"Have you and the other Champions discussed working together again?" Hermione asked as Harry carefully folded Remus's plan and put it back in the envelope.

"We figure Voldemort and his cronies are going to make everything as lethal as they can so we're agreed that we'll help each other out if we see one of us is in trouble and needing aid but that's it." Harry shifted so he could place his arm around her and she snuggled into his side.

Harry and Hermione had arranged a date in Hogsmeade that day, so Hermione had also obtained permission to eat with Harry that night. Sirius, who was effectively playing chaperone as far as Professor McGonagall knew, had winked at them and retired to the study leaving them alone.

"I guess it is a competition." Hermione said wryly, reaching up and linking their hands together.
"Hmmm." Harry's hold on her tightened imperceptibly and she guessed he was thinking back to the second task. "And we are all very competitive." He said dryly.

Hermione grinned at him. Harry for all his humility hated losing; Krum was an international Quidditch player with competition in his blood; Cedric was a sportsman with the same, and Fleur had made herself the best of the best to combat preconceptions. He was right; they were all very competitive. In some ways it made the fact that they had worked together on the second task even more remarkable.

"I still wish we'd been able to do more than just sit around and wait for you to rescue us," Hermione complained lightly. It smarted that she'd been unable to rescue herself.

Harry shook his head. "You did everything right. You kept your head, didn't panic when the room started flooding when you were down below, and you kept everyone's spirits up when you were waiting. You were brilliant."

"Hnmph." Hermione sighed.

"And you caught an illegal animagus." Harry pointed out, gleeful laughter suppressed in the statement but evident nonetheless.

"That was Sue more than me." Hermione admitted. "And we didn't even know what we had until Professor Moody turned up."

He'd crashed the after-party celebration the Potter alliance had held in Sirius and Harry's rooms wanting to know who the additional animagus was that he could see in the wards. According to Harry, who'd gotten the story from Sirius, Rita Skeeter had been forced back to her original form and then some kind of deal had been worked out between an irate Director of the DMLE, the paranoid professor and Sirius himself.

"Moody would never have given you and the others points if you hadn't impressed him." Harry pointed out.

"Cho has been saying she could have gotten out of the room." Hermione admitted to what was really irritating her.

Harry shook his head again. "I don't see how and she's just sore still about Susan."

Hermione grimaced. She did feel for Cho. Finding out your boyfriend had been thinking more about another girl had to have been mortifying. Within a day of the task, the couple had a furious break-up which had had the school gossiping for days and it had even made the front page of the Prophet. It was no wonder Cho was being slightly less than gracious about things if Hermione thought about it enough, and presumably Hermione wasn't the target of her ire but Sue.

Poor Sue had gotten hate mail. Hermione had been horrified that someone had laced one of the letters with bubotuber pus. That had led to an official investigation – really sending a malicious letter to the niece of the Director of the DMLE was very stupid – and they'd managed to track down the sale of bubotuber pus to Marietta Edgecomb's mother who had confessed to sending the letter. Marietta was Cho's best friend and there was a rumour it had really been her but her mother had taken the fall for the stunt so that Marietta wouldn't be expelled. Mrs Edgecomb had lost her job and had to pay damages to the House of Bones.

Sue and Cedric were still dancing around each other. It was very evident that they liked each other but the way their feelings had been revealed and the fallout had effectively made it very difficult for
them to progress.

Unlike Ron and Lavender who had leaped into couple-dom with enthusiasm.

Hermione's lips thinned.

As much as she appreciated that as she had predicted Ron finding a girlfriend had given her and Harry more time together, she really didn't approve of Ron and Lavender's very public displays of affection. It had been worse in the first week, and she had quietly been relieved when Fred and George had taken their youngest brother aside and warned if he continued groping a girl that way in public their mother would be informed. Parvati had performed the same role for Lavender, taking her friend aside and lecturing her about reputations. The couple had toned things down since but most evenings they could be found in the Gryffindor Common Room with Lavender on Ron's lap, and thanks to sharing a dorm, Hermione knew exactly how far Ron had gone with Lavender in a broom cupboard of all places.

Hermione wondered if she and Harry were weird for not being all over each other and eschewing broom cupboards…

"You're thinking too hard." Harry said.

She blushed furiously as she considered exactly what she had been thinking about and was insanely pleased Harry couldn't read her mind. But the question nagged at her. "Do you ever wish we were more like Ron and Lavender?"

Harry tensed beside her and shifted so they could look at each other fully. Hermione instantly regretted the inches of space that opened up between them.

"Are you…unhappy with…" Harry began tentatively.

"No!" Hermione immediately reassured him, and the uncertainty that hovered in his green eyes fled. "I'm very happy!" She said firmly. "Very." She blushed again. "It's just…well, we've been going out longer than Ron and Lavender and…"

"They're a lot more further along with the physical side than we are," Harry finished bluntly.

"I'm not saying I want to be like them," Hermione reiterated, "I like the fact that I don't have to wonder about your hands wandering and I like how we kiss each other," she ignored her hot cheeks, "and I don't see the need for any of what we do do to be in public. I mean, this is nice; snuggling on a settee in front of a fire and holding hands, but I wouldn't want…you know."

"I know," Harry agreed, laughter lightening his words although his cheeks were as red as hers, "I like what we have too." He hesitated for a moment before continuing, his gaze dropping to their joined hands. "I have thought about doing, uh, more but…I figure when you want more you'll let me know. But I definitely don't want to do it in public like Ron. Merlin knows with my luck it'd be on the front page of the Prophet the next day no matter what Sirius has cooked up with Skeeter." He peeked up at her.

Hermione smiled at him, filled to the brim with fond affection. She leaned in and kissed him sweetly.

They settled back into their previous position.

Hermione gave a soft sigh. "You know the wizarding world confuses me sometimes."

"Confuses me all the time." Harry rejoined.
She poked him in the ribs. "I mean, Tonks slept with Remus and Lavender is all over Ron, but on the surface of it, wizarding culture is very conservative. I thought they'd be more of an emphasis on waiting, you know, until you were married."

"I don't think it's that much different from the muggle world." Harry countered. "I mean, it's still frowned on, isn't it? Especially babies before marriage?"

"Yes, but Tonks wouldn't have to get married in the muggle world." Hermione pointed out. "And Lavender, well, she and Ron might get a few comments from the older generation, but you have to admit most muggle people our age would probably not think anything of it. Parvati told her she was in danger of painting herself as a scarlet woman!"

Harry shrugged, the movement rolling her slightly into him. "The only muggle kid of our age I really know is Dudley and the thought of him and any girl…"

They both said it at the same time. "EW!"

They chuckled and squirmed ever so slightly closer.

"I just think it's a shame Tonks has to get married." Hermione commented. "I mean, I'm happy to be a bridesmaid but I'm not sure what to say to her. It's not exactly a love match so the usual congratulations seem inappropriate." And Andy had been very upset with her daughter. It was good they'd moved past the breach but it had been a doozy.

"I don't think they have to get married," Harry said, "Sirius wouldn't have insisted and I mean, sure, there'd have been a really big scandal when it came out about the baby but it would have died down eventually." He paused for a moment as though thinking and sighed. "Sirius said to look at it as though Moony had an arranged marriage, and since he and Tonks do like each other, it means that they have a good chance of the marriage working out."

"I'm surprised it hasn't made the press yet." Hermione said.

"It's going to come out a lot sooner than they want if they keep inviting people to the wedding." Harry said grumpily. "It was supposed to be just family."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing Bulgaria." Hermione said enthusiastically, changing the subject.

"Me too." Harry said. "Sirius said he'd try and ensure we weren't too bogged down with wedding stuff."

Hermione relaxed happily, content. She let her mind drift, thoughts of homework flitting by and being replaced with thoughts of the third task and back to Remus's letter. She frowned.

"You know Remus's letter?" She asked.

"I'm familiar." Harry answered teasingly.

She poked him in the ribs again and there was a brief tickling match before they resumed their snuggling.

"No, seriously," Hermione said, "what was Remus going on about with that thing about Lumiere and Fleur's mother introducing you all to some descendant?"

Harry tensed and she knew without asking that she'd hit on one of the topics he wasn't meant to talk
to her about. She reminded herself of the lecture Sirius had given her not long after she and Harry had made up as a result of Harry's promise to ask Sirius if they could tell her more. Her cheeks burned just thinking about it; she had been told briskly that Sirius had given Harry permission to confide in her using his own judgement but she wasn't going to be told everything and she wasn't to put pressure on Harry to talk about the things if he didn't want to; that Sirius had expected her to act more maturely not make Harry feel guilty or make it a requirement of their being together. She'd come away feeling slightly ashamed of her previous demand to be confided in more and had apologised to Harry.

"You don't have to tell me!" She assured Harry quickly.

She felt his tension seep away, his frame relaxing again. Her eyes widened when he performed a privacy charm, his eyes flickering to the closed study door.

"Harry…" she began, torn between not wanting him to get into trouble with Sirius and simply wanting to know.

"I don't think there's too much of a problem telling this." Harry assured her. "You remember how I told you the Headmaster's wand used to belong to an old ancestor of mine?"

She nodded, possibly too eagerly because his eyes lit up with amusement.

"Right, so, there's this wizarding children's tale called the Three Brothers." Harry explained. "There are a lot of variations and the most popular is in a book called the Tales of Beedle the Bard and yes, you can borrow my copy."

Hermione shot him a look but she had been about to ask so didn't argue about it.

"In the story, three brothers Antioch, Cadmus and Ignotus come to a raging river and they know to cross it means certain death." Harry continued. "But the three brothers were clever and they took a nearby elder tree and made a bridge. They all crossed safely to the other side only to be met by Death himself who was a little put out that he'd been thwarted."

Hermione found herself captivated as the story unravelled; Death, his relationship with the three brothers and the gifts they'd received from him.

"Eventually, the three artefacts became known as the Hallows and the legend that was passed down was that should all three be united, the owner would become the Master of Death." Harry finished.

"It sounds like a fable," Hermione commented, "with the lesson being slightly obscure."

Harry smiled at her. "The three brothers had a last name, Peverell. Ignotus Peverell is my late ancestor."

"Oh my goodness, Harry!" Hermione sat upright, pulling out of his embrace. "But then…your cloak!" Her eyes widened even further. "And the wand!"

He hushed her. "So, Sirius's grandfather did a whole stack of research into the Hallows. Everyone believes that the story is just that a story but it was based on a real life event of the three brothers inventing the three artefacts in order to defeat an evil wizard."

Hermione subsided. "Logically," she admitted, "that makes a lot more sense." She considered everything for a long moment, facts and information aligning themselves in her head. "You think they could be useful in defeating Voldemort." She concluded.
"Maybe," Harry shrugged, tangling their fingers together again, "we really don't know. I doubt very much that just owning the artefacts makes you Master of Death and besides while they're each kind of cool, none of them really scream Awesome Weapon of Doom except maybe the wand. I mean, my Dad used the cloak for pranks."

"I guess you're right." Hermione agreed.

"Anyway Lumiere had a written account apparently told to him by Ignotus of how the artefacts were created." Harry explained. "The only real copy that isn't buried in an archive is owned by his descendant, Vivien Verte. She's a Veela living in a protected colony…"

"And Fleur's mother can provide an introduction." Hermione said, suddenly understanding that part of the letter fully.

"But we're not really making it widely known that we're after it, although we had to hire a French antiquities dealer to track down the other lead and we think he might have already given the game away so that's why I don't think it matters telling you but even so…" Harry said.

Hermione understood that immediately. "I won't say a thing." She mimed zipping her mouth closed. She settled back into her previous position and cuddled closer to Harry who with a flick of his wrist dismantled the privacy bubble.

Obviously Harry was right and the whole Master of Death thing was wrong but if the three artefacts did have power enough to finish a Dark Lord…they were a fantastic weapon. Of course, even if the Hallows were powerful, someone still needed to know where they were. Harry presumably had the cloak, and the Headmaster the wand, which only left the stone unaccounted for…

Hermione sneaked a look at Harry. Did he know where it was? She bit her lip and considered asking him but he'd told her about the Hallows and that was enough. If he did know where the stone was, well, maybe it was safer that knowledge stayed with as few people as possible. She suddenly realised how Harry must have felt about keeping things secret…

Sirius had been right to lecture her, Hermione mused. She'd stop nagging Harry for details and just continue supporting him. She shuffled closer, pressing into the warmth of his body, before kissing him sweetly.

Harry blinked at her bemused. "Not that I'm complaining but what was that for?"

"For being you." Hermione said.

Harry smiled at her a touch goofily. "OK, then."

Hermione settled back against him. "So," she began, "about the third task…"

o-O-o

12th March 1995

Sirius was somehow unsurprised to find Harry waiting for him at the breakfast table despite the insanely early hour. He knew Harry wasn't happy about Sirius's trip to Italy.

"You didn't have to get up." He admonished his son, even as he ruffled Harry's impressive bed-head and dropped a kiss on the messy nest of dark hair.

"I wanted to see you off and say goodbye." Harry said, nibbling on his toast.
There was no sign of any other breakfast in front of Harry and Sirius frowned. "That's not all you're having."

Harry shrugged and stared at his plate.

Sirius sighed, knowing the cause of Harry's lack of appetite was worry. "I'm going to be fine, Harry."

"You can't guarantee that." Harry argued, his green eyes flashing up to glare at Sirius.

"No," Sirius conceded raising a hand in supplication, "but this isn't me walking into a trap with only Snape at my side. Amelia has set this up so I'm going to be perfectly safe – both me and Richard."

The plan to get Fevrier and whoever was pulling his strings had been well thought out and Amelia had pulled in the Italian authorities, some of the Rat Squad and Moody to ensure everything ran smoothly. The ambush was scheduled to happen in Italy and Sirius had an international portkey waiting for him at the Ministry.

"I just…" Harry sighed heavily, "I keep remembering the last time and how badly injured you were and…"

And how Harry had felt when he'd thought Sirius was dead, Sirius concluded.

Sirius got up and rounded the table, tugging Harry out of his chair and into a tight hug. "I'm going to be fine. There is absolutely no danger of my being hurt, I promise. I wouldn't do that to you again."

Harry held onto Sirius for a long moment before his head jerked into an acknowledging nod. Sirius squeezed him gently again before easing back. He stroked a hand through Harry's hair. "I'll mirror call you when I get to Italy."

"And when it's over." Harry requested immediately.

"And when it's over." Sirius promised. "The very minute."

Harry sighed and stepped away. "You'll be back tonight?"

"Yes, and Minnie should be here any minute." Sirius confirmed. He gestured at Harry's fetching dressing gown and pyjamas. "You may want to get dressed before your animagus lesson. It would be the first one the irate Head of Gryffindor had allowed since Harry had used his crow form to access the girls' dorm."

Harry nodded. He lurched forward and hugged Sirius hard again but letting go, heading to the stairs. "Good luck in Italy!"

Sirius gave a bemused nod of thanks and sat down to eat his own meagre breakfast – Harry wasn't the only one with nerves. He thanked Dobby as he set down a simple breakfast of boiled egg and toast. He'd just finished when the door to the suite opened and Minnie stepped through.

He waved at her to join him at the table and wasn't surprised when Dobby immediately popped up to provide her with a strong pot of tea and a breakfast of kippers and freshly baked bread.

"Thanks for coming over, Minerva." Sirius said, folding the Prophet and setting it aside. "I know Harry feels too old for a babysitter but I feel better knowing someone's here keeping an eye on him."

"It'll be good to resume our lessons." Minnie replied, pouring herself a cup of tea. "Perhaps I was a
little harsh insisting on such a long suspension."

"He won't be doing it again." Sirius assured her, keeping his opinion that the two month suspension was far too severe for the transgression to himself. He had actually continued the lessons in Minnie's absence but both Harry and he had agreed that they'd keep that little secret to themselves.

"I have asked Hermione and Ronald to join us later." Minnie informed him briskly, setting to her breakfast with enthusiasm.

"Ron still stuck on the paw?" asked Sirius idly.

"He has a whole foot now but can't seem to get any further." Minnie said with a sigh. "It's still better progress than Miss Granger who has yet to identify her form."

"Maybe she should use the potion." Sirius suggested. "It would at least get her a form to try."

"You may be right." Minnie agreed. "I will see how today's session goes." She smiled. "I thought I might see if Harry wanted to try one of his other forms."

That would keep Harry's mind occupied for sure, Sirius thought with a touch of amusement.

She suddenly pinned him with a frank look that made Sirius feel he was a Hogwarts' student again. He repressed the urge to squirm in his chair.

"Are you certain that today is necessary?" asked Minnie pointedly.

"It's a good plan Amelia's put together." Sirius countered. "There's a chance that whoever put Fevrier up to this has some idea about the whereabouts of Riddle and company," his lips twisted as the thought that Peter was one of that company flitted through his consciousness, "that alone makes it necessary."

"Very well." Minnie said, but waved her knife at him. "Just make sure you return. No-one wants a repeat of what happened during the Christmas break."

"Me included." Sirius retorted, feeling a little testy at the chastisement.

Minnie sighed. "You do realise that we worry about you for your own sake and not just for Harry's, Sirius?"

Sirius didn't know what to say to that. He'd just assumed everyone's concern was for his son because, if he was truthful with himself, that was where his own concern was focused. "Oh."

Minnie rolled her eyes and shooed him away from the table. "Stay safe, Sirius."

"I will." Sirius stood. It was time for him to travel to the Ministry. He sketched a salute at Minnie, glanced back up the stairs to where Harry was currently occupied, and with mixed feelings headed out.
Amelia lowered the omniculars and glared at the ancient wand shop across the narrow and uneven Roman street. She was secreted away in a small room on the second floor of a guest house opposite to the shop which they were staking out. The air was a touch chilly despite the early morning sunshine and she was glad of her comfortable battle robes. She reached for the small cup at her elbow and breathed in the bitter scent of espresso coffee. She sipped appreciatively.

"I don't know how you can drink that muck." Alastor grumbled behind her.

"Remind me why I invited you along again?" Amelia said dryly.

"Harrumph." Alastor retorted. He plucked the omniculars out of her grasp, raised them and grunted. "We've got movement at the bottom of the alley." He tutted. "It's a cat."

"I'll alert the others." Amelia snarked.

Alastor shot her a disgruntled look. "When's Black's appointment?"

"Eight." Amelia checked the time. "It's coming up on seven." Nerves fluttered in her belly but years of operations and missions had her controlling them with steely practice. She took a deep breath.

There had been weeks of planning for the op, Amelia reminded herself, and a great deal of diplomatic cooperation between England and Italy to work out the details. It was just as well Hatter was back in charge of the Department for International Cooperation because Merlin knew Crouch would have bollixed it up. She felt a pang for thinking bad of the dead but pushed it away dismissively. She hadn't been fond of Crouch Senior when he was alive and she wasn't going to pretend because he'd passed on – especially given the mess he'd left behind with his son.

Alastor hummed beside her and tapped on the communication mirror. "This is Eagle's Nest. Position check."

"Italian Stallions are in position."

The crisp response only held a hint of an Italian accent. Marco Morello, the Head Italian Auror, was highly educated and intelligent, a force to be reckoned with. He was also familiar with Sirius having worked with him in the war, apparently had a similar sense of humour, and was eager to assist. It helped that the Italians had been tracking Cavietti for years but had never gotten enough evidence of illegal activities to make any charges stick. The Italians had staked out the café next door to the wand shop as their hidey-hole; two experienced Aurors had replaced the usual waiters while the rest of the team had taken over a back-room.

"Rat One in position." Keith Brooks replied.

Amelia pressed her lips together. Brooks was positioned in the alley behind the wand-shop disguised as a homeless beggar huddled into the walls.

"Rat Two in position." Marina Ambrey confirmed, her visage floated over the mirror and she was making faces as though pretending to check her appearance as she was stationed by the apparition point in the Roman courtyard just around the corner.

"Rat Three, the Dog and Bone are in position." Tim Chambers confirmed although the mirror stayed dark. He was back in England, watching over the exit point at the portkey office.
And that was the last of the Rat Squad involved with the op. Wood and Cambridge had been left out to keep following up any leads in England on Voldemort and the others' whereabouts.

"Next position check in fifteen minutes unless the buggers turn up." Alastor ordered. "Eagle One out."

"Shouldn't I be Eagle One?" Amelia complained good-naturedly.

"I still beat you out on age, lass." Alastor wagged his finger at her and picked up his flask. He took a swig of his drink and smacked his lips exaggeratedly. "Nothing like a good cup of tea."

"If that's just tea in your flask, I'm a monkey's uncle." Amelia commented. She tapped her cup with her wand and it refilled with more aromatic coffee.

"So," Alastor said brightly, "I heard you put Tonks on a sabbatical so she could guard Lupin abroad."

Amelia darted a quick look at him and wasn't fooled by the patently false innocent look he'd plastered on his misshapen face. "She invited you to the wedding, didn't she?"

"No sense of discretion that one; didn't even have security spells on the letter." Alastor agreed. "Rita might be watching herself now but it's only going to be a matter of time before another one of those vultures gets wind of it if Tonks doesn't smarten up."

"She's driving Sirius to distraction." Amelia sighed heavily. "If she wasn't on a sabbatical, I'd call her on the carpet."

Alastor grunted. "Didn't stop me. I sent her a Howler. You should do the same. Might knock some sense into her. Getting herself up the duff's no excuse for becoming an idiot."

"Alastor!" Amelia admonished him even though she inwardly agreed with his assessment.

She was disappointed in Tonks; she'd had such high hopes for the young Auror. Despite Tonks' family connection and her skills, Amelia knew the unplanned and out of wedlock pregnancy would impact the young woman's career and her future prospects, particularly with her male superiors. The fact that it had happened with a werewolf regardless of who he was and the position he held…

Amelia grimaced, shamefully recognising her own prejudicial bias but unable to completely suppress her horror at the thought of intimacy with someone who carried the lycanthropy disease. If he bit her in a moment of passion…it didn't bear thinking about.

But Remus was a good man and an honourable wizard. He was doing right by Tonks in marrying her and had taken the sensible approach of taking them both abroad to hopefully delay the revelation of the union and prospective addition to the House of Black until Sirius and the Potter alliance had done enough to minimise the political fallout.

It would be a shame for Lupin, Amelia thought, if the consequence of the dalliance undid every positive measure Sirius had secured for his oldest friend. Quite honestly, Amelia could hex both Tonks and Lupin for their selfish behaviour. What had they been thinking?

Maybe Alastor had the right of it, Amelia mused; maybe she should send Tonks a sharp reminder not to be idiot.

"We have movement." Alastor said suddenly.
Amelia snatched up the omniculars and scanned the street. Cavietti was approaching from the North end. With his small stout stature Cavietti appeared to roll rather than walk. She sniffed in disgust at the oily black hair and overly groomed moustache. The wand-maker barrelled up to the café and went inside for his usual morning double espresso.

Ten minutes later, he barrelled back out and made for the door of his shop. He had tucked the morning paper he had snagged from the café counter for their customers under his arm.

"Thief." Amelia muttered under her breath.

Cavietti weaved his wand in a complex pattern to unlock the wards and a moment later he was in the door.

The mirror flared to life. "Fevrier's arrived and on his way." Ambrey reported crisply, even as she mimed checking her lipstick. "Two others with him; man and woman." The mirror went black again.

"Got them at the South end." Alastor said. "Coming up the street now."

The mirror flared again. "I've got company. Black cat; unusual markings; sitting on the wall outside of Cavietti's. Going silent." Brooks said tersely.

"An animagus?" Amelia wondered out loud. There was no record of any of the missing Death Eaters being an animagus apart from Pettigrew, but then there'd been no record of Sirius either.

Alastor grimaced. "Could be a familiar. Kneazle could spy well enough."

They watched as Cavietti greeted Fevrier and ushered the French antiquities dealer and the unknown couple inside.

"Trap's set then." Alastor said darkly.

Amelia checked the time again. Only thirty minutes to go before the op began in earnest. She tapped her fingers restlessly.

"Rat Three reporting." Chambers' voice drifted out of the mirror. "Dog and Bone are on the way." There was a pause. "I've got an interested party who watched them leave. I'm following up."

"Call for back-up." Amelia ordered.

Alastor glared at the mirror as it winked out. "They're travelling early."

"Timing is everything." Amelia corrected. "Don't forget they have to have cleared customs, before apparating and walking up to the shop."

Alastor subsided. Amelia frowned. She wished in some ways that they could have had everyone in Italy overnight but the security considerations had ruled that out. She took a gulp of hot coffee and almost choked as it burned its way down her throat. With her mind occupied with whether everything would go as planned at the Italian Ministry she almost missed Alastor's flinch.

"What?" asked Amelia sharply.

"Flash of green inside the wand shop." Alastor said darkly.

Amelia's heart seemed to stutter in her chest. "The Killing Curse?"

"I would say so." Alastor frowned. "If we assume the unknown man and woman are Death Eaters
then it's either Fevrier or Cavietti."

"Fevrier." Amelia said. "They don't need him anymore. Maybe they had him under Imperio."

"Well, we'll get them for murder." Alastor said with satisfaction.

The mirror buzzed.

"Cat's been let in the back door." Brooks reported tensely.

So the Death Eaters had secured the shop.

Amelia tapped the mirror. "Eagle's Nest to Italian Stallions. We have circumstantial evidence a murder has taken place in the wand shop. Jurisdiction is yours. Do you wish to abort operation and attempt arrest now or continue?"

"Continue." Marco appeared in the mirror; he was a stunningly beautiful man; clear olive skin, dark brown hair cut into a fashionable style, twinkling green eyes and a mobile mouth that could smile disarmingly.

"Acknowledged." Amelia said crisply and closed the connection. She would not have made the same decision but it was not hers to make.

Alastor grunted beside her. "He's after Cavietti, remember?"

"Cavietti could be the one murdered." Amelia rejoined.

"You and I know that's not bloody likely." Alastor remonstrated.

Amelia sighed. She hoped Chambers was having better luck.

o-O-o

It only took a quick mirror call to have the rest of the Rat Squad in England on their way to support Chambers as he unhurriedly tracked the ambling figure of a non-descript Caucasian man with balding hair and in a cheap everyday robe down Diagon Alley towards the Leaky Cauldron.

There was no doubt in Chambers' mind that the guy was suspicious. The suspect had been lurking around the international portkey office since early that morning ever since a Disillusioned Chambers had arrived as part of the surveillance duties. The guy had made a show of making enquiries about the price of international portkeys to Russia but he hadn't made notes, had discarded the pamphlets the ever helpful Beryl Pootle had given him in response and had continued to lurk. He'd also almost snapped to attention when Chambers' charges had arrived to await their portkey allocation and departure. But the most suspicious act had been to press his left arm momentarily as soon as the portkey for Italy had activated and leave without further ado.

The guy wasn't tagged as a Death Eater which meant either he was a new recruit or he was one of the missing prisoners. Either way Chambers was determined to get him as a matter of pride for the Squad.

They were working their arses off, Chambers thought a touch belligerently, but the only real successes that they'd had were the arrests at the World Cup and tracking down the Summers woman in the crypt – and even those successes had been tempered by Travers' escape and the lack of progress on waking the two hostages they'd rescued.
Ahead, his unhurried suspect got to the Leaky and tapped on the wall to open up the entrance. Chambers sped up as the wall closed again, and hurried to catch up. He made himself visible, tapped the wall and entered as though unconcerned, sliding to the left and casting a tempus charm with a scowl as though waiting for someone.

His suspect was at the bar talking to Tom and retrieving a key, there was a flash of the number eight when Chambers glimpsed the fob. Chambers slid further into the shadows as Bald Guy went up the stairs to a Leaky room.

Just as he got out of sight, Wood and Cambridge stepped into the Leaky from the alley. Chambers caught their attention.

"He's upstairs in room eight." He reported crisply.

Wood, the senior most member of the Squad, nodded. "Good work, Tim. Darren, you stay down here, get the anti-transportation wards up, close the floo down, and get Tom to quietly evacuate as many people as possible through the exits."

"Right-o." Cambridge sent a quick grin to Chambers.

Chambers rolled his eyes and followed Wood up the stairs. They both drew their wands and took a position either side of the door. Wood signalled with one hand that they'd go on a count of three. Chambers gave a nod.

Wood held up one finger.

Two.

Three.

Wood swept his wand at the door, unlocking and slamming it open in one fell swoop. Chambers charged in.

"Aurors!" Chambers shouted at the balding man by the bed. "Surrender your wand NOW!"

The man swallowed hard, his eyes darting about the room looking for an escape. Chambers had his wand levelled on the suspect and knew Wood had his back.

"What…what is the meaning of this?" Bald Guy stuttered, his gaze still sliding about; his wand still held tightly in his grip.

Chambers gritted his teeth. "Put down the wand. We will fire on you."

Bald Guy made as though he was going to place the wand on the bed but at the last moment he whirled away and grabbed something off the dresser.

Chambers and Wood fired.

Their stunning spells slammed into Bald Guy who dropped like a stone to the hardwood floor. Woods cast an immediate binding spell on his hands and feet.

Chambers made his way over and kicked the comb the Bald Guy had grabbed. Portkey, Chambers realised. It failed due to the wards, but it could elicit information on a safe house for the Death Eaters or Voldemort's location. He levitated it into a conjured evidence bag.

"Well, well, well." Wood said with immense satisfaction capturing Chambers' attention.
"What?" Chambers looked down at their captive and grimaced at the flexing features as they morphed out of their polyjuiced state. "Well, well, well, indeed." He grinned at Wood before crouching down to poke the still stunned Death Eater at their feet. "Nice to see you again, Dennis the Elder. Don't you worry; we'll soon have your sorry carcass back in Azkaban."

o-O-o

"Dog and Bone on their way." Ambrey's disembodied voice sounding from the mirror had Amelia jumping and Alastor sending Amelia such a look of chastisement she flashed back to her Auror training.

She raised her omniculars just in time to see the figures of Sirius and her own brother enter the street. Her heart seemed lodged in her throat as she tracked them to the shop. Why had she thought this was a good idea?

"Steady, lass." Alastor said under his breath, not unkindly.

The two wizards drew level with the wand shop. Her brother's gait was missing its usual joie de vivre and there was no excited hand gestures to accompany his speech as the two men discussed something briefly. They approached the door and rang the bell.

Amelia drew a quick breath as Cavietti answered the door and ushered them inside. As they had thought, Fevrier was likely dead. "It's going to be two against four." She said under her breath.

"They're both capable wizards." Alastor stated without hesitation.

"Italian Stallions reporting to all: wards have gone up. We have erected our own."

Amelia settled back but she couldn't hide the flinch when almost immediately there were flashes of light in the wand shop. She tapped the mirror urgently.

"Spell fire! Back-up needed NOW!" Amelia ordered.

Immediately, the two Aurors masquerading as waiters rushed to the shop and blew open the door, another two rushed out of the café to support their colleagues.

Alastor was already moving and Amelia dimly heard the sound of the door as he left, the clop of his leg as he charged down the stairs. She kept her gaze pinned to the shop, poised to report any sign of escape.

"I've got the cat going out the back." Brooks reported suddenly. "Pursuit in progress. He's heading to the apparition point."

"I'm on it." Ambrey confirmed.

Amelia watched as Alastor hurried across the street, he paused taking a position to the side of the door momentarily as he drew two wands, and having glanced through the opening, he went inside.

"One cat animagus captured." Brooks reported, smug satisfaction dripping from every word.

"Ambrey took him down at the apparition point; we have Boris Dolohov?"

Amelia frowned. Antonin Dolohov in Azkaban and Boris was his younger brother. Boris had fled to the Continent and they had been unable to argue for his extradition when Romania had declared him to have been under the Imperius and innocent.
Alastor's voice suddenly crackled over the mirror. "We're all clear. Looks like we've got a team of newbies."

Amelia didn't wait. She grabbed the mirror and charged out. Her descent down the stairs and across the tiny street was a blur. She met a grinning Marco at the door of the shop.

"Director. Ladies first, of course." Marco swept his arm out, inviting her into the wand shop.

Amelia pushed through, noticed absently that the four Italians had each taken a corner of the room to cover which was almost textbook Auror standard procedure, and hurried over to the centre where Alastor stood with the other two Brits in the room – their wands all pointing downwards at the bound and gagged witch and wizard they'd disarmed, and an unconscious Cavietti.

She ran her eyes over the two man who'd played bait; their clothing was a bit ruffled, there were a couple of tears in the material, but neither looked harmed in any way.

"Alright?" She asked anyway.

Sirius's face contorted into a sneer. "A little singed…"

Marco immediately drew his wand and pointed it at Sirius. "You are NOT Sirius Black!"

Amelia placed herself between them hurriedly, both hands up. "Neither of these men are who they appear to be. Both are part of the team for this operation."

Marco's eyes flashed with displeasure but he lowered his wand. "Polyjuice?"

"Yes." Amelia said. "My apologies for the deception but we could not risk this detail leaking in anyway. Lord Black was adamant that he could not participate in person and I would not risk a civilian such as my brother. The real Lord Black and Lord Bones never left the Italian Ministry."

"Then I suggest we adjourn there with our prisoners." Marco said shortly.

Amelia had a feeling she was going to get lectured about keeping information from him as Head Auror – she wouldn't be pleased in his position either – but that Marco was sensible enough not to make a bigger deal of the deception than what was required.

"Search the shop." Marco grinned at his gleeful Aurors. "We will have much to discuss with Cavietti."

The mirror buzzed in her hand.

"Eagle, here." Amelia responded.

Chambers grinned back at her. "We got Travers Senior, ma'am."

Amelia smiled darkly. "Get him into a holding cell. Rat Squad only as his guard. Tell Fudge and Scrimgeour that they'll answer to me if they go anywhere near him before I get back."

"Yes, ma'am." Chambers blinked out.

Amelia exchanged a gleeful look with Alastor. It had been a very good day.

o-O-o

Sirius couldn't quite prevent the blush which crept up his neck and across his cheeks as Marco
stepped out of their farewell hug and grinned at him wickedly.

"It was good to see you, Siri." Marco said softly. "Bring your son to visit. I would love to host you both."

Sirius was touched at the sincerity. "It was good to see you again, Marco."

Marco's grin dropped away as he shifted position and bowed sharply to Richard, Amelia and Alastor who were looking on with glee.

"I present the Minister's thanks on bringing this criminal activity to our attention, Director Bones." Marco said formally.

"We present our Minister's thanks on your cooperation in this matter." Amelia replied.

"I will leave you. Your portkey will activate in a few minutes." Marco said. "Until next time."

His eyes searched out Sirius one last time and he was gone, stepping out of the privacy bubble Alastor had conjured up as soon as they had arrived in the small Ministry transportation room.

"So you and Marco worked together during the last war?" Richard enquired teasingly.

Sirius inwardly sighed but showed no sign of his dismay knowing it would only lead to more teasing. "He was undercover for the Italians with the Death Eaters in the same gang I was. We were both made aware of each other in case we needed assistance." He said with a straight face.

"And?" prompted Amelia dryly, getting her own back for all the times he'd teased her about Brian no doubt.

"And nothing." Sirius said firmly. He wasn't ashamed of his past relationship with Marco, which in truth had been more about simple companionship with someone who understood in the midst of the Death Eater horror they'd both faced undercover, but it was past and it was nobody else's business.

"Well, you would have been better warming blankets with him than Kelp." Alastor said bluntly. "She was cold enough to freeze a man's d…"

"Alastor!" Amelia snapped before he could complete the insult.

Sirius snorted with amusement. "He's not wrong."

"You should floo him when we get back." Richard said. "He's clearly still interested."

Sirius shook his head. As flattering as it had been to see the regard and affection still in Marco's gaze, Sirius had his hands full with Harry. "I'm not interested."

"You could do with some fun in your life." Richard coaxed. "And a partner would be able to give you a lot of support with Harry."

Sirius shook his head. "I'm happy as I am; thanks but no thanks." He wagged a finger at his friend. "No match-making." He turned to Alastor. "Thanks by the way for whatever you said to Tonks. She mirror-called last night and apologised for the lapse in security."

"Sent her a Howler." Alastor said with satisfaction.

"You still planning on making the announcement at the April session?" Amelia jumped in, continuing the subject and cutting off her brother.
"Yes." Sirius nodded. He, Daniel Greengrass and Cornelius had been over the political ramifications until they were all exhausted. It had been a hugely lucky stroke finding out Rita's secret just after the second task. Really he owed Susan and Hermione some kind of present for that.

"I can't believe her behaviour." Amelia commented with a touch of exasperation. "She's always been so level-headed."

"I think Bogdan offering to do the wedding made it suddenly a Big Thing rather than a quiet family occasion, and it made her a bit giddy." Sirius offered diplomatically. It was either that or hormones, and he wasn't going to suggest the latter in front of a woman; he valued his life too much to risk it.

"Giddy, my arse." Alastor huffed.

"She has acted without considering her House and the consequences at all." Richard said soberly. "She's lucky you're so understanding, Sirius. Another Head of House would have disowned her."

"She wasn't raised to consider the House and she's very young." Sirius said, feeling a little defensive on his cousin's behalf. "This whole thing has been one very big life lesson for her."

"Well, there's nothing like parenthood to make you grow up fast." Richard said. "Flick and I found that out with Sue."

"Portkey." Alastor reminded them.

They all reached forward and grabbed the ticket that had appeared in front of them.

Sirius felt the pull of the transportation and gathered himself for the landing. The reception room at the Ministry of Magic was non-descript but it was manned by an official who checked their wands and identities.

"Geoffrey," Amelia greeted him by name, "did the others return alright?"

"No problems, Director." Geoffrey doffed an imaginary cap and bowed his head at the sight of Sirius and Richard. "M'Lords."

Amelia led the way out and into the Ministry. Sirius followed, ignoring the tiredness – it had been an extremely early morning – and the slight nausea caused by the international portkey.

The holding cells were below the Auror Department and they arrived to find Rufus Scrimgeour pacing his office like a caged lion.

"I'd best deal with this one on one." Amelia said briskly. "Why don't you head down there? Alastor knows the way."

Richard held up his hands. "I'll say goodbye here. Flick's expecting me for lunch." He shook hands with Sirius. "I'll see you on Monday at the alliance tea?"

Sirius nodded his agreement. "Thanks for all your help today, Richard."

Richard grinned. "I did nothing but sit with you in a wonderfully comfortable office and eat lots of those amazing almond biscotti. Shacklebolt did the hard work."

It had been Kingsley who'd taken Richard's form and face as part of the operation, while Dawlish had taken Sirius's. It had been slightly disconcerting seeing someone else wear his own features, Sirius considered wryly.
Sirius shook himself at Alastor's sharp admonishment to stop lollygagging. He returned Richard's wave of goodbye and followed his old mentor. Sirius was pleased he'd remembered to mirror call Harry before they'd returned from Italy and hadn't deferred it to until he'd gotten back to England. Harry's relief at the op being over had been visible and Sirius was assured his son was no longer wearing out Minnie with nervous energy.

The path down to the cells held some nostalgic memories of his time as a Hit Wizard; of working with James. Sirius was glad of the silence as Alastor and he made their way to where Travers Senior was being held.

Cambridge and Wood were outside the door; one positioned to the left of the door so it would offer cover if opened; one positioned on the wall opposite just off centre to the door.

"Director's on her way." Alastor said as the two men straightened. "Where's Chambers?"

"Scrimgeour wanted his report written up straight away." Wood replied.

Alastor grunted.

Sirius sighed. The Head Auror could be petty and pernickety at times, but then Amelia had cut him out of the Italian operation so it was perhaps understandable that he wasn't too pleased by her riding roughshod over him on interrogating a recaptured prisoner.

"How did the Italian job go, sir?" Cambridge asked eagerly.

"Boris Dolohov cracked like an egg. Least his brother had some gumption about him." Alastor said bluntly. "Had a visit from his brother's old friend Greyback who'd put him onto the return of their master. There'd been rumours in the criminal world of Fevrier and Cavietti running a scam on Black so Dolohov invited himself along."

"He intended capturing me and offering me to Voldemort in return for his brother being rescued from Azkaban." Sirius added, conjuring up a chair and sitting down.

Alastor eyed the chair and called him a wimp under his breath before continuing. "His wife Gorgonia killed Fevrier and tried to kill Shack when he was Lord Bones."

"Her brother tried to kidnap Dawlish who was pretending to be me." Sirius said.

Wood started chuckling. "And Dawlish left him alive?"

"Watch what you say, Wood." Alastor said sharply. "Dawlish may be a pain in the arse but he is one of ours."

Wood held up his hands. "No digs intended. Just can't see my old partner taking to almost being kidnapped kindly."

"And to answer your question," Sirius stepped in before they could argue about Snape any further, "he wasn't impressed but the bad guys are all alive and in Italian custody. They'll be tried for their crimes there. Unfortunately they had limited knowledge of what was going on back here. According to Dolohov when he was under truth potion, Greyback put them in touch with our friend in there," he waved at the cell door, "to provide them with notice of mine and Lord Bones' departure. Travers Senior apparently owed the Dolohovs a favour and agreed to do it because of that. Dolohov had no idea if Voldemort even knew of his effort."

There was a sound from the bottom of the corridor and they all turned, wands out, to see the
approaching forms of Amelia, Cornelius and Rufus. Chambers brought up the rear.

Sirius stood up and dismissed the chair with an absent-minded wave. He greeted Cornelius who praised them all effusively.

Amelia finally broke into the Minister's ramble. "Rufus has convinced me it would be better for me to focus on the prosecution without being associated with the questioning of the prisoner so he'll be taking lead here."

"I'd appreciate you sitting in, Moody." Rufus said gruffly.

Alastor nodded.

"Cambridge, Wood; you'll continue to guard the outside of the cell." Rufus ordered briskly. He unlocked the cell and marched inside without further ado; Alastor at his heels. The door clanged shut behind them.

"The rest of us will observe." Amelia motioned to the next door along and they all trooped in. Amelia tapped the adjoining wall and it became transparent.

Rufus sat with his back to the observers; Dennis Travers Senior sat bound up in ropes to a chair on the opposite side of the table. Alastor stood behind him, a looming threatening presence.

Rufus reached into his robes and brought out parchment, quill and a vial of veritaserum.

"I'm not going to tell you anything." Travers snarled angrily. "I know my rights! I want a solicitor!"

Rufus bared his teeth in a simile of a smile. "You have no rights, Travers. You're an escaped prisoner. If I wanted to I could send you straight back to Azkaban, no questions asked." He pulled another parchment from his inner pocket. "This here is a special warrant giving me the authority to use any force necessary in your questioning due to your involvement in terrorist activity which is a direct threat to the security of the wizarding world."

Travers stiffened.

Rufus nodded at Alastor and in a swift couple of motions, Travers had been frozen, his mouth yanked open and the requisite dosage of veritaserum dropped down his throat.

They waited a moment for the truth potion to take effect.

Rufus set the quill to record. "Name."

"Dennis Travers."

"How did you escape from Azkaban?" Rufus asked briskly.

"Bartemius Crouch Junior disguised as the Minister released myself, Mulciber and Rookwood into his custody." Travers droned in a monotone detached voice.

Sirius shivered.

"Where have you been hiding since your escape?" Rufus continued.

"On the Durmstrang ship docked in the Black Lake at Hogwarts." Travers immediately replied.

"Who knows you are there?" Rufus asked, shifting with barely concealed excitement.
"My Lord and Master, the traitor Karkaroff, Bartemius Crouch Junior, Peter Pettigrew, the Lord and Master's familiar, and my son." Travers recited.

Sirius exchanged a brief look with Amelia and Cornelius; the confession was a good enough to secure an official move to search the ship. Hopefully combined with all Bogdan had already done unofficially they could be aboard within a few hours.

"What contact have you had with your Lord and Master?" Rufus asked.

"I met with him on the first night of my escape; I have met with him every other week since my escape to make my report." Travers was clearly regaining some awareness because sweat had broken out on his brow – a sign he was resisting.

"How do you meet with him?" asked Alastor.

"I go through the Vanishing Cabinet aboard the Durmstrang ship and exit through the matching one in the cottage where my Lord and Master resides." Travers gasped.

"This cottage is where?" Rufus pressed.

Travers struggled against the serum furiously, turning a shocking shade of purple before he stuttered out a location; a village in the Lake District.

It was enough.

Amelia whirled away immediately just as Rufus was getting to his feet in the cell. They would have a search and a raid to prepare and get in motion. Sirius silently refused Amelia's offer to join them. He wanted to hear the rest of the interrogation.

Alastor slid into Rufus's place. "Why were you at the Ministry today?"

"To assist Boris Dolohov in his attempt to capture Sirius Black." Travers confessed to that easily enough. "I was to ensure Black left for Italy on schedule and contact them if there was any delay."

"What else did you know of the plot?"

"Only the timings." Travers said, struggling against the potion again.

"How did you get into the Ministry?" Alastor demanded.

"I ran the Department governing transportation for a number of years. I have back doors into transportation system including the floo network. I flooed into my old office without being detected." A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face.

"Tell me everything you know about the plot to return your Dark Lord to a body and to kill Harry Potter."

Travers gulped and looked anywhere but at the ruined face in front of him. "The last task." He said finally. "He'll take the boy during the last task as the final part of some ritual. He wants Snape to do the potion because he thinks Pettigrew will screw it up. That's all I know."

"And what will your Dark Lord do to ensure that he takes the boy?" Alastor pressed.

"I don't know." Travers stuttered out. "Crouch is the only one who knows." He slumped over suddenly.
Alastor raised his wand and ran a diagnostic spell on him. He sniffed. He packed up the parchment, quill and serum, and leaving Travers unconscious in the chair left the room.

Sirius met him in the corridor. "Shouldn't we get a healer?"

Alastor shook his head as he started walking. "Passed out. He'll come to eventually."

A vague sense of déjà vu swept over Sirius and he frowned as he remembered a fairly similar occurrence in his training.

"You said that about Kevin Mucky back in 'eighty-one and he'd had a heart attack." Sirius reminded him.

Alastor stopped walking and turned back. "Oy, Cambridge! Do another diagnostic on the prisoner. Might have had a heart attack." His eye whirled. "Nice catch, Black. I always did get those results confused."

Sirius shook his head and repressed the urge to smile despite his twitching lips.

"You should think about signing back on." Alastor said as they made their way back up to the main level. "You and Potter were my best students."

"I'm happy enough doing what I'm doing." Sirius insisted, ignoring the small pang of disappointment that he couldn't sign back on as a Hit Wizard. Harry, he reminded himself; he was playing politics and looking after the estates for Harry.

"Harrumph." Alastor said and pushed open the double doors to enter the Auror department.

"There you are." Amelia snagged hold of Sirius and waved a hand at Alastor. "Rufus wants your advice on searching Cumbria."

Alastor limped away and Sirius allowed Amelia to hustle him out of the Auror department and through the Ministry corridors to her own office.

She sat him down and had an elf bring them coffee. She produced a box of biscotti from the pockets of her robes and set it down on the desk between them.

"I've been ordered to keep you out of it." Amelia told him baldly. "Cornelius is flooing Bogdan to push for an immediate raid on the ship and Rufus is leading on the Lake District angle."

"And by giving you the job of keeping me out of it, they're…"

"Also keeping me out of it too." Amelia picked up her coffee. "I annoyed both of them with keeping control of the Italian operation but I have no regrets. I'll let them have this."

Because it was unlikely that either situation would result in more arrests, Sirius surmised. The instant Travers had been arrested, it was likely Voldemort's lot had been informed in some way if only by Travers' absence. But it was possible that they'd find something at either location and Amelia was generous enough to step back and allow her colleagues some of the glory.

Sirius watched in amusement as Amelia drained her cup and looked longingly at the coffee pot. "You're going to be bouncing off the walls if you have another."

Amelia set her cup down and simply smiled back at him. She picked up one of the almond biscotti from the box in front of them. "These are fabulous."
"Italians have some of the best cuisine in the world." Sirius agreed. "You and Brian should have a holiday out there. Harry has a villa in Tuscany and I have an apartment in Rome. You're welcome to make use of both."

"That might be one of your better ideas." Amelia said, brushing the crumbs from her robes. "I could do with a break." She smiled again. "I might even have earned it today." Her gaze narrowed on Sirius. "You know Richard wasn't wrong about Marco's interest. You could go back to Italy yourself with Harry for a holiday and renew old acquaintances."

Sirius sighed heavily and raised his eyebrows. "You're not seriously trying to fix me up, Amelia?"

Amelia grimaced exaggeratedly. "Merlin forbid." She held up a single hand. "I just…" she sighed and sat back in her chair, holding his gaze. "We're worried about you, Sirius. We're all your friends and I think you know we support you."

Sirius nodded bemused.

"So we're all aware that Remus Lupin is your closest friend and confidante." Amelia continued. "And that you have lost his supportive counsel and presence because of his relationship with young Tonks and that impacts on you." She didn't expand on the thought but Sirius got the gist of her concern. "A romantic partner would provide you with, perhaps not a replacement for Remus but an additional support for you."

"I appreciate the concern." Sirius said, after a long moment trying to organise his thoughts into a coherent reply. "Look, Remus and I talk every day, and no, it's not the same, but it's enough. Believe me when I say I have no interest in and no time for a romantic relationship of any kind right now."

Amelia nodded slowly. "I don't think Harry would object though should…"

"Harry," Sirius cut in, "has already given me pseudo-permission to date when we talked about it last year. But," he regarded her soberly. "you and I both know that underneath Harry's mature Champion of the Light and Leader of the Potter alliance exterior, is a scared fourteen year old who has already faced unimaginable horrors, who is prophesised to face more in his future, and who has spent the majority of his life being emotionally abused and physically neglected."

Her expression melted into comprehension. "And the last thing he needs right now is to feel in competition for your time and attention."

"He deserves to be put first for once in his life and to know it, to never doubt it." Sirius said simply. "And while Remus isn't available as much these days, I do have you and Richard and Daniel and many others to talk to when I need to talk or vent or whatever." He'd spent the night of the second task curled up with Minnie on the rug in front of the fire, the two of them in their animagus forms. Even as Padfoot he'd had nightmares of Harry being swallowed whole by the snake he'd faced. "I'm not without support."

"I won't say anything more about it then." Amelia said.

Sirius nodded with gratitude. He shifted position, readying himself to rise. "Well, as you can definitely claim to have kept me out of the latest operations, I'm going to head back to Hogwarts. I'll inform Albus about the probable raid on the ship and make sure I keep my son and his friends distracted from it."

Amelia's eyes widened with the sudden realisation of how the imminent raid might be foiled by a group of curious students. "Good plan."
He smirked at her slightly panicked expression and headed for the door. He paused in the doorway, tossing her a look over his shoulder. "Thanks, Amelia."

She waved him off dismissively and he shook away the feelings their conversation had stirred, the faint memories of another time, the remembered excitement of his old job, of being part of the team on an important mission. He had an important mission, Sirius reminded himself, and suddenly he couldn't wait to return home to Hogwarts and see his son.

o-O-o

"HEAR THIS!" Alastor's voice boomed through the school. "ALL STUDENTS TO COMMON ROOMS! ALL STUDENTS TO COMMON ROOMS!"

Harry morphed back into his human form and glanced immediately at his honorary Aunt.

The Deputy Headmistress frowned and motioned for Ron and Hermione to remain seated on the settee. She conjured up a messenger patronus and sent it off to Dumbledore politely requesting information.

"I think it would be prudent for us to remain where we are," Minerva said firmly. "I'm certain there is nothing to worry about."

The unspoken implication that it was possibly one of Alastor's 'constant vigilance' tests relaxed them all a touch.

Ron began laughing and pointed at Harry with his one paw.

Harry looked down at his fur-covered skin and sighed heavily. "I was distracted!"

Hermione's eyes were alight with amusement but she was valiantly keeping her laughter to herself. "At least you have fur." She sighed.

Her Head of House grimaced. "It may be time to admit defeat on the meditation process, Miss Granger, and find your form through a potion."

"I just don't understand why I can't see it." Hermione complained. "I do achieve a meditative state now but it's just cloudy! I can't see anything!"

"It's entirely possible that your age may be hindering the assumption of a form." Minerva said crisply. "Our teenage years are a key period in which our identity is formed and solidified. It may be that your own subconscious view of yourself is currently in flux and hence the cloudy view, as your inner self is changing, the animagus form is not known."

"I don't understand why Ron and Harry have forms though if that's case." Hermione questioned, folding her arms over her chest. She glared at both boys.

"They are not questioning their inner selves in the same way you are." Minerva held up a hand. "There is no right and wrong about that. Boys are more inclined to be definitive about their identities and less inclined to ponder their own personalities and behaviour; girls are more inclined to self-awareness and questioning of these things. It is not a failure on your part, Miss Granger. It is quite normal." Her eyes found Harry's and she smiled. "Harry's mother was unable to achieve an animagus form during her Hogwarts' years for similar reasons."

Hermione's lips drooped into a miserable frown. "So I'm not going to be able to become an animagus?"
There's the potion.” Harry said quickly, trying to cheer her up.

"There is but without a commitment to the animal shown by the potion, it will be incredibly difficult to transform into it.” Minerva cautioned.

A white shining patronus shimmied through the door and flew over to the group. The phoenix patronus opened its mouth…

"Aurors are currently preparing for a sanctioned raid on the Durmstrang ship." Dumbledore’s voice said calmly. "Please stay with Harry. I will have another teacher look in on Gryffindor."

Harry tensed. Sirius had called him to assure him that the Italian operation had been a success and that he was fine, but he'd heard nothing since. Perhaps the prisoners had confessed to the location of the conspirators who had sabotaged the Tri-Wizard tournament or given up Karkaroff.

Minerva hummed as the patronus dissipated. "Perhaps we should all revert to our human forms and have a snack." She waved her wand and Ron's hand morphed back.

Harry briefly closed his eyes and willed the fur away; he visualised his own skin and when he reopened his eyes the fur was gone.

"It's not fair," Hermione complained, "you have two forms and I can't even find one!"

"Talk to your parents and Sirius about the potion." Harry replied. "I'm sure they'll agree to you trying it."

Hermione sighed and nodded. She pushed her bushy hair back over her shoulders. "I wish I could do it your way though."

Ron shrugged. "It is really difficult." But his eyes gave away his inner delight and smugness that he had achieved something she had not.

Harry slipped his hand into Hermione's to support her. "You'll get it. I know you will." He reassured her.

Hermione sighed and squeezed his hand in a silent thank you.

The portrait door opened suddenly and Harry's wand was in his hand and pointed at the intruder immediately, Minerva spun around a split-second later with her wand ready too. They both glared at an unrepentant Sirius as the portrait door swung shut behind him.

Sirius winked at them but returned his attention to the hand mirror he held. "Thanks for the assist, Remus. Whatever you said to Bogdan worked because there's a dozen Bulgarian aurors who've turned up." He nodded absently. "As soon as I know anything. Padfoot out." He lowered his mirror. "Hi!"

"Really, Sirius," Minerva sniffed, "you could have let us know you were on your way. The school is in lockdown!"

"I know," Sirius said calmly, "Alastor almost wouldn't let me in." He opened his arms to Harry and they hugged hello briefly.

"What's going on?" asked Ron, curiosity written all over his face. "Are they really raiding the Durmstrang ship?"
Sirius nodded again. "Well, in about ten minutes or so." He gestured at the sofas.

Minerva excused herself to check on Gryffindor personally but Harry and his two friends took seats. Dobby popped in with refreshments and Sirius picked up a cup of tea with an appreciative sigh.

"Travers Senior was caught by the Rat Squad in the Leaky Cauldron this morning." Sirius waved vaguely in the air. "He was the look-out man here to make sure Richard and I were on our way to Italy; Chambers picked up on him, followed him and captured him."

Harry's eyes widened and he quickly deduced what had happened. "He's confessed they're using the ship."

"Of course!" Hermione said excitedly. "The Ministry would finally have enough cause to request an international warrant!"

Sirius smiled at them proudly. "Exactly." He motioned in the general direction of the Black Lake. "We've got a team of aurors and Bulgaria has sent some. They're going to be boarding shortly."

"What'll happen with Travers?" asked Ron, picking up a large chocolate biscuit and dunking it into a mug of hot chocolate.

"At the moment he's in the Prisoner's Ward at Saint Mungo's." Sirius winced visibly. "He really resisted the veritserum and put a lot of pressure on his heart. He had a heart attack and the Healers aren't optimistic."

"He probably wasn't in the best physical condition after being in Azkaban so long." Hermione murmured.

"It's not the best place for healthy living," Sirius agreed dryly. "I was lucky that I had my animagus form to shift into."

"I still don't have an animagus form!" Hermione repeated what had been said earlier about her identity being in flux.

Sirius nodded understandingly. "Lily had the same problem when she meditated in seventh year in an attempt to join us. She had to go with the potion in the end and she only took that after she and James had been married a while."

"What was she?" asked Harry eagerly.

"A doe." Sirius smiled sadly, his eyes unfocused as though staring back into the past. "She knew Prongs' form by then, of course, and as James' wife…magic pushed her into a complementary form. I think if she'd had the chance to do it properly she'd have been something else." He shrugged. "Either way she didn't ever master the transformation. Soon after she took the potion, she discovered she was pregnant with you."

Harry breathed in deeply, settling his emotions and his magic. He loved hearing about his parents and there was so much he still didn't know about them.

"Can I do the potion?" asked Hermione.

"You have to make it yourself." Sirius cautioned.

"She made polyjuice in our second year." Ron said, munching through his biscuit. "She'll be fine."
"I think it's just as well Minnie left." Sirius teased. "Otherwise you'd be in hot water." He pointed at Hermione who blushed.

"It was for a good cause." Hermione muttered sheepishly.

"Yes," Sirius said dryly, "breaking into the Slytherin Common Room and trying to find out if Draco was actually the Heir of Slytherin."

Hermione and Ron turned accusing eyes on Harry who held his hands up.

"I didn't tell him!" He protested before relenting enough to admit he had confessed all but only after Sirius had made it clear he had already known.

"Your brothers spilled all to Remus." Sirius said cheerfully to Ron.

Hermione huffed.

Ron looked appalled. "I didn't think they knew!"

"They must have overheard us talking or something." Harry said. Or maybe they'd realised the trio were constantly holed up in Myrtle's bathroom because they'd had the map and had investigated.

"I'll talk to your parents." Sirius offered. "If they say yes then I'll teach you how to make the potion."

Hermione's face brightened. "Thank you."

"So what happened this morning in Italy?" asked Harry, eager for details now the operation was over and done with, and Sirius was standing in front of him, uninjured.

Sirius grinned and launched into the tale to his captivated audience.

He was just explaining about the Italian Justice system the captured criminals would be faced with when he was interrupted by another announcement.

"ALL CLEAR!" Alastor's voice boomed. "COMMON ROOMS ARE NOW OPEN!"

"Does this mean the raid's over?" asked Ron excitedly.

Sirius took one look at their curious faces and sighed. He called Dobby who went to collect outerwear for Ron and Hermione. "Get your cloaks on. We'll go take a gander."

Harry smiled widely and raced upstairs to get his own cloak. Five minutes later they were out of the rooms and walking the still quiet corridors of Hogwarts. Most of the students had stayed in the common rooms despite Professor Moody's announcement.

Sirius herded them out of the entrance. As soon as they rounded the corner to the lake, they could see the bank filled with people; the team of British aurors were distinctive by their red cloaks but Harry could make out Bill and Caro talking with them. Amelia Bones stood off to one side in conference with the team of international aurors, Moody, Snape, a Durmstrang professor, and the Headmaster.

"I guess Amelia couldn't stay away," murmured Sirius.

Moody caught sight of them and waved them over. Harry glanced at Sirius who grimaced but nodded.

Hermione tucked her arm around his as they made their way over the muddy grass to lurk close to
the group. Snape shot them an annoyed sneer as Moody made room for them all to join the huddle.

Dumbledore frowned at them a little but his attention was mostly on the Durmstrang professor who was protesting that he knew nothing.

"Igor vould not let anyone into his office all this time!" The small man blustered in a heavy Germanic accent. "He vould lock ze door and vould refuse us entry!"

Amelia sighed heavily. She looked worn and Harry felt a moment's sympathy as he remembered she'd been in Italy that morning with Sirius. "Thank you, Professor von Humberg. We'll let you return to your students."

"Gunther," Dumbledore interjected, "please convey our condolences to the students for the sudden death of your Headmaster. If there's anything we can do…"

Harry bit his lip. Did that mean Karkaroff was dead?!

Amelia cleared her throat. "Director Hatter will be here shortly to help you make all the necessary arrangements."

"The Minister will also be in touch. We will stay and provide additional support and security for the remainder of the tournament." The Bulgarian auror stood next to her said.

"Tank you." Professor von Humberg departed with the Bulgarians in tow.

"Karkaroff's dead?" queried Sirius soberly.

"As a doornail." Moody agreed brusquely. "They left him in his office. Any sign of the others is gone. They cleared it out."

"If the Dark Lord believed the ship and Karkaroff's involvement to be compromised, he would have ordered Karkaroff to be killed. He held no further value." Snape said evenly.

"Has the secondary team found anything?" asked Sirius.

"Secondary team?" asked Harry sotto voce to Sirius.

"Ah, Travers also mentioned where Voldemort was hiding." Sirius grimaced. "Didn't I say that?"

"No." Harry said, trying to hide his irritation. "I think I might have remembered if you had."

Sirius slung an arm over his shoulders. "I'm getting old; forgetting things. Truthfully, I didn't think much would come of it. Once Travers didn't make it back from his morning activities…"

"They would have ran." Harry sighed. "So we're back to square one."

"And a very nice square it is too." Sirius said brightly.

Snape snorted again in the background and Harry found it horrifying that he agreed with him.

Amelia shook her head. "They identified the cottage where we think Riddle and his gang holed up but, again, cleared out of anything useful." She shivered and huddled into her cloak. "We'll put forensics onto both the ship and the cottage. We might turn up something."

Snape huffed loudly. "The Dark Lord is not stupid. He will have left nothing."
"Doesn't hurt to double check, lad." Moody countered.

Dumbledore heaved a heavy sigh. "It is a pity Igor did not reach out for help. We could have perhaps saved his life."

"Unlikely." Snape said.

"He'd have gone back to Azkaban for conspiracy to terrorise, attempted murder, premeditated manslaughter with the death caused by the dragon, and harbouring fugitives and terrorists." Moody barked at Dumbledore. "His life was over either way."

And that was a depressing thought, mused Harry, feeling colder than ever. He had very little sympathy with Karkaroff – the man had made his own choices – but ultimately he had been doomed.

"If he's dead, does this mean the tournament is over now?" asked Ron, bemused.

"I'm afraid not, Mister Weasley," Dumbledore said briskly, "the tournament is only over if there is a winner."

"Or the contestants are all dead." Moody added.

Dumbledore sent him a reproachful look. "We are doing our best to circumvent the strictures of the revised parameters."

"It was good to know that there would have been a protective shield for anyone left in the cabin at the time of the explosion." Hermione offered supportively.

Harry held back his own snort at that. Bagman had cheerfully told them about the protective shield after the task had finished; Dumbledore had set it into the walls of the cabin and it would have flared into being had life been detected within the walls at the time the explosive hex was detonated. It was still dubious whether it would have worked or not.

Dumbledore beamed at Hermione and turned back to Ron. "We shall have to confer with Durmstrang once they have dealt with the initial aftermath of Igor's death. They will no doubt appoint a new Headmaster or Headmistress in time but it may be that someone like Professor von Humberg steps in as their judge for the final task."

"The tournament is the least of their worries right now." Amelia agreed. "Speaking of which; are we certain that anyone hiding out on the ship has gone and hasn't just assumed a new identity here at Hogwarts?"

"The Bulgarians are doing identity checks on this lot." Moody pointed his thumb behind him at the ship. "We may get permission to do the French again with this as evidence of foul play."

Amelia nodded. "I'll get Hatter onto it."

"If I were them I'd pretend to be a Hogwarts' student." Ron said casually. "Nobody ever checks our identities."

They all stared at him.

"That's brilliant, Ron." Harry congratulated him, thumping Ron on the arm.

"It is very insightful." Amelia agreed.

Sirius smiled proudly at the youngest Weasley male who was now as red as his hair.
“Hmnph.” Moody said. "Take ten points for Gryffindor, lad."

"Indeed.” Dumbledore said.

Snape rolled his eyes behind Moody and Harry felt his lips twitch into a smile as he took in Snape's disgusted expression.

"Well, can we do a student check?” asked Amelia.

Dumbledore frowned. "Not without parental permission, I fear. The Board of Governors is also likely to have an opinion."

"What about the map?” pondered Harry. "Professor Moody could take the map for a day or two, and check all the students coming into his class are who they say they are?"

"An excellent idea.” Dumbledore said brightly. "I'd give you points but alas you're not in the House system."

"Thank Merlin." Snape muttered under his breath before he cleared his throat and raised his voice. "It has merit as a plan but we would need to cover more than one subject at NEWT level as not all sixth and seventh years take one particular class."

"Are we sure there isn’t a way to fool the map?” Moody asked gruffly.

Sirius considered the question for a long moment before he shook his head. "I don't think so but Remus would be the best person to ask. He did a lot of the charms work."

"So, we do a spot check with the map this week," Moody said, "and in the meantime, the Director and the Headmaster will approach the Board and the parents to get permission for a full blood check."

Both Dumbledore and Amelia grimaced.

"Sounds like a plan." Sirius said. "We'll get the map to you for tomorrow morning."

"You best get yourself back to HQ, lass.” Moody pointed at Amelia. "Nothing more for you to do here."

Amelia nodded. "I'll be in touch if there's anything else." She walked away towards the British aurors and Harry glanced back at the ship.

He shivered.

"Let's get back inside.” Sirius suggested, his hand clapping Harry's shoulder comfortably. "There's nothing to be done here."

They all fell into step with each other as they walked back towards Hogwarts.

"Hey, Harry,” Ron broke the silence as they passed the Quidditch pitch, "can you spend some time with Ginny on some seeker moves?"

Harry nodded. Ginny was doing a lot better at being a friend rather than a stalker and, besides, he really wanted Gryffindor to win the cup. They'd managed to win their second match against Hufflepuff and they were facing Slytherin in the last match of the year. It would decide the cup since Slytherin had also managed wins against the other teams.
"I wish you could play." Ron complained. "Ginny's alright but she's no you, and Malfoy's improved a lot this year."

Harry was warmed by the offhand praise and comforted to know he would be welcomed back to the team.

"I've been telling him that for weeks." Hermione complained lightly without any anger or irritation in her tone. She grinned and winked at Harry who stuck his tongue out at her.

"Hot chocolate, I think." Sirius said as they made it inside.

"And biscuits?" asked Ron hopefully.

"You just had some!" protested Hermione.

"I'm a growing lad!" Ron retorted.

Harry chuckled, exchanging an amused glance with Sirius.

Maybe there was someone already in the castle waiting to strike; maybe Voldemort had shown his ruthlessness in killing Karkaroff; maybe there was still a trial and a final task to be faced…but it didn't matter.

With the familiar camaraderie of his best friends filling him to the brim as he listened to their usual bickering, and with Sirius's steady presence at his back, Harry knew he wasn't alone.
Hermione picked at her breakfast, not really interested in eating. She had received permission from her parents to try the animagus potion but she was wondering whether she should go ahead or not. She had woken early and decided to ponder the matter over food before anyone else got up. She frowned as she scooped up more muesli.

A motion beside her had her half-turning, irritated at being disturbed, but the sight of Luna sliding onto the bench forestalled any remark Hermione might have made to be left alone.

"Morning." Hermione said instead, watching bemusedly as Luna helped herself to a full English and half-wondering where the small waif of a girl put that amount of food.

"Good morning." Luna said cheerfully. "You look pensive this morning."

Hermione explained the ongoing problem with finding her animagus form and her internal debate on whether to use the potion. She was careful to keep her voice low; Harry's animagus form was a secret as were the lessons but she knew Luna knew and was a safe confidante.

Luna tilted her head as she sliced up a sausage. "Why are you so against using the potion?"

"I think it's because all the material states that you're not given a choice and once you've taken the potion, that's it; that's your form." Hermione sighed. "I mean, I understand why Harry's father and Sirius took the potion back in school. It is expedient and they needed something to work with quickly to help Remus but there isn't the same argument for me. This is something that Harry invited us to share with him and just because it's taking me longer…" She huffed out another breath, annoyance filling her again. "I just don't understand why I can't see my form when Ron and Harry can! Taking the potion feels like I've failed and that's unacceptable! And I know Professor McGonagall explained about self-awareness and questioning of identity but…"

"But it sucks that they can do something and you can't." Luna said bluntly. "Especially Ron."

Hermione deflated. She felt like a really terrible person. It was OK that the boys were good fliers and into Quidditch because it was physical and sports and not Hermione's thing. It was just…being smart and the first to spell was her thing. She'd had to adjust to the realisation that Harry was better than she was in school, although she'd managed to comfort herself that it was because his power levels made his practicals easy, and that he still checked with her on the theory. "I'm horrible."

"Animagus transformation isn't just another spell and knowing the theory." Luna pointed out. "It's more than that and that's why you're not getting it."

Professor McGonagall had pretty much said the same thing when Hermione had cornered her after Transfiguration to talk about it again.

Hermione stirred her soggy breakfast despondently.

Luna cleared her throat. "What else is bothering you about the potion?"

Hermione squirmed under the sharp silver gaze and sighed. "Sirius told us that Harry's mother took the potion because she had similar difficulties to me in school. Only when she took it she ended up with a form that complemented Harry's father; he was a stag and she was a doe."
Luna hummed. "And this disturbs you because you don't just want to be seen as Harry Potter's girlfriend."

"Exactly." Hermione pushed her half-eaten muesli away and reached for a banana. "I'm a terrible girlfriend."

"Maybe you can't see your form because you're afraid you won't like it." Luna stated. "You've called yourself a terrible person and a terrible girlfriend. Maybe you don't like you enough to see it."

And that was remarkably insightful. Hermione flinched at the accuracy of Luna's comment. Maybe she really didn't like herself enough to see the truth of herself and maybe her ambivalence to taking the potion was because she wasn't sure she was ready to see her form at all.

"I don't think you are terrible." Luna said comfortingly.

Hermione glanced at her. "Really?"

"I wouldn't want to be a raven just because my boyfriend was one." Luna said matter-of-factly, her eyes on her bacon. "I want to be whatever I am."

Hermione nodded. "Me too." She gestured with the unpeeled fruit she held. "I think it scares me that Lily Potter ended up with a form that so mirrored her husband's. By all accounts she was…well…"

"Your equivalent," Luna said lightly, "the smartest witch of her generation."

"Yes." Hermione flushed bright red, feeling a little arrogant at her own presumption in comparing herself. "But if she took a form so closely to her husband's…then what are my chances?"

"Much better I would have thought." Luna said simply. "She was a wife in the late Seventies. Society would have driven her to think of herself primarily in terms of her husband and family."

Hermione brightened and started to unpeel her banana. "Right."

"And you're not married to Harry." Luna pointed out the very obvious difference and Hermione blushed again.

She and Harry were a long way off marriage for all the jokes that had been made about them since Remus and Tonks started to organise their wedding. But sometimes Hermione daydreamed and she wasn't ruling it out for the future even if the logical side of her argued it was unlikely that they'd stay together. First loves rarely did.

And wasn't that a depressing thought? One that made her heart ache a little because she really did love Harry.

"You think too much." Luna said, without even looking at her.

Hermione rubbed her forehead and took a bite of the fruit to refrain from a reply.

"Harry's mother took the potion when she was married to Harry's father and considered herself primarily in those terms." Luna waved her knife. "You're worried that since you started going out with Harry, you're only seen as Harry's girlfriend and you have enough ambition and smarts to want to be known for yourself first. You're worried that if the potion is a raven it means you're identity is being suborned by Harry, but you're also worried that if you aren't a raven that Harry will be upset since his mother was so clearly aligned with his father."
Hermione nodded, her mouth full of banana. "I think you've managed to put what's been bothering me into words." She admitted once she'd swallowed. "It's one of the main reasons why I don't want to take the potion." She sighed. "But I'm also worried that even if my form isn't something to do with Harry and it's just me, then I still get stuck with that form when I'm still learning and growing and... what if the form influences me away from that learning and growing? I can't imagine Sirius being anything other than his form."

"Hmmm." Luna's gaze went unfocused for a long moment. "It's unlikely Sirius would ever have been anything other than a grim. It was his destiny to guard Harry."

There was a dreamy quality to the statement and Hermione guessed Luna's gift was making an appearance. She pressed her lips together.

"It's still a concern." Hermione insisted. "I mean, Pettigrew's a rat. Maybe if his form hadn't been stuck..."

Luna shook her head a touch as though to shake away whatever vision she had seen or maybe to disagree with Hermione's half-finished thought. "The potion forms are valid representations of the primary character traits of the animagus at the time the potion is consumed. Pettigrew was always going to leave a ship he thought was sinking. Sirius was always the defender of the innocent. Harry's father was the leader of his herd."

"Maybe I'm not ready to see what that is right now." Hermione confessed out loud, dropping her gaze to the table.

Luna gazed at her, another half-dreamy look upon her face. "You will embrace your form when you are ready to see who you really are."

At least that sounded promising.

"I just don't understand why it was so easy for Ron and Harry." Hermione muttered.

"Harry had a lot of healing over the Summer to know who he truly is and to know who he is has worth." Luna pointed out kindly, scraping up scrambled eggs from a pool of brown sauce. "I would guess that Ron has never questioned himself much."

That was true. And it explained a lot. Hermione chewed on the last of her banana. She knew she was a good person. Yes, she had her pride and her ego, but she believed she was caring and compassionate; a strong defender for right and honour; a loyal, trustworthy, dependable friend and a loving supporting girlfriend. But if she was being honest with herself, in many ways, Hermione knew she didn't like her outward persona much; a bossy bookworm was the kindest description many had given her in the past and Ron's past teasing that she didn't know how to have fun had hit uncomfortably close to the mark at times. She guessed she had some thinking to do about accepting her own character before she would be able to find her animagus self.

Hermione put down the banana skin in her half-finished bowl. "I don't think I'm going to take the potion. I think I'm going to persevere with the meditation. It may take longer but I think it will be better that way."

Luna nodded sagely and changed the subject to runes.

Hermione happily went with the topic and they were in the midst of a spirited discussion about the origins of runic magic when Ron showed up along with the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Ginny was pale under her freckles and Hermione didn't envy the younger woman the pressure she
was under. Everyone in the school knew the outcome of the Quidditch cup rested on the game, and as always the seeker was the one under the most pressure to perform.

It wasn't long before breakfast was over, cloaks and gloves were gathered, and the majority of the school headed for the Quidditch stands.

Hermione met Harry outside of the tower and they walked hand in hand outside. Harry was almost vibrating with tension and Hermione appreciated it was difficult for him to simply watch a game that he'd had no choice in not playing thanks to the tournament rules.

"Sirius isn't coming?" asked Hermione as they trudged up the steps to get a good seat.

"He's in the parents' block with the Weasleys." Harry explained. "He invited them for lunch."

"That's nice." Hermione said.

"The Malfoys arrived just before," Harry retorted, "it was like a car crash."

Hermione winced sympathetically. She could only imagine how the two couples must have reacted to each other.

"Well, they can't expect us to support Draco just because he's family." Hermione said. "We are Gryffindors."

"Lucy made the argument that I'm not actually a Gryffindor at present," Harry scowled. "Ponce."

"Language." Hermione remonstrated, more because it was expected than anything else. "You know if you're not careful you're going to end up calling him that to his face."

"Ponce or Lucy?" asked Harry cheekily.

She laughed and poked him in the arm. Neville waved madly at them from a row just ahead and they made their way to him, sliding into the seats next to him and beside Lavender and Parvati.

"No Hannah?" Hermione looked around just in case she'd missed her.

"She's keeping Sue company." Neville said evenly.

But Hermione could sense the disgruntlement he was repressing and lifted her eyebrows knowingly.

Neville flushed. "We'd said this was going to be a date but..." he shrugged away the rest of the sentence.

Harry gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "It'll get better. Sue just needs to get some confidence back after the letter thing. That was nasty."

"I hope you're right." Neville said. "It's not that I don't understand, it's just Hannah and I haven't had a date just the two of us since the second task."

"Here come the teams!" Someone yelled excitedly.

They turned their attention to cheering and clapping as the teams strode out onto the field and took to the skies as they were announced.

Neville thrust two thumbs up as Ginny buzzed them. "GOOD LUCK!"
"How much money do you have riding on this with Zabini?" asked Harry amused.

"Enough." Neville admitted sheepishly.

Hermione shook her head. Betting! She pursed her lips with disapproval and kept her gaze on the match as Harry and Neville quietly spoke about tactics. She bit her lip. She was regretting not bringing a book.

Harry shifted beside her and bumped her slightly. She turned inquisitively and he leaned in to whisper in her ear.

"The snitch is up by the Slytherin stands."

Hermione frowned and squinted in the general direction. She couldn't see anything! How had Harry seen it?

"Shiny objects." He said with a deadpan tone.

She slapped his arm and smiled at him affectionately. "Harry?"

"Hmmm?" Harry blew out a frustrated breath as Draco feinted andfooled Ginny into following him into a fruitless dive well away from where the snitch was lurking.

"I'm thinking I'm not going to take the potion." Hermione said in a rush. "I want to do it properly."

It took a moment for Harry to connect the dots on what she was talking about but his expression cleared and he shrugged.

"Meditation is better according to all the theory." He said.

"Exactly." Hermione agreed. "And I want to do it right. There's no rush is there?"

Harry shook his head. "I thought it'd be good for us to have something to do together and we are so…” he smiled his shy smile, the one that reminded her for all of the changes in his life, he was still Harry.

A yell went up and they both dragged their attention back to the action on the field. Hermione looped her arm through Harry's and leaned against him. Maybe she didn't need the book after all.

Harry sipped on the butter beer that Fred had sneaked into his hand and watched as the Gryffindor Common Room partied in celebration.

The cup had been given to their extremely proud Head of House and Harry wouldn't put it past his Aunt Minnie to be happily ensconced in her private rooms polishing the silver trophy and raising a toast to it with a dram or two of whiskey.

He gazed around the room. He felt slightly awkward being there. He'd rarely been back to the tower since he and Sirius had moved in to their own suite of rooms. Apart from a couple of occasions to see Ron and the one memorable trip to Hermione's dorm room that had gone down in Hogwarts' history, Harry hadn't been by very much at all.

Some of it, he mused, was his own reticence at being around crowds of people. Even now, tucked into a corner seating group with Ron holding court retelling the story of the match to a captivated Lavender and Parvati one side of him, and Hermione chattering away to Neville on the other, he was
too aware that everyone kept throwing surreptitious glances in their direction.

Of course, he might just be paranoid.

Just because he was visiting, it didn't mean he was the centre of attention, and wasn't it arrogant to think that he was especially when Ron, a key member of the cup-winning team, was right there? Harry repressed the urge to sigh and instead sipped his butter beer.

Alright, maybe he wasn't the centre of attention, he still felt awkward though.

Like he didn't belong in the Gryffindor Common Room anymore.

Harry tried to dismiss the thought and watched as Ron gestured with his bottle demonstrating a save he'd made. Ron had been a hero at the hoops. He'd made save after save after save. It had allowed the Gryffindor chasers to rack up a high score and the game had finished 260-250 to Gryffindor when Draco had mis-timed grabbing the snitch.

He tried to listen to Ron's tale but his mind kept dwelling on the feeling of not belonging that was getting stronger with every moment he stayed there. At least he was due to leave soon because of his curfew anyway…

It wasn't just the length of time he'd been away from Gryffindor or the way some people were staring, Harry thought tiredly, it was also the knowledge that in truth his power levels and training were pulling him away from his peers – from his friends. In class, Hermione and some of the Ravenclaws still outdid him where the theory was concerned but nobody could touch him on the practical side. He usually managed complex spell work in a matter of moments. It made him different and he hated it. At least Hermione was top of the class for the fourth year material and had, thanks to her helping him with the tournament, also mastered some fifth and sixth year spells. It eased something in him to know he wasn't completely leaving her behind.

If he hadn't promised Sirius he'd do his best…

If he didn't need to be his best to survive the tournament…

He couldn't go back.

He would just have to deal with the changes his power and his training wrought when he returned to Hogwarts for his fifth year. If he returned…

His mouth pressed into a thin line. He was determined Tom wasn't going to win another victory but the reality was that he was still a long way off knowing how to defeat his nemesis. But he was certain that the next time they met, it would be over one way or another. In fact, he felt the inevitability of a confrontation sooner rather than later deep down in his bones.

Harry sighed and took another gulp of his drink.

A flash of red in the corner of his vision had him frowning and he turned his head just in time to see Ginny slipping out of the portrait hole. He fidgeted for a long moment before turning to inform Ron – only to find Ron immersed in a snog session with Lavender. Parvati had disappeared.

Harry winced. He really didn't need such an up close view of his best friend's tongue…

"You should go talk to Ginny." Hermione whispered in Harry's ear, her breath skating over his skin.

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow.
"Who better than you? You're a seeker. You know how she's feeling." Hermione whispered.

"We could both go." Harry pointed out, careful to keep his own voice low.

Hermione shook her head and jerked it pointedly toward where Neville was staring despondently into his butter beer. Hermione would obviously deal with Neville and Harry was nominated to deal with Ginny. He squeezed Hermione's hand gently. Her compassion and generosity was one of the things he loved about her.

He set his beer down and slipped out of his seat. He wished he had the map but Moody still had it. He hoped Ginny hadn't gone far – Hogwarts wasn't safe if someone was masquerading as a student. He got through the portrait door without anyone stopping him and paused as he found Ginny immediately.

Ginny glanced up from her position hunched up by the wall near to the portrait door. She flushed bright red and made to get up but Harry waved her back down and lowered himself to the floor beside her.

He nudged his glasses back up his nose. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Ginny shrugged and looked down at her feet. "I messed up."

"How?" asked Harry gently.

Ginny's gaze flashed to his in disbelief. "I didn't catch the snitch!"

"No," Harry agreed, "Draco had the edge on you since he saw it first and has a faster broom. But you pushed him; you were right behind him when he grabbed it and he knew if he didn't get it, you would. He made the choice to catch it despite knowing the score. He knew if he didn't, you'd catch it and they'd lose by a massive amount and not just ten. You forced his hand because you were on his tail. You did good."

She frowned but her gaze seemed contemplative. "I thought a successful seeker was meant to catch the snitch."

"Or force their opponent into making a mistake." Harry corrected. "Sometimes the score is even and it's a direct race. Sometimes it's not and it's more complicated. Draco needed to time catching it correctly or they'd lose, and he misjudged it. At the World Cup, Viktor knew his team would never catch-up with the Irish – their chasers just didn't have it in them – so he chose to end it knowing his catch would mean defeat not winning."

"I never looked at being a seeker that way." Ginny murmured, wrapping her arms around her knees and hugging them to her.

"Well, you kind of want to be a chaser really, right?" Harry pointed out. "And you really helped with that out there today. A lot more than I would have done because I don't have the same understanding of chasing that you do."

Ginny gave a small smile. "I was so busy helping the chasers, I forgot about the snitch."

Harry bumped her shoulder with his own. "So you won't make that mistake again."

She grimaced but nodded. "At least you know your place is safe next year."

If he survived. Harry shook himself. He had to stop thinking that way.
"Well, you never know," Harry joked, "we might both get shown up some kind of Quidditch prodigy." He smiled at her. "You're a shoo-in though for Angelina's place on the chaser line."

Her grip on her knees relaxed and she shifted position, her shoulders dropping as she grinned at him. "Thank you." She glanced back at the portrait hole. "I'm sorry to drag you away from everyone."

Harry shrugged. "Parties aren't really my thing plus your brother and Lavender…"

"Say no more." She said hurriedly, pretending a full body shudder.

Harry grinned at her.

"I think I'm going to tell Fred to go ahead and write to Mum about Ron." Ginny pondered out loud. "If it were any of us acting the way he is he'd go spare."

Harry figured it was probably just Ginny Ron would have issues with but he nodded anyway.

"Well, if you're not upset at leaving the party, I'm sorry I dragged you away from Hermione." Ginny said.

"Actually she was the one who sent me after you." Harry informed her briskly.

Ginny blushed and looked away. "She's a really good friend."

"Yes," said Harry with proud contentment, "she really is."

Ginny regarded him for a long moment and just as he began to feel uncomfortable, she began to speak.

"I've never really apologised for behaving the way I did, have I?"

"Yes, you did." Harry frowned.

"Not about Hermione," Ginny contradicted him quickly, "I know I apologised about that. No, I mean, about how I was with you. How I was at the beginning of the year before the whole thing with Hermione."

Harry felt as though his tongue was tied in a knot. He had no idea what to say to her.

"I am sorry, Harry." Ginny said sincerely.

He jerked his head in a nod of acknowledgement. "It's OK…"

"No, it's not." Ginny said. "I was terrible." She shook her head. "I wasn't very much of a friend." She sighed. "You know Hermione told me that it was more likely that you'd choose someone who was a friend to go out with and…and I didn't believe her. I thought she was just warning me off, you know?"

Harry couldn't speak again, unsure what to say.

"But she was right." Ginny continued, clearly not needing his input anyway. "I see you and her together and…and it works because you're friends more than anything else."

"I know she likes me for me." Harry said quietly. He fidgeted with the laces on his shoes. "I can't imagine being with anyone else."
Ginny nodded quickly, a blush stealing over her cheeks again. "You make a great couple." She paused. "Matt's asked me on a practice date."

Matt as in Matthew Inglebee.

"Is Lydia OK with that?" asked Harry, wondering if it was going to cause problems with Ginny's friendship with the other girl.

"Yeah," Ginny grinned, "she prodded Matt into it, I think, because his friend Albert asked her out."

Harry refrained from shaking his head at the antics of the lower year students. His year didn't exactly hold any moral high ground with all the soap opera break-ups and get-togethers that had happened.

"I like Matt." Ginny admitted quietly.

"So, go for it." Harry encouraged her. He nudged her shoulder again. "I promise I won't tell Ron."

Ginny smiled at him and nudged him back. "Thanks, Harry. You're a good friend." She hesitated again before rushing the words out. "I hope you think I'm a better friend too now."

"I do," Harry hastened to reassure her.

The quiet pad of paws had Harry turning his head and he wasn't surprised to find Padfoot walking around the corner. He cast a quick tempus charm and grimaced at the time. No wonder Sirius had come looking for him. He was past the time he'd said he'd be back.

Padfoot shifted into Sirius as Ginny and Harry scrambled to their feet.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly, "I know I'm late."

"It was my fault," said Ginny, "he was giving me a pep talk for missing the snitch."

Sirius held up both hands and smiled reassuringly. "Apologies accepted."

Harry turned to Ginny, feeling awkward again. "Can you let Hermione know Sirius came for me and I'll meet her as usual tomorrow?"

Ginny nodded, her red hair flying everywhere. "I will. Thanks again, Harry." She mumbled the password to the Fat Lady, who was glaring at Sirius, and disappeared into the tower.

Sirius slung an arm around Harry's shoulders and they fell into a comfortable pace as they walked back to their own quarters.

"So," Sirius began, a teasing lilt to his tone, "sitting out with a girl who isn't your girlfriend? If I didn't overhear you talking about her going out with Matt I might have been a little worried."

Harry shot him a look. "Hermione sent me out to talk to her."

"Very trusting girl, your girlfriend." Sirius continued to tease.

"I'm not interested in anyone else." Harry said with a shrug. "She knows that."

Sirius hummed. "You're a good boyfriend and a good friend, Pronglet. It was a good thing you did back there with Ginny."

"She's not bad when she's not being all stalkerish." Harry admitted.
Sirius gave a bark of laughter as they reached the portrait guarding their door. "High praise indeed."

They walked into the cosy warmth and Harry felt the tension drain out of him. He really did love having his own rooms. It was going to be difficult going back to the dorms in his fifth year.

"You alright, Pronglet?" asked Sirius.

Harry turned around and found his father standing just inside the door looking at him with concern. "I'm fine," he immediately said to reassure him, "I just…" he sighed and rubbed his head tiredly, "it feels odd being in the tower now? I was just thinking that it's going to be weird next year."

"And?" prompted Sirius, guessing that there was more that was bothering him.

"And I guess I was wondering if I'll fit in." Harry admitted. He slumped back against the dining table. "I'm miles ahead on practical work and…then there's Quidditch. They won without me." He ducked his head, shamefaced at the pettiness of hating that they had won without him.

Sirius crossed the space between them and tugged him into a quick hug before ruffling his hair and easing back as though knowing Harry wouldn't tolerate the comfort very long. "It's only natural to feel left out. When I was banned from Quidditch, I hated that they won games without me and I didn't even want to play."

His confession made Harry feel a touch better.

"Maybe you should spend some more time with Hermione and Ron over there next term?" suggested Sirius. "Minnie won't mind as long as you're not using the girls' dorm as the way in…"

Harry snorted.

"…and it'll get you comfortable being there again."

"Maybe you're right." Harry admitted, stepping away and stopping as he caught sight of the map on the table. "Moody brought the map back?" His fingers touched the battered parchment carefully.

Sirius nodded, accepting the change in subject although it was obvious he wanted to say something more. "Neither Moody nor Snape have managed to catch any of the students not being exactly who they're supposed to be." He frowned. "Remus can't say for certain that Peter doesn't know a way around the map and neither can I. Either way checking the map now is pretty pointless when they could have gone completely and have plans to sneak someone back in after Easter." He pointed at it. "You can take it back for the rest of term. We'll take it to Bulgaria with us and have Remus take a look at it."

Harry nodded, happy to have the map back in his possession if not with the news that the map checks had been a pointless exercise. "I'm going to head to bed."

"Try not to worry, Pronglet." Sirius advised, alluding back to their previous conversation. "Things will work out."

Harry attempted a smile but as he made for the stairs he couldn't help thinking that his life was never that simple.

6th April 1995

"…and I have the latest plans from Tomas on the security for the wedding in the folder." Clara tapped it for emphasis. "They've provided the general layout of the Minister's home which is great
and gives us some idea of how we can ensure we close the gaps."

Remus nodded, surprised at Bogdan's generosity again that he had opened up his official home for
the wedding and was allowing such sensitive security information to be shared with them. He wasn't
disregarding the honour he was being afforded. But then as well as he got along with Bogdan, Dora
had hit it off with Hilde even more so, and Bogdan's wife was a force of nature.

"They've suggested we team up the lycanthrope guards." Patrick said cheerfully. "Gregor's putting
together a detail and I'll take a look at it then. It makes sense to have one of theirs with one of ours
and since Gregor's comfortable with that arrangement we should go with it."

Another honour since it simply wasn't done for an Alpha to cede territorial duties to another pack and
yet Gregor was allowing it for Remus's.

Remus reached for his glass of water, taking a long cool sip to lubricate his suddenly overly dry
mouth. "That's good news." He set the folder to one side. "Anything more on the wedding?"

Clara looked down at her ubiquitous notebook. She tucked a strand of red hair behind an ear and
sighed. "We've got a room ready for Dora's mother and father. They're due to arrive by portkey first
thing in the morning around six at the Ministry. I understand you're going to pick them up?"

"I will." Remus said evenly, hiding his own discomfort at the thought of seeing Andromeda and Ted
for the first time since they'd broken the news of the baby and plans for marriage.

It had been a hell of a fight between mother and daughter. They'd reconciled over mirrors and floos;
in long letters that had had Dora weeping and laughing. It had been emotional for Dora losing her
mother's regard and only Ted's steadfast support had seen Dora through it. Even now, he knew Dora
was uncertain of her mother's reactions and was dreading the visit.

He wasn't looking forward to it himself. He had deserved more than Ted's disappointed glare and
Andromeda's scathing dressing-down. He'd probably feel better if Ted or Andy had simply cursed
him or punched him. He deserved it.

He had known as soon as he'd given in to the first kiss what was going to happen and he hadn't
stopped it, grateful for the comfort the intimacy of sex had given him in the wake of Skeeter's article
and the fallout. He'd also known it had been a mistake. He'd tried to get Dora to see reason the day
after when they'd returned from the Wizengamot but she had been intractable, unwilling to see his
reasons. He'd hurt her, Remus told himself briskly. He'd hurt her and he'd deserved the cold shoulder
she'd given him for a month.

But the baby changed everything.

Truthfully, Dora had been hesitant, truly not wanting him to be trapped, but he'd assured her that he
did want to marry her. It had been a kind lie – he did truly care for her, he would never have slept
with her if he hadn't, but the want to marry…that had been the lie and still was.

No...he really wasn't looking forward to playing host to his imminent in-laws but Sirius had been
keen to get them out of Britain and away from the inevitable fallout of the announcements that had
been made to the Wizengamot earlier that day. Remus couldn't blame him for that. The wireless had
been filled with commentary already and he had eventually switched it off rather than continue to
listen to it.

"Nothing else on the wedding from me." Patrick chipped in, drawing Remus's attention back to the
meeting.
"Pack news?" inquired Remus delicately, hearing Patrick's unspoken hint that there was something to speak about.

"Everyone is generally happy," Patrick began, "Tonks is very easy-going so that has helped everybody feel comfortable with welcoming her. A lot of us are excited about the cub..." he grinned as Remus grimaced at the term, "and we're all enjoying the fact that our Alpha is here and that Harry and Sirius are going to visit with the wedding."

"But?" prompted Remus.

"But there is some unrest." Clara stepped in briskly. "Sian is disgruntled and some are listening."

"What's she saying that's resonating?" Remus wasn't unsurprised at the news; Sian had been less than welcoming to Dora since their arrival. Patrick and Clara had seemingly helped to curtail the worst of her jealousy and spite but the resurgence as the wedding drew closer wasn't unexpected.

Clara and Patrick exchanged a telling glance.

Remus heaved a sigh. "This is going to be one of those pack things that I don't understand isn't it?"

"Sian thinks Dora shouldn't be regarded as pack even though she's your fiancée and the mother of your child." Clara explained. "That's resonating with those who'd like to keep the pack to wolves."

"The pack already has Harry and Sirius." Remus said exasperated. "It's not an exclusively wolf pack anyway."

"Well you know how Sian feels about Sirius and Harry." Patrick quipped, a smirk softening the truth of his words. "She wants a wolf pack." He shrugged. "Most of us accept that your pack began with Harry and Sirius and accept them as pack-mates. I don't deny I'm a little antsy about their arrival because they're your human betas. But then from everything you've said they won't challenge me for the position on the wolf side so I'm teaching my wolf to be cool with it. Some of us aren't so great at compartmentalising or drawing a distinction between the wolf instinct and our own intellect."

Clara nodded in agreement. "Sian is targeting those most likely to agree with her. The rest are giving her short shrift."

"Anyone who has a problem with Harry, Sirius and Dora being part of the pack are more than welcome to find another more suited to their tastes." Remus snapped out, frustrated and feeling defensive.

Clara and Patrick both subsided into their chairs and lowered their gazes, allowing Remus's wolf to feel their submission and acceptance of his words.

Remus took a steadying breath. The moments where his wolf would make himself known were growing the more time he spent with the pack. It worried him that he was losing himself to the wolf but at the same time there was something settling within him; a discontent that was being erased day by day.

"We'll take that message back." Patrick said seriously. "It will deter most people from giving Sian the time of day."

"I'll talk with Sian." Clara offered. "If she wants to stay, she has to settle down and accept your choice of mate."

"Which brings us onto the second part of what she's been saying." Patrick murmured.
Remus's eyes narrowed at his beta. "What?"

"That even if Dora and the cub stay, you should take a second wolf-mate, or at least keep your marriage open to the possibility of liaisons with the pack women." Patrick continued, fulfilling his role as beta to not be afraid to give Remus the bad news.

"Bugger." Remus swore and slumped back in the comfortable leather chair. It wasn't unheard of for Alphas to have free reign with the women in the pack – or the men for that matter – Greyback hadn't been that discriminating over who he screwed. Gregor and Robert were happily married but Remus was aware that wasn't true for the others.

"It's gotten some mixed reactions." Clara inserted smoothly. "Some are traditional and believe a marriage is sacrosanct; others, well, some of the single women joined because they were attracted to the idea of you as their Alpha and mate. They're bitterly disappointed in the same way Sian is that you've chosen someone else outside the pack to settle down with."

Remus bit back the words that he hadn't truly chosen at all since it would be a lie on several levels even if that was the way he felt.

"I'm making traditional marriage vows." Remus stated firmly. "Dora will be my wife and I will honour and respect her with fidelity."

Patrick grinned at him. "You're a good man, Remus." He puffed up his chest. "More for me then."

Remus laughed at his beta's antics.

Clara smiled widely too. "We'll let the others know." She got to her feet and Patrick followed.

Remus dismissed them with a simple nod and sighed as they left him alone. The study at the Black Farm had become his refuge; somewhere for him to retreat when the situation with Dora became too much or the pack felt claustrophobic. But as he looked around the comfortable cozy room, shadowed and lit alternatively with the flickering flames in the hearth, Remus felt loneliness creep into his soul.

He missed the School House. More, he missed Griffin House. He missed Sirius and Harry so much some days his bones ached with it.

Especially Sirius.

The two of them spoke daily on the mirror but it wasn't the same. He'd gotten used to having his friend back in his life again and it felt far too like losing him again for it to sit easily with Remus.

"You haven't lost him," Remus told himself sternly, "he's alive and he's well and he's not imprisoned in Azkaban. You just talked to him!"

He rolled his eyes before closing them. He kneaded his forehead gently.

"And now you're losing your mind." Remus muttered. "Talking with yourself."

He sighed. He had made his bed and now he had to lie in it. He focused his mind on business enough to double check that his work for the day was done. He tidied his desk, banked the flames and locked up the study on his way up to the master suite.

He hesitated by the door next to his and with a shake of his head as though to dislodge the nerves that had set up home there, he knocked gently.
Dora opened the door a moment later and ushered him inside, darting a look down the hallway to see if anyone had noticed his entry. He was amused at her discretion. They were the only ones living in the family wing.

He stood a touch awkwardly inside her sitting room. The Blacks had somewhat conveniently created a suite of rooms for the Lord and a suite of rooms for the Lady. They were connected via an inner door but both could be kept distinct if necessary. He and Dora had taken the decision to sleep apart until their marriage when they'd arrived. Perhaps it was closing the door once the horse had bolted but Remus was glad of the privacy his own rooms afforded him. He wasn't looking forward to losing that once the wedding had taken place.

"I just wanted to check in." Remus said hesitantly. They hadn't seen each other since lunch time. "Gilby said at dinner that you weren't feeling well?"

Dora grimaced and waved him into a seat as she settled back onto the sofa. "I have no idea why they call it morning sickness."

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Remus feeling guilty and concerned.

Dora shook her hair – strangely in its natural state – and waved a hand at the discarded tray of food the elf had presumably brought her. "I've managed to eat some soup and crackers." She sighed. "You know our wedding breakfast is going to be fantastic but if sprog here keeps up his routine I'm not going to be able to taste a morsel of it."

Remus reached over and picked up her hand. "I'll have whatever you end up with."

Dora smiled appreciatively at him, her grey eyes alight with affection. "That's sweet."

He smiled back at her.

Her expression turned mischievous. "So did Clara and Patrick finally spill the beans about the rest of the women feeling all bereft of your manly charms?"

Remus rolled his eyes expressively. "I have no intention of sleeping with anyone but you for the rest of my life."

Dora's face brightened. "I'd understand if…"

Remus waved her tentative offer away. "We're going to be married, Dora. My own parents were very happily married all of their lives by being dedicated to each other and their family. I want that."

"Me too." Dora admitted. She sighed. "I guess I just feel a touch guilty about trapping you into this."

"You didn't trap me." Remus denied it automatically although a small voice in his head was agreeing with her. He cared for her, he thought to himself sternly; he truly cared for her and she cared for him. They were friends. There were worst starts to a marriage, worst foundations than theirs.

"That's not what Sian thinks." Dora said dryly.

"Sian can get stuffed." Remus said decisively.

She laughed and he was pleased that he'd managed to raise her spirits a little.

"I should get to bed." Remus said, standing.

Dora stood up again. "You could stay." She offered, a hopeful smile softening her features into a
welcome that tempted Remus.

He shook his head. "I have to leave early to collect your parents from the Ministry and I'd like to do that with a clear conscience."

"Right." Her face crumpled, first with disappointment and then with horror at remembering the imminent arrival of her mother and father.

"It'll be alright, Dora." Remus assured her. "Andy loves you and Ted's been very good about this whole business."

"I know," Dora rallied and smiled at him, "you get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

He leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. She moved into his space and deepened the kiss. He was so tempted to wrap himself around her and take comfort in her. Remus drew away reluctantly, reminding himself that it had been that kind of thinking that had led them to the current state of affairs.

"I'll see you in the morning." Remus said gently. "'Night, Dora."

"'Night, Wolfy." Dora replied with a hint of her old spirit.

He used the connecting door to walk into his own rooms and for a long moment he stood in the dark, his mind racing. He shook himself. He had an early start and he had absolutely no wish to greet the parents of the woman he'd knocked up on little or no sleep. But even as he readied himself for bed, he had a feeling sleep would be a long time coming.

o-O-o

7th April 1995

Bill dropped the latest lot of brooms onto the transportation device and watched them zap away. He shook his head. By his reckoning, that batch brought the number of brooms found to an astonishing one hundred and eleven. Some of them were beautiful old classics, some of them were broken and unusable, and some of them were the very latest version. Bill couldn't help but wonder at the latter. Were some of the kids so spoilt rotten that they didn't notice when they lost their top of the line broom?

He shook his head sadly.

Perhaps it had been out of necessity but one thing his parents had taught him was to value every galleon, sickle and knut he earned, and by extension everything he bought with said money. It was a philosophy that had won him points with the goblins.

He made his way back down the aisle he was clearing and started in on a stack of books. He absently separated them into old and valuable, usable, broken needing repair and beyond hope.

He had found himself wondering again whether he'd return to Gringotts after his service was finished, his mind drifting back to the conversation he'd had with Sirius the previous Summer. In many ways, Bill mused, he had only become stronger in his conviction that the life he had previously planned for himself was no longer the one that he would live.

He watched Sirius and Harry; he watched the Potter alliance; and, more than anything he wanted to be part of the future they were building for their world, to be an equal voice in shaping that future.
An equal voice.

That was important.

Because he had a voice in it already. Sirius and Harry both took time to ask for his opinion; considered his thoughts; included his suggestions as part of their plans. He knew he was lucky that their view of service was not subservience, but active and vigorous participation in making the House he was sworn to serve a success. Sirius had regular meetings one-on-one with Bill; Harry sought him out more than his own brothers did. He was tremendously lucky that they ignored the actual reality of his position, of the Ancient and Noble House of Weasley's position, and simply followed their own path. But he wanted, more than ever, to have earned a real position of authority; of responsibility.

It was probably time to take up Sirius's offer to speak with him about his future and map out some kind of plan. He wanted to get his family seat back on the Wizengamot. It might take years so Bill's focus had to be on building up the alliances and reputation needed to win a nomination. He wondered if curse-breaking was something he could incorporate into that; there was a lingering sense of duty urging him to complete his contract with Gringotts.

The door to the room opened and Bill barely paid any attention knowing the magic wouldn't allow anyone but those who were allowed to enter.

"Bill!" Caro's call echoed through the vast space.

He raised his wand and sent up a spray of red sparks as a reply.

She found him a few minutes later. "Wow, what time did you get up? You look like you got an early start!"

Bill flipped a pristine and unused copy of Gilderoy Lockhart's book on werewolves to the 'beyond hope' pile. He shot her a teasing grin. "Maybe you're late."

Caro snorted and tossed him the newspaper. "Five minutes," she admitted, "but I had a good excuse. Got caught up reading Skeeter's latest article." She rolled up the sleeves of her plain blue robe and took over the book sorting as Bill unfolded the paper and began to read.

"HOUSE OF BLACK SEALS ALLIANCE WITH WEREWOLVES WITH MARRIAGE!

BABY BOOM FOR THE HOUSE OF BLACK!

The April Wizengamot session started with a joyous announcement from Lord Black concerning its Werewolf Steward Remus Lupin and the daughter of Andromeda Tonks nee Black, Nymphadora; a marriage!

Nymphadora Tonks was assigned back in January as protection detail for Remus Lupin following public unrest after the details of his accidental attack on Lords Potter and Black were maliciously leaked through an unsuspecting press as part of a vicious attempt by the former Lord Wenlock (now residing in Azkaban) to derail the new Creature laws. In February, the pair went abroad to continue Lord Potter's work in building a sanctuary for all werewolves.

It appears time spent in each other's company has led to a wondrous whirlwind romance between the two culminating in the announcement of a spring wedding to be held on April 17th in Bulgaria where Lupin is a known close friend of the current Bulgarian Minister Bogdan Oblansk.

Lord Black made this official comment: "I am tremendously thrilled that a wizard I have long
considered to be a brother will formally become part of our family and an official son of the House of Black, and, of course, that my cousin has found happiness."

Of course, the marriage of the pair would not have been allowed under the previous Werewolf Laws. Minister Cornelius Fudge remarked: "It is truly a wondrous day for our society when we can acknowledge that our new laws are fair and equitable for all. Government should not interfere with the personal lives of our citizens in matters of the heart and we celebrate this union as one of the first for those Wizards and Witches infected with Lycanthropy."

Others are not on sanguine about this societal shift. Lord Selwyn commented: "While the Steward of the Houses of Black and Potter is a learned and knowledgeable wizard in addition to his unfortunate status as a lycanthrope, we cannot help but feel he is an exception to the rule. Perhaps this union will be the first but I rather feel it will and should be a rarity; how many lycanthropes have the control required to never bite or turn their loved one?"

Dolores Umbridge, currently serving as an Ambassador for the British Ministry abroad and original author of the old Werewolf laws, contacted this journalist to state in the most vulgar language possible that the planned union was "disgusting, abhorrent and abnormal." She also made comments regarding the lifespan of any progeny of the union which have been passed to the DMLE for further investigation.

Speaking of progeny, it was a somewhat sheepish Lord Black who admitted in his announcement that the love-struck couple had "jumped the wand rather" and a new addition to the House of Black was already on its way with an expected birth in the Summer. He reported that the baby has already been confirmed as free of lycanthropy, and Nymphadora is blooming in her pregnancy. With the news announced some months ago that Narcissa Malfoy nee Black is also expecting her second child, it would seem that the House of Black is splendidly resurgent and will have much to celebrate in the coming months. We look forward to covering what will be the society wedding of the year!"

Bill huffed out an exasperated sigh at Skeeter's obsequious tone but nodded in relief. "It looks like it went better than expected."

"I'd like to know just how much Sirius had to pay Rita for her to spin it that way." Caro remarked.

Bill kept silent. He knew something had happened between Sirius, Skeeter, Bones and Moody just after the second task but he wasn't aware of the details and he figured it was better for his health to ignore it.

"I'm glad for Remus and Tonks though; they don't need the stress." Caro continued. "I'm pretty sure they'll still get a heap of Howlers anyway."

She probably wasn't wrong, Bill mused. His father had only just managed to stop his mother from sending one after they'd been told. At least it was out in the open with the announcement though. The whole imminent marriage and baby had been the worst kept secret of British wizarding society ever since Tonks had started sending out invites.

Bill refolded the Prophet and put it aside. He started to help again. "What do you think about it?" He asked. "I mean, honestly?"

Caro shot his a suspicious look and waved her wand at him. "Why are you asking?"

Bill shrugged, the movement pulling his black t-shirt taut – he refused to wear robes for physical work. "Maybe I just want your view of the society wedding of the year?"
They both smirked at each other.

Caro sneaked another peek at him as they settled back to the task of sorting the books. "Honestly, I guess my view is skewed because I know them both..." she frowned as she considered the question seriously.

He liked that about Caro. She always took the time to properly answer a question even when she didn't fully understand why he was asking it.

"I can see why most people will think her being with a werewolf is squicky. I mean, some of the young girls may think it tragically romantic in a Beauty and Beast kind of way, but there's no denying that she's living with a man who is carrying a horrifying disease. Maybe a bite or a scratch when they're, uh, intimate won't infect her but the risk..." Caro sighed. "She's got to either be fearless about it or just head over heels for Remus."

"I think it's the latter." Bill said. Tonks had pursued Remus as soon as she'd had a signal that he was looking for a relationship.

"Me too." Caro agreed. "And I understand her attraction to Remus as a wizard and a man; he's an attractive bloke, powerful even though he hides it behind his mild-mannered steward persona; knowledgeable and very intelligent. And he's funny. He has the driest sense of humour of anyone I've ever known. And, of course, there's his friendship with Sirius and Harry. It's sweet and adorable how much he loves them, and..."

"And I may need a sick bucket." Bill joked. He glanced at Caro wonderingly. She had joked about fancying Remus and Sirius in the past; had even flirted a bit with both of them. Maybe it had been more truth than fiction?

"All I'm saying is that I see the attraction from Tonks' viewpoint." Caro said firmly. "And so because I also know Remus, I know he'll take every precaution and be extremely careful never to scratch Tonks ever, never mind bite her, and while I do tend to find the whole being with a werewolf thing squicky in the abstract, I can see and understand why it's not a consideration for Tonks with Remus."

She placed another book in the repair pile. "On a social political level, I worry that young girls might romanticise this particular situation too much and find themselves out of their depth with werewolves who don't have the same sense of honour or care that Remus has."

It was a good point even if it did come close to parroting Selwyn. But Bill figured it wouldn't hurt to raise it with Sirius as something they needed to consider in the political arena going forward.

"As far as the unplanned sprog is concerned," Caro shrugged, "it's their business that they had sex and forgot to take precautions. I think everyone's sex life is private. Society should keep their noses out of it." She sighed. "I guess the thing that jars with me most from what I've overheard so far is that Tonks is being singled out for criticism. But then I'm not really surprised that there's a double standard which paints the woman as a hussy who's trapped the poor bloke into marriage."

Bill nodded. "Harry cornered me a couple of weeks ago and asked me what was acceptable and not about sex before marriage and babies out of wedlock in the wizarding world since he was getting a lot of conflicting messages from reactions to the news just in the Potter alliance circle." He frowned at a book and set it on the old and valuable stack carefully.

"I can understand why since he's been mostly raised in the muggle world." Caro agreed. "As a muggleborn it's not easy traversing the culture. Normally you don't even realise you've put your foot in it until your foot's already in it and sinking fast." She stopped sorting for a moment and rubbed her wrist. "What did you tell him?"
Bill grimaced and paused himself. He crossed his arms. "You have to promise never to tell my mother."

Caro grinned at him. "It's hardly likely that your mother and I will ever speak enough to…"

"Caro!"

"Fine!" Caro raised her wand as though taking a vow. "Promise."

"I told Harry that he had to remember that the wizarding world would always react a bit like my mother where sex and marriage were concerned." Bill admitted chagrined. "Namely that as far as my mother, and therefore wizarding society in general is concerned, sex and babies don't happen outside of a marriage, and they happily have hypocritical self-imposed amnesia of any sex they had before they got a ring on their finger."

Caro's eyes widened and she burst into laughter. She bent over double before heaving herself back into a standing position. "Oh, that's priceless!"

Bill sighed but he couldn't blame her. "Harry commented the view was very old-fashioned."

"It is." Caro agreed cheerfully, resuming her book sorting. "And let me guess; the man is supposed to have the requisite amount of experience to make it wonderful for his wife on their wedding night – never mind how he's supposed to get that experience if all the women are meant to remain pure and innocent?"

"Nobody said it was realistic." Bill commented dryly. "Like I said to Harry, most wizards and witches have some experience by the time they get married these days, although some do wait for the wedding to go the whole way, but the decision is a personal one." And one Harry didn't have to make for a while, Bill concluded in his own head.

"But society as a whole still paints the witch as morally deficient if she does decide to have a sex life outside of marriage." Caro shook her head. "The muggle world isn't that much better. It's just as patriarchal and male-biased. It's improving though all the time." She sighed. "I have to admit I was surprised at Andromeda Tonks. I thought she'd be more sympathetic."

Bill raised his eyebrow questioningly.

"Didn't she elope with her husband as a school-girl?" Caro pointed out.

"She did and it was huge scandal from what everyone remembers," Bill said, "but she ran off with Ted to escape getting trapped into a loveless arranged marriage and I get the impression Andy probably did wait for marriage for, um, you know."

"Ah." Caro grimaced.

Bill rubbed his nose with the back of one forearm. "I haven't said anything to anyone else but I overheard her and Ted arguing back when she and Tonks weren't speaking and she was upset rather than angry." He frowned. "She said because of the baby Tonks had effectively tied herself into marrying Remus just as though there was a marriage contract and she'd wanted Tonks to have a choice about who she married."

He also figured Andy was upset that Tonks' choices had unthinkingly made life politically difficult for Sirius after he had welcomed them back to the House of Black.

Caro pulled a small face; features distorting briefly before inclining her head to the side like her
"I get the impression that if they weren't getting married, jumping the wand with the baby wouldn't have been forgiven so easily. In the muggle world it wouldn't be such a big deal these days although some old biddies might disapprove."

"Harry mentioned Hermione had said something similar." Bill stretched, easing the kinks out of his back.

"I guess that's where I do get kind of get concerned." Caro said with a sigh. "I'm a little worried Tonks' so wild about him and he's…" she struggled to find a way to express herself but finally heaved out a sigh, "not so invested?"

Bill nodded slowly. It wasn't as though he hadn't had the same thought himself.

"Add to that most people are coming down on her like a tonne of bricks as though she was the only one who had sex…" Caro continued, disgusted.

"You can see why though." Bill said and had to take a quick step back from the furious glare Caro pointed in his direction. He raised his hand in surrender. "Look, all I'm saying is from the outside, she was the one pursuing him and suddenly she's pregnant and they're having to get married. You have to admit that to most people it looks like she set her cap at him and trapped him into it."

Caro wagged her wand at him. "That came direct from your mother, didn't it?"

"Told you she was a good barometer of what the general reaction usually is." Bill quipped. In fact, the Howler his father had intercepted had all but said the same thing but in stringent and harsh language.

"But you don't think that, do you?" Caro checked.

Bill shot her a look. "Give me some credit, would you?"

"Sorry." Caro said quickly. "It's just…I guess I'm more racked off than I thought about how everyone's blaming her when he could have kept it in his pants or remembered the charm himself."

"You're not wrong." Bill admitted. "Remus is as responsible as Tonks for the baby and he knows it too." He slapped another Lockhart book into the 'beyond hope' pile. "I hope for both their sakes the marriage works out."

"Yeah, me too."

"Changed your mind about coming with me then?" asked Bill lightly.

Caro gave a throaty laugh. "And miss out on the society wedding of the year?"

They grinned at each other.

"I'm surprised you didn't invite that pretty Veela who's following you around still." Caro said, a question lurking in the statement that Bill didn't ignore.

"She's still at school." Bill said firmly.

"She's of age, but I guess at least she won't have your Mum blaming her for breaking up your relationship with Alicia like she does me." Caro said dryly.

"She doesn't blame you." Bill said automatically. But inwardly he was wincing because his Mum had automatically placed the blame on Caro despite Bill's denials and he had a fair idea going to the
wedding with Caro would mean that his Mum would continue to put two and two together and get five. He'd need to talk to her before the wedding; head her off. His split with Alicia had been very mutual and amicable.

Caro levitated a decrepit looking *Hogwarts, A History*. "Repair or bin?"

"Bin." Bill advised.

And they were done with the latest pile of books.

"Accio book storage trunks!" Caro called out.

The trunks arrived and one packing spell later and trip to the transportation device, the books were gone.

Caro eyed the next pile of junk with a weary eye; it was a towering stack of chairs. "Remind me why we're going through this room item by item and not just searching out something that looks like the Ravenclaw diadem?"

"Because we have no guarantee that You-Know-Who didn't transfigure it into something else or create a decoy?" Bill offered eventually.

She gave a huff. "You know Brooks has been insufferable since the Rat Squad caught Travers and Dolohov?"

He was a little thrown by the change in subject but figured she wanted a win to shove back in Brooks' face.

"Brooks is a wanker. The arrests didn't lead to much, did they?" Bill pointed out. "Dolohov and his frankly scarier sister were doing their own thing, and Travers ended up dead with his information old news." He shook his head remembering the latter. Moody was unrepentant at his mis-diagnosis and lack of concern over the prisoner's collapse during the interrogation.

"They did find that cottage in the Lake District." Caro retorted. "And they got the proof they needed to raid the Durmstrang ship."

"Both of which were abandoned by the Death Eaters well before the Squad showed up." Bill said.

"I can't believe Karkaroff was killed off." Caro said quietly, shoving a stray strand of hair back behind her ear.

Bill grimaced with disgust. Karkaroff had been badly tortured before he'd had his throat sliced open. "I can't believe they left him in his office for some poor kid to find." It had been pure chance that the Aurors had gotten to the office first.

"They're Death Eaters, Bill. I'm sure they didn't think anything about it at all." Caro said, grimacing as she started sorting the chairs in a similar way to the books. "I'm not going to lose sleep over them killing one of their own but it's a damn shame they took the vanishing cabinets with them, I would have liked a look at them. They're very rare."

Something tugged in his memory and Bill paused in examining a rather odd wooden chair painted a rather lurid green to chase after it. A half-formed picture formed in his head.

"Caro, I think we might have a vanishing cabinet in here somewhere." Bill said, trying to remember whereabouts it was.
"Yeah?" Her entire face brightened. "Where?"

Bill pursed his lips and turned slowly. "Over there." He pointed to his left. "It's a couple of rows back."

Caro gave a small cry of excitement and grabbed Bill's hand. "Come on!"

He rolled his eyes and let her drag him through the aisles. "I can't believe you're this excited about a piece of furniture."

She mock-punched his arm and continued dragging him. "I can't believe you remembered where you'd seen it in here." She slid him a considering look. "You should think about joining the Unspeakables when you finish your service with the House of Potter. Croaker would snap you up."

Bill rubbed his forehead. "I don't think that's going to be on the cards." He peered at the furniture they were passing, trying to find a landmark that would – ah! There. He pointed at a dilapidated wooden cabinet. "Is that it?"

"Why wouldn't it be on the cards?" asked Caro, tugging him over but turning to face him rather than cooing over the delights of their find.

"I've been thinking about the future and…" Bill shrugged, a touch embarrassed about speaking about his motivations. "The Weasleys are an Ancient and Noble House. If my Great-Grandfather hadn't gambled away our seat and the money, we might have been helping Harry and Sirius the way Richard Bones and Augusta Longbottom are helping instead of helping through service and friendship. If you believe the origin stories of the family magic, we took an oath just as they did to protect the wizarding world and I guess having seen Sirius and Harry put that oath into action, I want to do that too. I don't know whether I should continue with what I thought I wanted to do before or…" he sighed, "I just know that I want to make sure our world is safe."

"That's a lovely sentiment." Caro said seriously, without a hint of teasing.

A faint glow of light caught their attention.

Caro gasped and grabbed at Bill's arm. "Is that…"

Bill's eyes widened at the sight of the Weasley family totem atop the cabinet. The golden owl blinked back at him, almost proudly, and with a flare of its wings and a soft hoot, it disappeared…

And the Ravenclaw diadem sat where the owl had been a moment before.
Peter sighed at the latest front page of the Daily Prophet and thanked Merlin he'd been sent out on surveillance duties and would not have to deal with the latest Dark Lord rant.

It had not been a pleasant few weeks, or rather months.

Firstly, there had been the unmitigated disaster of the second task when the Champions had apparently rallied together to overcome the task's constraints ensuring there was no loss of life. That, combined with the heroic images of Potter wielding Excalibur had led to days of Dark Lord ranting, including many hours spent planning how the Black Lake could be dredged so the Dark Lord could make the infamous sword his own.

Recent events still stung more though.

Such was his devotion to their master, Dennis Travers had been the first to report his father's absence, handing over without delay the small missive his father had left him. The letter had been brief; Boris Dolohov had contacted him and was attempting an abduction that would please the Dark Lord; Travers Senior was off to help him as he owed Dolohov a favour; that he would return within a couple of hours.

When noon had passed without any sign of his missing follower, the Dark Lord had immediately ordered them to move locations; for Travers to kill Karkaroff, and for Barty, who had long since taken on a new identity to provide a spy at Hogwarts, to relocate their vanishing cabinet to another part of the school. Travers had disguised himself once more as a Durmstrang student and escaped through the cabinet back to the cottage.

As soon as he'd arrived, the second vanishing cabinet had been shrunk down and packed along with everything else. They'd moved back to London, settling back into the flat above the apothecary – the Dark Lord proclaiming that if Fenrir had meant to betray the location in a fit of pique, he'd already have done it.

The Dark Lord was not pleased at having to relocate again though. Travers had taken the brunt of the punishment on behalf of his absent father, but had been spared permanent injury because of his own devotion to the Dark Lord. When the news of Travers Senior's death had been announced in the papers, the Dark Lord had even allowed Travers a day without punishment to mourn. Still, Travers was still healing from the punishments inflicted from the Dark Lord's fury and with Fenrir searching Europe for Remus, and Barty hidden away at Hogwarts in his latest persona, there was only Peter left to gather intelligence.

Possibly the Dark Lord had assumed Peter would spy in his usual form as a rat but Barty had made plenty of the modified polyjuice and Peter had taken advantage of the stash Barty had left with the Dark Lord. He'd also helped himself to some of the petty cash Barty had stowed in the flat for emergencies.

It was nice, Peter mused, to walk down Diagon Alley without anyone giving him a second look. To be among people again rather than stuck in the cottage hide-away in the middle of nowhere. And Peter had chosen the perfect place for his eavesdropping – the Leaky Cauldron, heaving with the lunch time rush.

Peter thanked Tom as he placed a steaming plate of steak and ale pie with a mountain of vegetables and a liberal amount of gravy in front of him. He took a large bite of food and almost moaned in
pleasure. It was wonderful to eat something with flavour; there was a shambolically small number of meals he was capable of cooking and none of them were very successful for all that they were edible.

"...I think it's disgusting!" A woman remarked at the table behind him. "A werewolf really!"

"I don't know," her companion twittered, "have you seen the photo of Lupin? He is a fine specimen and his position with Lord Black would mean his wife would be granted access to the highest echelon!"

"Cynthia, there are times when I don't think you have the sense Merlin gave a goose." The other woman remonstrated. "You'd never catch me allowing a werewolf to so much as look at me."

"What self-respecting werewolf would want to look at her?" A young man on another table whispered to his date who giggled.

Peter allowed himself a small smile and tucked into the beautifully prepared cabbage, peppered with tangy bits of bacon and buttery onions.

"...no, I'm telling you, it was Moody who was last with 'im." A lunching Auror sank the last of his beer down his throat and set the empty glass forcefully on the wooden bar.

It amused Peter that not once did they look in his direction.

"You're just jealous at the Squad, Jones." His colleague complained. "Everyone here knows it was the Squad that took him in. I was here meself taking witness accounts from anyone present."

"Padraig is right, Jimmy." The female Auror with them dipped a chip in a pool of brown sauce and ate it with gusto. "Chambers, Wood and Cambridge took down Travers Senior."

"Ah but, Lucy, my love, it was Mad-Eye who was the one to interrogate him." Jimmy crowed. "'e was the one who left him 'avin' an 'eart attack in the cell!"

Jimmy ordered up another beer and Peter felt a momentary flitting pang of a citizen's disapproval at the Auror's lunch-time drinking, before he drowned the impulse with the more amusing thought that Dennis would be pleased to know who he could hold responsible for his father's death.

"Whatever, Jimmy." Padraig, a curly haired twenty-something year old, picked up his bacon sandwich and focused on eating for a bite. "The Squad still deserves the catch."

"Yeah," Lucy complained, waving a chip, "and least Chambers doesn't use it to get in a girls' knickers like Brooks."

"'as 'e got in yours then?" leered Jimmy, as he handed over money for his beer.

"Leave off." Lucy poked him.

"Probably got in Tonks' though, right? Seein' as she likes to drop them for the beastie!" Jimmy laughed.

"Oy!" Lucy shifted upright, her brown eyes glaring at her partner. "You leave Tonks alone! Don't think I don't know what happened on your date with her, you tosser!"

"She can't expect to be a metamorphmagus and expect a bloke not to ask if she can make her tits more than a handful!" blustered the ill-mannered Jimmy.

Peter wondered if he shouldn't try and discern a surname so he could provide it to Sirius for
retribution of some sort. There had been one rare occasion back in the old days when Sirius had dragged him around to his cousin's for tea. The bright wide-eyed little girl in his memory definitely didn't need to be so publicly disparaged.

"And people wonder why she had to look to a werewolf to find a decent bloke!" Lucy snapped up her cloak and stormed off.

Padraig looked after her, set the rest of his bacon sandwich down and slid off his stool.

"Where are you going?" demanded Jimmy.

"To catch up with her before she decides to hex my stuff along with yours." Padraig said wearily.

Jimmy paled, downed his beer and set off after his colleague. 

"'ey! Wait up, Padraig!"

With that the entertainment was over and the lunchtime crowd in the pub went back to their own conversations.

Peter listened for a while, letting the discussions on potion prices and the standard of wizarding portkeys drift over him. He slid a final piece of pastry through the last drop of gravy and made a moue of disappointment that his meal was over.

Tom beamed at him as he scooped up the debris of the meal. "Nice to see a clean plate!"

"It was wonderful." Peter agreed easily.

"Dessert?" Tom offered. "We've a nice Summer pudding with cream or there's Spotted Dick with custard."

Peter was tempted but the crowd was already thinning out and he knew with that morning's news the Dark Lord would be impatient. "Alas, I have to return to work. My employer likes to crucio latecomers."

Tom laughed heartily at what he supposed was a joke and bustled away.

Peter drank down the rest of his pint and left a few knuts on the table for Tom. It had been a delicious meal. He ambled out of the Leaky, timing his departure just right to slide out behind someone else saving him having to use his borrowed wand.

He took a direct route back to the flat but kept his pace unhurried and was satisfied when he reached the apothecary that no-one had followed him. He used the wand to unlock the door and stepped inside full and content, nerves beginning to rise for his anticipated debrief.

"You've been at the polyjuice again." Barty's sing-song voice accused him sharply. "I don't make it for you!"

"No," Peter agreed, turning to face Barty who wore the face of the seventh year Ravenclaw he was masquerading as, "you make it for our Dark Lord."

"He does, indeed." The Dark Lord's voice had them both spinning around.

Travers carried the Dark Lord in and placed him reverently onto a chair piled high with a stack of pillows.

Barty immediately kneeled at the side of the chair. "Father, I bring news from Hogwarts."
"Then you shall begin." The Dark Lord said silkily, his small hand carding through the sandy blond locks of the boy Barty pretended to be.

Peter lowered his eyes to hide his instinctive roll at Barty's simpering son act.

"The school has been let out early by the old fool for an Easter celebratory feast." Barty said with the right amount of sneering snobbery at such frivolity. "The Express will leave tomorrow and arrive in King's Cross as usual. However, the Potter boy will once again not travel upon it."

"He is remaining within the castle?"

"He is going abroad, Father." Barty eagerly reported. "Both he and the treacherous Black. They are intending a small European tour from the little I was able to overhear from his gossiping school mates, culminating in Bulgaria with the wedding of the werewolf."

"Yes," the Dark Lord purred, "it would appear that our young nemesis is determined to sway the werewolves to his cause although I doubt many will want to marry the foul beasts."

"As you say, Father." Barty agreed eagerly.

"Your cover is secure?" The Dark Lord posed the question idly but Peter knew better than to think the answer didn't matter to him – so did Barty.

"My cover is secure." Barty confirmed. "They did an attempt a check with the map Peter described. I spotted it in the Potions class I attended but the masking charm was able to confuse it into believing I am who the polyjuice says I am."

The Dark Lord hummed. "Well done, Peter, for informing us of the risk of the map and the way to circumvent it."

Peter felt a bolt of satisfaction as the Dark Lord's praise warmed him. The others scowled at him and Peter ignored them.

"And what of our spy, Bartemius? Is Severus well?" The Dark Lord said softly.

"Severus has agreed to meet with his lover during the break." Barty said before pouting. "He claims in his letter that the antidote is progressing to the schedule he originally outlined and that Dumbledore watches him too closely for him to sabotage it."

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed angrily, the childish features showing a hideous fury before it was quickly masked. "I want you to press upon him that I will be most displeased should the woman wake. If he cannot find a way to prevent the antidote from working then he must find a way to prevent her from speaking."

"As you wish, Father."

"We will need to arrange a location so he can begin the next phase of the ritual potion." The Dark Lord murmured. "Not here. Severus will not find this worthy of a Potions Master."

"The LeStrange Manor stands empty, Father." Barty murmured. "It has a wonderful Potions lab."

"No," the Dark Lord said, "they know of you and of your association. They would have taken care to lay a trap. No. We must choose somewhere they would not suspect..." his cold gaze turned to Peter who immediately prostrated himself.
"My Lord."

"My faithful servant, Peter." The Dark Lord said smoothly. "You will continue to use the polyjuice and return to the place we visited for the ingredient of my ancestor." He smiled nastily. "The Potions lab in the west wing of the mansion will suffice for Severus's needs, it simply needs to be cleaned. You will see to this."

"Yes, Master." Peter replied immediately.

"I will place it under the Fidelius charm." The Dark Lord said with satisfaction.

Peter prayed he wouldn't be made the Secret Keeper.

"You may tell us all you learned today now, Peter."

His mouth dry, Peter took a moment to wet his lips. "I discovered the identities of those who captured your fallen follower, my Lord."

Travers started forward but contained himself after a swift glance at the Dark Lord.

"Who?" asked the Dark Lord, a glint of madness flaring again.

"Three of the team they call the Rat Squad." Peter explained hurriedly. "Chambers, Wood and Cambridge were responsible for the arrest."

The Dark Lord hissed angrily.

"However, my Lord," Peter continued, "it was our old enemy Moody who was responsible for his heart attack."

The Dark Lord snapped his wand up and a small ornament blew up, coating the mantelpiece with dust. He settled back in his throne of pillows and glowered. "Dennis…"

Travers kneeled beside him, pain coming and going on his face so quickly that Peter was almost convinced he hadn't seen it. "My Lord."

"Faithful Dennis." The Dark Lord said slowly. "You have been so good and taken your father's punishment with such grace. You deserve a reward."

"I live to serve, my Lord." Travers said, devotion dripping from his tongue with every word.

Peter considered that if he himself was to die, it was likely that Travers would take the place of the servant in the ritual.

"Then all those our dear rat has named are yours." The Dark Lord said. "Kill one or kill them all. I leave it with you."

"Thank you, my Lord." Travers said with a deferential nod.

Peter deduced that Travers would kill them all or die trying – the latter was not an impossibility given Moody's long history of paranoia and prowess with a wand.

"Anything else?" asked the Dark Lord impatiently.

"The masses are diverted by the news of the wedding, my Lord." Peter said quickly.
The Dark Lord hummed. "Your old friend must be lauded by his fellow lupines." He said eventually. "His relationship with Black has given him the power to suggest normality is a possibility for the pitiful creatures."

"But hardly socially acceptable yet," Peter said, "most of the remarks I overheard were not sympathetic to a witch, especially one with the gift of a metamorphmagus, aligning herself with a werewolf."

"Indeed not." The Dark Lord agreed. "But if this marriage were to occur, it would send too much hope into the werewolf community. You do not set your dog at your dinner table and dress it in fine clothes."

Peter thought of his mother's yapping Yorkie with its winter woollies and dog boots, and said nothing.

"No, dogs are good for guarding and terrorising but they should still be treated like dogs." The Dark Lord sighed. "We cannot allow this marriage to happen." His eyes narrowed on Peter again. "You said the witch had the ability of a metamorphmagus?"

Peter nodded swiftly.

"Then she may be an interesting specimen to keep." The Dark Lord said coldly. "Perhaps the child she carries would have the same value of examination."

"My Lord." Peter said prostrating himself again to hide his shudder of revulsion. He could imagine the horrors the Dark Lord's examination would form and he would not wish it on his worst enemy never mind a young woman such as Nymphadora Tonks.

The Dark Lord sighed. "Fetch parchment and a quill."

Peter rushed to do his bidding, laying them out in easy reach of the Dark Lord's tiny hands.

"While I did not want to provide Fenrir an advantage as part of his punishment, I fear I must change my plans." He grimaced. "I had thought Fenrir would have tracked Lupin down and killed him by now. He was once a capable asset."

"Hopefully, the old wolf will realise Lupin will be in Bulgaria for his own wedding, Father." Barty offered dryly.

Manic laughter erupted from the small child and the Dark Lord patted Barty's head. "You do amuse me." He waved around the room. "Leave. I have letters to write to old associates."

Vaguely aware that Barty headed for the vanishing cabinet to return to Hogwarts, Peter bowed and made for the door to fulfil the other mission his master had given him. He would need to apparate to Little Hangleton and assess the situation with the lab. And if on his way he stopped at the owl post office and offered his old friend Moony an early wedding present of a warning, well, he was only fulfilling his master's original wish and instructions on the matter of Fenrir, after all.

Satisfied with his justification, Peter hit the street and safely out of earshot of the tiny flat above the apothecary, he began whistling. Maybe there would also be time for a Spotted Dick and custard…

The news of the diadem being found had Albus settling into the comfortable chintzy armchair he had conjured for himself with a squirm of glee. He took in the arriving teachers with a sense of
satisfaction. He nodded to the four Heads of Houses as they made their way into the room.

Their fourth staff meeting was about to commence and Albus felt that they had made many improvements since the start of the year – the debacle of Harry being entered in the tournament notwithstanding nor the ongoing sabotage of the tasks. The teachers seemed happier and more engaged; the students brimming with enthusiasm…Hogwarts hummed with happiness at the energy, both spiritual and magical.

He smiled a welcome as Irma, Matilda and Septima took their usual seats. The librarian, the historian and the Arithmancy Professor had become a tight threesome during the previous months. As had the next trio; Bathesda, Alison and Rolanda were not far behind the other ladies. The Ancient Runes Professor, the Muggle Studies Professor and the Flying Instructor were all Quidditch mad it transpired. There was a heated debate about the last match of the season taking place from what Albus could overhear.

He turned his attention to the unlikely duo lurking in their usual corner; Alastor and Severus. Both were watching everyone else. Albus hid a smile as Firenze entered deep in discussion with Aurora and Tobias. The duelling contest had concluded with a win for Beauxbatons but Hogwarts had performed well especially given the lack of formal training in prior years. Opening it up to the lower years had made for a fascinating competition; Daphne Greengrass's prowess had been a definite revelation.

Hagrid arrived carrying an injured owl and took a seat next to Pomona. Sybill arrived in her usual flurry of scarves and finally Helen entered briskly, providing apologies for Poppy who was treating a student in the infirmary. Argus took his place at the door, glowering as usual. Albus sighed inwardly. He feared the caretaker was seeing his last year at Hogwarts.

Minerva cleared her throat pointedly; they were ready to begin.

Albus greeted them warmly. "It is good to see us all here again for another round-up." He said cheerily. "Perhaps we shall begin with the academics?"

He listened with half an ear as Minerva covered the best and worst performers in each year, with each Head of House chiming in as required. It was only as she reached Harry's year that he tuned back in as the conversation turned to the boy himself.

"...I think it's clear that Mister Potter will require an individualised lesson plan next year." Minerva sighed.

"If he returns." Severus inserted snidely.

Minerva glared at him. "There is no suggestion currently that he will not."

"He does have to survive the tournament." Severus rejoined.

Albus cast a warning look in Severus's direction. "Let us all hope that he will and that he will resume his studies here with us formally next year."

"An individualised lesson plan will be the way forward." Filius agreed with Minerva. "He has mastered most of the spell-work required to achieve his NEWTs."

"But not in every subject." Pomona objected.

"And his theoretical understanding is still somewhat behind NEWT level." Severus sneered.
"With some tutoring, I believe he could pass his OWLs in the wand subjects early with Exceeds Expectations if not Outstandings." Minerva took a breath. "He could also easily achieve NEWTS in the wand subjects the following year focusing on theory as opposed to the practical work which he is already performing well. In all other subjects, bar Runes where he is already a year ahead, I would propose to keep him with his year group." She paused. "He could begin a Mastery in one of the wand subjects post completing his NEWT."

Albus wondered if she was hoping Harry would choose her subject.

"It seems a sensible and balanced plan." Helen commented. "He doesn't need the isolation of being completely separated from his peers and his friends, but this recognises that he has different educational needs without making him too different."

Severus snorted quietly from his corner but he remained thankfully silent otherwise.

"What does Lord Black think?" asked Matilda, leaning forward. "Has this been discussed with him?"

Minerva inclined her head. "Sirius and I had a brief discussion just this morning. He is happy with my proposal. He is concerned Mister Potter is becoming increasingly disassociated with Hogwarts and his peers as the year progresses and would like to encourage him to strengthen his ties with his friends and year group." She pursed her lips. "He has requested that, subject to some additional security, next term Mister Potter be granted to spend the occasional night in the Gryffindor boys' dorm with his friends. I have granted the request."

Albus was pleased with the news. He had been a touch worried that Harry would not wish to return to Hogwarts for his fifth year or that Sirius would decide that Harry would be home-schooled instead. If there were plans to ensure Harry continued to feel a part of the Hogwarts student body then his small concern was appeased.

"Can we continue or are we to assume Potter is our only student?" inquired Severus pointedly.

Minerva sent him a quelling look but she picked up the parchment she had discarded and continued with the academic performances of the other years.

Albus subsided, content to hear that Natalie Warren was currently top of the seventh year and destined to graduate with a full set of Outstandings.

Minerva set one parchment and picked up another. "I shall move onto the points system. I am pleased to say that all professors are complying with the guidelines set out at the start of the year. The Houses remain fairly equal although Gryffindor currently leads due to our success in the Quidditch cup."

Severus glowered in the background as Minerva once again accepted the congratulations of her colleagues.

"Shall we move on?" suggested Albus smoothly inserting himself into a pause. "Helen, perhaps a report from the infirmary?"

Helen nodded. "We have two second year students currently in the infirmary, Amy Addison and Larry Cable."

Pomona sat forward and Albus was reminded that the students in question were Hufflepuffs.

"Both mis-timed the stairs yesterday and had a bit of a nasty fall." Helen continued. "They should be
fine for the Express tomorrow." She cleared her throat. "Generally, we have had a good term. A few minor accidents and mis-spells but no major outbreak of illness. The at-risk children are all doing well, I'm pleased to say. Two have been removed from their current living situations due to the evidence and have been placed with either close relatives or godparents. There was one report of bullying but Professor Flitwick was quick to step in."

"An attempt at theft." Filius reported with a disapproving scowl. "The culprit has been issued with a first warning."

"Poppy is doing duty over the Easter break as I have a return to the States planned. That's all from the infirmary." Helen concluded.

Albus smiled at her benevolently. "And that does neatly bring us onto the arrangements for the upcoming holiday. Alastor, if I can prevail upon you?"

"Security will be maintained over the holiday." Alastor said firmly. "We will maintain constant vigilance."

Albus ignored Minerva rolling her eyes.

"What about during the Lupin wedding?" asked Septima seriously. She leaned forward attentive and curious.

Alastor glowered. "Bloody stupid timing but we have it covered." He nodded at Minerva. "Those with personal invites will attend. Minnie will be away for the entire weekend of the wedding; the Headmaster for the day before and of the wedding; me, I'm going just for the day."

"The invitation was extended to all Remus's former colleagues," Albus explained hurriedly. "but clearly we need to maintain a quorum of teachers given the students remaining within the castle." He nodded at the Head of Ravenclaw. "Filius will assume overall responsibility for the school in my absence with able assistance from Professors Snape and Sprout."

"There'll be a group of aurors patrolling during the period an' all." Alastor said firmly.

"That's reassuring." Alison commented. "There are rumours going around the school that a former follower of Voldemort may be masquerading as a student."

There was an evident question in her tone and Alastor snorted while Albus shot her a faintly disapproving look.

"It is a suggestion that perhaps those with ill intent who had hidden on the Durmstrang ship and killed Headmaster Karkaroff have entered the school under false pretences." Albus conceded. "However, there is no proof."

"We did have an artefact in our possession that allowed us to identify the students benignly without asking them to take a blood identity test." Alastor growled. "There was no evidence of anyone not being who they said they were and the Board of Governors have seen fit to refuse the request to run additional tests."

"No student is acting out of character as yet." Snape added snidely. "Although we should all endeavour to be observant and raise any such abberant behaviour to their Head of House or the Headmaster."

The rest of the teachers nodded.
"Will we have to retake identity tests?" asked Irma pointedly looking at Alastor.

"It would help eliminate the possibilities." Alastor said. "But I've been told I can't insist on it unless you leave the grounds."

"We could volunteer." Alison said. "I'd be happy to offer to do a test."

"Me too." Helen concurred.

As more staff stepped forward until they all had confirmed they'd retake a test, Albus beamed at them widely. "Excellent." He said finally. "As Alastor has said it will help eliminate the possibilities and in the meanwhile we should all keep our eyes and ears peeled for trouble."

"Wish the sodding French were as accommodating." Alastor grumbled.

"Has anything come of the investigation into the sabotage of the second task?" Rolanda asked.

Alastor sighed heavily. "The sea snake was supposedly in a cage and under the control of a merman."

"There's evidence that the merman was subjected to the Imperius curse." Albus said gravely. "We fear it was Bartemius Crouch Junior. He has no doubt inherited his father's aptitude with languages."

"The merman was under orders to release the snake regardless of how the task was done." Alastor said brusquely.

"At least nobody was killed or hurt this time." Helen said grimly, no doubt remembering the death of the dragon handler in the first task.

"And the preparation of the third task?" asked Tobias delicately. "Is that going well?"

"We've locked down as much as we can but that maze is so bloody public!" Alastor gave another glowering grimace.

Albus didn't respond to the disapproval. "The Quidditch pitch was the most sensible choice."

It was Rolanda's turn to snort.

"Do we know which students are staying over in the castle over the holiday period?" asked Matilda returning them to the topic at hand.

"A full list will be published shortly." Minerva confirmed briskly. "However, as usual for this break all the seventh and fifth year are remaining behind in anticipation of exam revision, and we have a good proportion of the other years choosing to remain behind across all three Houses."

"Some of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students have requested leave given the recent terrible events and they have all been granted dispensation to travel home but will face an identity check on their return." Albus said. "We expect the temporary placement of Professor von Humberg as the Headmaster of Durmstrang to be made permanent in the new term."

"Those poor children." Pomona sighed. "Such a terrible event."

"Some have taken up the counselling we have offered." Helen said comfortingly.

"A most unfortunate incident." Albus demurred.
He quickly brought the meeting to an end and called for Severus to remain behind.

"I noticed you received another letter at dinner." Albus said without preamble.

Severus looked at him sourly. "As you know I have been summoned to a meeting during the holidays with Crouch."

Albus nodded gravely, remembering the last time the two had met. He hated that Severus risked his life in his role as a spy but he knew that there was no choice. If Sirius had not insisted on Severus resuming his role, no doubt Albus would have had to request the same at some point. "It is remarkably dangerous for you to meet him alone, Severus."

"Never fear," Severus sneered, "he will court the displeasure of the Dark Lord if he attempts to harm me again, and my position with the Dark Lord is assured as long as he requires potions made."

"I do care for you for you, Severus." Albus remonstrated gently. "Not just your worth as a spy."

Severus gazed back at him with an even dark gaze that in true Slytherin style gave away nothing.

"Why has he written again?" Albus asked steering the conversation back to business.

"He requests that in the event I cannot sabotage the potion to awaken the Summers woman, the Dark Lord is insistent that I do not allow her to speak."

Albus stroked his beard softly. "He gave something away in her presence."

"Undoubtedly." Severus inclined his head. "But what..." he made a sharp motion with one hand. "I assume you have assessed the likelihood of the person hidden at Hogwarts being tasked with the mission of destroying the potion?"

"It is a possibility." Albus mused. "We should increase security to your lab."

"Alastor and I have already taken care of it." Severus informed him. "If there is nothing else?"

Albus inwardly sighed and allowed Severus to leave in an impressive billow of robes. He sometimes wondered if he had made other choices whether Severus would have taken a different path. His choices in regards to Harry had been so far off the mark that he found himself questioning whether his actions in regards to Severus had been the same. He rather feared he had mis-stepped in Severus's youth – allowed the Marauders too much latitude in hindsight and punished Severus too severely in comparison.

Perhaps...

He shook his head.

He could not change the past, he could only work to make a better future. There was a sense that the end was almost upon them. The third task was not so far away and with it the inevitable confrontation that would take place between Harry and Tom...

Albus sighed and shook himself out of his melancholy contemplation. He should think of happier things, he determined; there was a wedding to look forward to after all.

o-O-o

Sirius sat on the arm of the easy chair in his study and stared at the blackboard. He sighed and raising his wand, scratched out Diadem. There was only one more possible horcrux to go – the snake. Of
course, they just had to hope that Voldemort hadn't made any others in the meantime but the general consensus was that it was unlikely.

His mirror buzzed on his desk and he frowned. It was the silent signal – the one that he and James had spelled into the mirror in the event one of them was stuck on a date from hell and needed the other to call them for some reason. He'd never told Harry about that particular feature of the mirrors and none of the new mirrors he created had it. Which meant, Sirius mused rapidly walking over to the mirror, the only person it could be was Moony as he very much doubted Wormtail had a mirror still or would use it.

He picked up the mirror and sat down at his desk. He tapped the mirror carefully. "Moony."

"Padfoot!" Remus replied immediately. The image wavered as Remus hurried out an excuse to whoever it was he was with and settled into a more private space.

"Why the signal for an emergency call?" asked Sirius, half-amused and half-impatient to know the reason.

"Andy and Dora have been talking about wedding colours for over an hour, Padfoot." Remus sounded completely bewildered. "Over an hour!"

Sirius laughed and settled back in his chair. "Oh come on! That's nothing! How can you not remember Lily and Alice spending two hours on the subject for Alice's wedding to Frank?"

"Are you sure I was there for that?" demanded Remus bemused.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "You were there; just as you were there for the marathon discussion they had about whether lilies were an appropriate flower for a wedding when Lils and Prongs got hitched."

"In all honesty, Padfoot, I think my mind has blanked out both events in self-preservation." Remus said dryly.

"Lucky you." Sirius muttered. He had tried drinking to forget at the time and it hadn't worked.

"Colours, Padfoot!" Remus stressed. "I mean, what does it really matter if the yellow is the wrong side of sunshine and things should be more to the gold side of the spectrum?"

"It's a woman thing." Sirius shrugged.

Remus sighed and cast a look beyond the mirror. "I should get back. Andy's being very…well, I don't know how to put it but I think Dora's pretty on the edge. I just needed a breather."

"Look, Moony," Sirius said, softening his tone, "Andy just wants Dora to have the best wedding and the best marriage."

Remus flushed bright red. He breathed deeply as though gathering himself and heaved a sigh. "I know I'm not the best catch…"

"That's not what I'm saying, Moony." Sirius interrupted him sharply. "You're a great catch and frankly, you're the one Tonks wanted. Andy just hasn't come round to the way it happened yet, that's all. In the meantime, indulging Andy's fervour is probably not a bad thing."

"You mean I should man up." Remus sighed.
"Moony." Sirius sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. The last thing he wanted was to pressure Remus any further about the marriage and the kid. Remus had stepped up and done the right thing.

"No, Padfoot." Remus said firmly. "I'm sorry." He reached out as though to touch Sirius and dropped his hand. "I know you're in a difficult position. Has it been very bad the fallout?"

Sirius gave a half-shrug. "The press has been good but commentary wise? Dora's getting the worst of it. I'm just pleased Andy and Ted are out of the country they don't need to hear everyone calling their daughter names."

Remus's eyes flashed amber. "They'd better not call her names at the wedding. We both made the lapse of judgement on birth control."

"Our friends are being supportive." Sirius waved his hand dismissively. "The alliance mainly disapproves about the lack of thought on the political implications by both of you."

"They're not wrong about that." Remus said. "I'll make sure we send some kind of pre-wedding apology note? Maybe with the wedding favours?" He sighed heavily again. "What are favours anyway? Did Prongs have favours because I don't recall anything?"

"Sure," Sirius said, "they had those little bags with hangover potion in them for everyone."

Remus stared at him. "How do you remember all this?"

Sirius made a vague dismissive gesture. "I think I thought Lily would kill me if I didn't! I was the best man." And there had been the hours spent making the damn potion…

Remus smiled at him nostalgically. "She probably would have done."

They shared a look of fond remembrance.

Remus cleared his throat. "Any ideas for mine and Dora's?"

"If you're going to use the favours as an apology, something suitably expensive." Sirius said dryly.

"That's…" Remus paused, "actually very helpful."

Sirius smirked at him and suddenly realised he hadn't told Remus the latest news. "Ooo-oo! On a completely different topic, we found some treasure today!"

"Treasure?" Remus's gaze sharpened. "In the Room of Requirement?"

Sirius nodded enthusiastically. "The Weasley owl showed up right on top of it. Bill was blown away."

"Is the item destroyed?" Remus asked, the image distorting as he changed position.

"Yes." Sirius nodded again. "Same as the others. One priceless treasure now one puddle of useless slag."

"So, there's just the snake to go in the treasure hunt." Remus smiled at him. "That's excellent, Padfoot."

"Bertie's over the moon." Sirius said wryly. "Both he and Amelia were looking smug at the Council tonight."
"Why was Amelia looking smug?" asked Remus.

"A monitoring ward on somewhere we've identified as a possibility for a hidey-hole pinged this afternoon." Sirius explained. "When the Squad went to check, they got confused and apparated back. Bertie confirms that there's now a Fidelius in place. Amelia thinks they're gearing up to move there for the final months leading up to this ritual."

"Which puts them somewhere we know they're generally at thanks to the location of the monitoring charm," Remus said, "but somewhere we now don't know about and can't get into without the Secret Keeper. Bugger."

"Exactly. I guess Voldemort's not against using something his enemies have come up with if it works." Sirius sat back. "To be honest, I don't think it matters that we don't know where they are right now. On the day of the ritual, we'll be able to pinpoint them if we allow their plan to play out."

"That's a big if, Sirius." Remus murmured.

Sirius nodded in sombre agreement. "Harry thinks we should be thinking of the endgame though and I agree with him, although I'm hoping with the diadem found, we can go after Voldemort more aggressively and take him down before then. If we haven't got him before the third task, Harry and the kids have a good training plan but as he points out, the third task isn't really about winning the tournament. As soon as it's over, winner or not, as an ingredient all the prep's done and he'll be ripe for the picking."

"Well, that's a horrifying thought." Remus commented sadly.

"Harry believes Voldemort has to have something planned for grabbing him." Sirius pushed a hand through his hair. "So frankly I think the main worry right now is Hogwarts. They lost the ship as their way into the school and I think they'll have planned a contingency. It's what I'd do."

Remus sighed. "What would you do exactly?"

"Ron was right; the easiest thing is take the place of a student or a teacher." Sirius replied promptly. "Albus says the teachers volunteered for tests but we're not performing identity checks unless people leave the grounds otherwise – and not at all for all the Hogwarts students."

"So there's a risk someone will go home for Easter and come back as someone else." Remus surmised. "We have the map."

"Yes," Sirius agreed, "but we don't know if Peter has done something to get round it. And if we do spot someone as Harry says do we then keep them in play where we know where they are or do we take them out?"

Remus sighed again. "Another good question." He shifted and caught Sirius's gaze. "You said Harry has pointed out a lot of this?"

"I'm very proud of him." Sirius felt a lump in his throat. "I am kind of torn about not wanting him to have to think about this kind of thing, but I'm pleased he's taking it seriously, you know?"

"I know, Padfoot." Remus took a deep breath. "I felt the baby move today for the first time and I... all I can think about is how can I keep that tiny scrap of life protected and safe? I know I love Harry but I guess there's still a bit of, I don't know, distance? Maybe because I know he's yours and I'm still only Uncle Moony at the end of the day. But that feeling yesterday...it was overwhelming and if that's how you feel about Harry...I don't know why you aren't bald from pulling your hair out."
Sirius gave a weak laugh. "Welcome to parenthood, Moony."

They both smiled somewhat sappily at each other before the realisation that they were smiling somewhat sappily at each other had them both suddenly snapping into action.

"Right, um..." Remus shook himself. "What about the 'power he knows not'? With the diadem found, we do need to think of the endgame and that needs to be part of it. Did the Italians let you have the Cavietti copy of the Lumiere account?"

Sirius shook his head. "It's worthless anyway, Remus, you know that. However..." he rooted around his desk and picked up a parchment lifting into the view of the mirror with a loud 'TADA!'

"A letter?" Remus squinted. "I can't read it, Padfoot."

"Then allow me." Sirius declared cheerily. "Dear Lord Black, I thank you for your recent correspondence delivered to me by our mutual friend, Elaine Delacour. She has kindly agreed to host a small introduction between us and your son, Lord Potter, on the tenth of April in Paris. I look forward very much to meeting you both. Yours, etcetera, etcetera, Vivien Verte." He put the letter down. "It just arrived this afternoon."

"I wish I could attend with you." Remus sighed, frustration tensing his face momentarily. "I feel like I'm letting you and Harry down."

"You should stop beating yourself up, Remus. You made a mistake but you're stepping up and taking responsibility." Sirius contradicted gently. "Harry and I understand you have different obligations now and you aren't letting us down. You're still there for us, we know that."

Remus gave a snort but he subsided with a nod. "So, any thoughts on colour?"

"I prefer gold to sunshine yellow if that helps." Sirius said.

Remus rolled his eyes, gave a wave and disappeared.

Sirius looked at the blank mirror and put it down gently on the desk. He missed Remus a great deal. He missed his counsel and steady support; missed having Remus's calm to offset his own frenetic energy. His other friends had stepped in and he knew he only had to floo call Minnie and she'd pop over for a nightcap and a chat but...

He'd had this particular ache before, Sirius reminded himself. It was the ache of a man who knew that life was changing because his best friend had found a romantic partner, had found a relationship which would take precedence over every other relationship in their lives, even their oldest and dearest friendship.

Sirius could remember the hurt he'd felt when his friendship with James had become secondary in his best friend's eyes to James's love and relationship with Lily; when nights out with Sirius had been eschewed for nights in with Lily; when time spent with just the guys suddenly became time spent with the guys and Lily...

In retrospect, the resentment and angst he'd felt at the time all seemed so childish, especially when he considered that Lily had become the sister he'd always wanted. And it wasn't the same with Remus and Tonks, Sirius mused. Remus and Tonks were already family, and Sirius was mature enough that he understood Remus's changing priorities and even supported the change. But change was change, and the ache of the losing what they had built since Sirius had become Lord Black hadn't yet been soothed by what they would become in the future.
There was a small knock on the door before it opened and Harry entered. He’d dressed for bed and Sirius glanced at the clock startled to realise it was after ten.

"You OK?" He asked as Harry wandered over to sit in the visitor's chair in front of the desk.

"Just restless I guess." Harry smiled at him. "I'm kind of excited about tomorrow and France." He gestured vaguely. "And Bulgaria and seeing Remus again." He pointed at the mirror. "Did he call?"

"I called him." Sirius said, ignoring the complicated rescue signal.

"Did you tell him about the diadem and the letter from Madame Verte?" Harry asked excitedly.

"I did." Sirius confirmed. He got up from the desk and held out a hand to pull Harry from the chair. "I also told him we were starting to think about the endgame."

Harry glanced back towards the blackboard as Sirius slung an arm around his shoulders. "It's weird to think we're almost at the end. It feels like it's been going on forever."

Sirius hugged his son to his side for a long moment. "It will end, Harry." He paused. "And then you will have responsible sex, get married, have babies and live happily ever after with the woman of your dreams."

"Oy!" Harry laughed, pinching Sirius in the ribs.

They wrestled for a moment before Sirius slung his arm back around Harry and marched him from the room.

"Come on." Sirius declared. "If we sneak down to the kitchen, Dobby will make us hot chocolate and marshmallows."

His gaze darted to the blackboard as he leaned back to close the door and he shot a spell to cover it once again.

Maybe they were getting close to the end, but it wasn't over yet.

o-O-o

Thomas Marvolo Riddle stared up at the ceiling above him. He was ostensibly resting. The young body he inhabited tired easily and after his letter writing of the afternoon he had been fatigued.

It was frustrating.

But it would soon be over.

The plan for his physical resurrection was in full motion. In only a few short months he would have a new adult body. Once again he would have the physicality to match his intellect and spirit. The ability to move and act…

He had underestimated the Potters that Halloween night. He had been too self-satisfied by Peter's betrayal of their hiding place and his grand plan to create an inviolate horcrux that he had not considered the fact that James and Lily Potter had already 'thrice defied him,' knew of his want to kill their child and had perhaps planned for the event.

The ancient Wiccan magic that the mudblood witch had used to protect her child was powerful. He had felt the wrath of an angry mother as it had sent his Killing Curse back full force to him, obliterating his body into ashes in a way the curse would never have done otherwise. Powerful and
unknown; it was not a magic Tom would ever be able to wield as he was neither a witch nor a mother, and he had no wish to become either despite his envy at the magic.

But he was powerful enough to defeat it.

Choosing the Potter boy – Harry – for the ritual worked for him on several levels not least of which was the hypothesis that taking the boy's blood would neutralise the blood protection the boy's mother had placed around her child. He had done the Arithmancy and the theory supported his proposition.

And really it had been the only reason for his defeat that Halloween. Without it, a mere babe would not have withstood his attack or his power. Without it, he would have killed the boy before he'd turned twelve.

Thomas gave a disgruntled huff.

Occupying Quirrell had been difficult despite the wizard's simpering adoration of him, but it had given him the ability to spy on the eleven year old Harry and contemplate what about the boy was special.

The answer had been: nothing.

Nothing about Harry Potter was special. He was thin, small and under the school robes wore clothes that were second-hand and raggedy; Thomas recognised the signs of neglect from his time in the orphanage. He had felt a hard bitter satisfaction at that. Perhaps a baby had reduced him to a wraith but without his formidable parents, little Harry Potter had grown up without love or kindness it seemed.

Dumbledore knew, of course. It wasn't hard to see how the old fool sometimes looked upon his boy wonder with eyes filled with sorrowful regret. But Harry's situation didn't matter any more to Dumbledore than the plight of Thomas Marvolo Riddle had done so many years before.

Thomas contemplated that for a moment and wondered if he'd played it wrong with the boy back then. Yes, he'd made a half-hearted attempt to the boy onside during their confrontation in front of the mirror but…but if he had approached the boy not as himself but as a saviour, as someone who would rescue him from his situation, as repentant perhaps…could he have swayed his nemesis to his side?

Possibly not.

The boy he'd observed that year had been filled with too much righteous anger against the wizard who'd murdered his parents.

Of course, the boy he'd observed that year hadn't been anything special beyond his name and a fame he hadn't even known he'd possessed.

Harry Potter was an average student, no discernible intellect or power, and with only flying as a potential talent. He'd certainly managed to stay on that damnable broom longer than most when Thomas had convinced Quirrell to jinx it.

And yet…Harry had stood firm in their confrontation. Yes, the boy had been scared but he had still defied him, still challenged him. And in the end his mother's protection had saved him again. Quirrell had burned at the touch of the boy; Thomas's own form had been weakened with immense pain.

It had taken Thomas months to recover.
And then Peter had turned up.

There had been the babbling tale of how little Peter the Rat had been discovered, tales of his old friends Black and Lupin almost murdering him only for little Harry to stop them; poor honourable Harry whose sense of justice had wanted Peter locked up for betraying his parents rather than dead. And then as Thomas had plotted and planned, Peter's stumbling information about young Harry and tales of the two years he'd missed.

The tale of the Heir of Slytherin, the basilisk, and Harry slaying the snake had angered Thomas. It was unthinkable that the boy had spoken parseltongue (although magical transference on the night of the Halloween had probably been the cause); maddening that he'd killed such a powerful weapon that Thomas had under his thrall; infuriating that Lucius had used one of his precious artefacts in what amounted to nothing more than a political ploy but then…

The diary horcrux had been filled with more than soul, it was filled with his writings and plans. He had written in many times after he had realised what he had done in making it, and had felt the pull of his own horcrux wrapping icy fingers around the remaining soul within his body. A young girl would not have withstood it for long. Perhaps Lucius had been alerted to his survival after the events of his son's first year at Hogwarts (and really the younger Malfoy was a disappointment) and taken the diary out in anticipation and…and perhaps the diary had instructed Malfoy.

Thomas would find out from Lucius when he was returned to full power. He smiled cruelly. The diary was not the only thing Lucius had to account for. It appeared that Lucius had bowed to the political will of Lord Black faster than a tissue crumpled under a few drops of water.

Lord Black.

Thomas found his mind drifting towards the matter of Sirius Black and allowed it to drift. The wizard was proving to be a worthy adversary. Thomas had always admired the Blacks. Arcturus had been a contemporary – a couple of years ahead of him at Hogwarts and he had ruled Slytherin house like a King. There were few wizards Thomas admired but Arcturus had been one of them; highly intelligent, political and Slytherin to his core. And Sirius Black was Arcturus's chosen Heir.

In retrospect, Arcturus had never truly supported Lord Voldemort; had never intended to become a Death Eater, Thomas mused. As Lord Black, Arcturus had remained behind his formidable walls and told Thomas only when the entire living House of Black was in support of him would Arcturus allow himself to be Marked. Arcturus had to have known his grandson Sirius would never have supported Lord Voldemort.

Back then, the young Black hadn't really registered with Thomas as anything more than an annoyance – an acolyte of Dumbledore and another faceless Hit Wizard. He'd been angered at the revelation that Sirius Black, undercover and undetected, had managed to screw up the European side of the war for months. The Carrows had spent time under the Cruciatus curse for that oversight. He'd also been angered that Black had somehow escaped and killed so many in his wake. But he'd never stopped to evaluate him, too focused on Dumbledore, Bagnold and others.

That had been a mistake.

Black was every bit as dangerous as his grandfather; every bit as wily. Peter might have tricked him once but Black had escaped Azkaban. He had escaped again after Peter had fled to Thomas. But instead of going to ground as a wanted fugitive unable to do anything but hide, Black had claimed his Lordship and had turned the British wizarding world on its head. He'd assumed political control with ease, subjugated Lucius, and invigorated society, kicking it out of the inertia and apathy that would have allowed Thomas to have taken power with ease.
All for one boy.

Thomas wondered what it was to have someone love them so much they literally changed the world to ensure their loved one's safety and happiness.

A part of him, a part of him that remembered his childhood and the nights he'd dreamed of his parents turning up, telling him it had been a horrible mistake, and whisking him away to a loving home...that part of him envied Harry Potter the love of Sirius Black.

He glowered at the ceiling.

He had never had anyone but himself. He had never needed anyone else but himself. That little Harry needed Sirius Black so much...it was a weakness.

Of course, apart from Peter's foray at deception over Yule, they hadn't truly been able to exploit that weakness. Bartemius's plan had been a complete failure and eliminated two of his better supporters in Mulciber and Rookwood before they'd even entered the fray.

Thomas tutted under his breath.

Bartemius was intelligent and cunning but it hadn't escaped Thomas's notice that he was insane. No, Bartemius was useful because his obsession with getting revenge on Black was all-consuming and he would help Thomas achieve his aims so long as that revenge was on the table. Thomas was not going to lose sight of that. Bartemius had already killed one father, and even if he played at the role, Thomas had no intention of becoming a second victim of Bartemius's taste for patricide.

Dennis Travers was a loyal and faithful follower but he was dull and lacking creativity. He was a good foot soldier but he was not and never would be a lieutenant. Before Azkaban his father had been a smart man but his cleverness had dimmed with exposure to the Dementors and Thomas believed he'd been a liability - something that had been proven when the wizard had gotten caught and interrogated. Death was a lucky escape for Travers Senior; his Dark Lord would have tortured him for months for his transgression.

And Peter...Peter was a good servant. He had done all Thomas had ordered him to do and he could not fault Peter's care. But Thomas was never going to lose sight of how quickly the rat had turned on his friends. How Peter had ended up in the house of the brave was a mystery to Thomas. The rat would always look to the strongest to protect him.

Severus, on the other hand, was a worthy follower; intelligent, a genius at potions, and cunning. He had clearly capitalised on the advantage of being thought of as Dumbledore's spy and used it to save himself at the end of the previous war. Perhaps he should be angry at Severus for upsetting Quirrell's plans but Thomas had always believed his followers should be able to prevail on their own against all obstacles, and Severus clearly had no idea that his Dark Lord inhabited the snivelling Defence teacher the Potions Master had seen no need to hide his disdain for. Thomas did wonder if the death of Lily Potter might have affected Severus's loyalty but the hatred Severus had shown young Harry eased his mind on that score.

He rather feared Fenrir was one dog who'd had his day. Lupin was in his prime and Fenrir would be hard pressed to win against the younger wolf on an even playing field. Of course, Thomas had no plans to allow an even playing field. The Carrows had been his most vicious followers and he fully expected that they would ensure victory.

Soon, Thomas promised himself, soon he would have his body back and he would be able to entice his better compatriots back to his side. It was a shame Black had killed the LeStranges, especially
Bellatrix, but once Thomas had removed Harry Potter from the world, the likes of Malfoy, Nott, Selwyn, Gibbon and Wilkes would once again bow at the feet of Lord Voldemort.

Stupid Purebloods, sneered Thomas's inner voice. So superior...so convinced of their own place in the world.

Thomas had created the persona of Lord Voldemort to appeal to their snobbery, and with the truth of his status as the only true Heir of Slytherin, it ensured that he had ruled over them once and would again. It amused him that they followed so avidly as he killed their kin indiscriminately. All Thomas wanted was power.

Power to rule, to make them all regret the day they had ignored or belittled a penniless orphan named Riddle. Power to ensure he would never again be that helpless or subjugated.

Potter wasn't a pureblood either for all he had been clothed in the robes of a pureblood family, mused Thomas. He had actually decided Potter was the more likely candidate for that infernal prophecy because he wasn't a pureblood. Stupid, Thomas berated himself. If only he hadn't chosen either of them perhaps he might have escaped the prophecy.

He really should try to find out the whole thing, but that would involve risking a trip to the Ministry and with the security measures that had been put in place it was unlikely he would be able to get in and out without being noticed at all.

No.

It would have to wait until he was restored to a body and then it would be moot as Potter would be dead.

Although Harry under the tutelage of Black was proving to be a rather different enemy.

The boy's abilities had grown since his observation of them at Hogwarts or perhaps Harry had hidden his true abilities back then. He had killed a basilisk at twelve, after all. His performance in the tournament was astounding. Thomas could lay some of it at Black's door, he mused. No doubt Sirius Black was coaching the teen. But that didn't detract from the fact that at fourteen Harry Potter was as much a magical prodigy as Thomas himself had been.

But Thomas was certain of his ability to best Harry once he was back in his own body. He had decades of knowledge and experience. In a duel, Thomas would beat Harry and all would see that he was the better wizard.

Images of spells and fighting flashed across his inner landscape and Thomas felt the pull towards sleep as the dream of defeating his nemesis tempted him into rest.

His last thought whispered in his inner ear as he let go of his hold on consciousness: he would beat the boy, but perhaps he shouldn't underestimate Harry Potter the way he had underestimated his parents.
Finding Pronglet's Power: 1

Part 11: Finding Pronglet's Power (The Endgame Prank)

10th April 1995

Paris was a beautiful city.

Harry's mind whirled with the two days of sight-seeing he'd thrown himself into since their arrival in Paris on the Saturday morning. He and Sirius had disguised themselves and wandered around both the wizarding and muggle tourist attractions without anyone being wise to who they were. Harry had loved the Eiffel Tower with the grand views of Paris, and the Louvre with its hidden wizarding floor where the portraits spoke of everything from the French Revolution to the French Resistance in the last World War. But he'd also just enjoyed sitting outside on the pavement of a little café for lunch with a hot mug of chocolate, crusty baguette and platters of cured meat and cheeses, watching the world go by. It had been a wonderful two days, if exhausting.

They were staying at the Black apartment which was big enough to house not only Sirius and himself but also in a surprise move, Andromeda, Narcissa and Tonks, who'd all decided that Paris was the only place to commission the wedding outfits. The Grangers had arrived earlier that morning to facilitate Hermione getting her bridesmaid's dress and they were expecting Simeon and his family the following day.

It had taken only an hour for Harry to feel swamped by the wedding talk and he'd been relieved when Sirius hustled him out of the door early for their luncheon with the Delacours and the mysterious Vivien Verte. He only felt a smidgeon of guilt about leaving Hermione who had looked as bewildered as he had felt about what material would work best for the dresses.

The Delacours estate was very close to Versailles, (Harry had hoped they might have time in the afternoon to visit the palace but Sirius had been adamant it needed a day on its own to properly appreciate the gardens and the historical building), and only accessible by floo. Sirius walked them over to the French Ministry of Magic to use the public floos there since the apartment didn't have an active floo. Harry didn't mind the walk; the sun was shining and the wind was bracing stinging his cheeks and mussing his hair, and generally reminding him he was alive.

In some ways, he mused, the past couple of days had seemed like a holiday from the reality of their lives; a revisit of the Summer when they'd been at the clinic and the only thing they'd needed to do was focus on healing. It had been a good time-out and Harry felt rested as they entered through the public entrance and into the Ministry which was housed under the Bastille.

They gained a few looks but nothing like the attention they would have drawn in Britain and Harry happily followed Sirius over to the bank of public floos where they paid for their usage to a small goblin.

There was nobody in the reception room when they arrived and Harry took a moment to take in the large rectangular space, empty of everything but a beautiful magical tapestry of a gathering of swans all along the one wall in front of them; the swans swam up and down the length of the woven fabric serenely. Looking back over his shoulder, Harry spotted the crest of the Delacours hewn into the marble mantelpiece and a wide ornate mirror which no doubt was linked to another somewhere in the building for someone to watch for security reasons. There were no windows and no visible door; the only lighting was an elaborate chandelier which had lit up as soon as they had stepped out of the floo.
A pop alerted them to a house elf. "Bonjour, Madame Elaine will be with you shortly. I'll be taking your cloaks."

They handed them over and the house elf bowed politely before it popped out again.

"Good security." Sirius commented, admiration colouring his tone. "I like the tapestry, provides the right amount of calming distraction. No windows, no doors. Nice mirror." He grinned at Harry. "Maybe we should get a tapestry for Black Manor."

"I don't think I want to know." Harry joked, seeing the mischievous glint in Sirius's eye. Once a prankster…

A grand double doorway suddenly appeared to their right and it opened up on its own allowing entry to the beautiful woman who was Fleur and Gabrielle's mother. Her golden hair was up in a complex chignon; her loose blue day robes were open to reveal a floaty muggle-style white summery dress decorated in a pattern of tiny blue flowers; gold sandals and jewellery completed the outfit. Harry was glad he and Sirius had opted for stylish outfits and that he wasn't going to feel either under or over-dressed; they'd judged it correctly.

Elaine accepted Sirius kissing the back of her offered hand with a delighted laugh and she smiled widely when Harry did the same. "It is marvellous you 'ave arrived."

Her French accent was barely traceable, Harry noted as Sirius thanked her for her welcome. Elaine shrugged in a very Gallic manner. "It is our pleasure." She motioned for them to follow her. "Our estate is, of course, very extensive. I 'ope we 'ave time to show you the grounds before you depart, but if not another time per'aps. I realise your purpose today is meeting Madame Verte." She turned and, smiling again, winked at them. "We will 'ave lunch before business though."

Harry followed her, wide-eyed at the gorgeous architecture, the wide main corridor decorated with what Harry assumed to be considered beautiful objects d'art and pictures painted by many famous artists.

The room they were led into was the conservatory; a large oval room which overlooked a pristine green lawn leading down to the rest of the gardens. Apart from the back wall which was part of the main house, the rest of the room had a cream wall up to waist height and then glass that arced into a dome above. Various plants were placed around the room; some trailing up the glass and along the walls. The main space though was taken up with a long table set out for lunch and a number of comfortable dining chairs around it. There was a side door out to the garden and Elaine ushered them through and round a small stone path to a walled garden where Fleur, Gabrielle and two older women sat on ornate metal chairs around a matching table.

Fleur caught her sister before she could throw herself at Harry, whispering something about decorum in her ear that Harry could barely hear.
"Please don't get up." Sirius said, seeing the women start to adjust their positions for the introductions.

The first woman bore a marked resemblance to Elaine despite her papery-thin skin and silver hair; she smiled at him. "Thank you, Lord Black. You are a gentleman."

"My grandmother." Elaine introduced them brightly. "Madame Sabrina Limone. This is Lord Sirius Black and his son, Lord Harry Potter."

"Sirius and Harry, please." Sirius said, kissing the older woman's hand with just as much charm as he'd used on Fleur's mother. "Your mother-in-law's wands are wonderful creations, Madame Limone."

Harry followed Sirius, a touch more shyly, but performing his small 'bonjour' and kiss without tripping over anything.

"You may call me Sabrina." She said with a twitching mouth which gave away her amusement at the proper protocol. "May I introduce our good friend, Vivien Verte."

"Madame," Sirius bowed and kissed the back of her hand, "you have my utmost gratitude for consenting to meet with us."

Vivien was older than Sabrina. There was a fragility in the small woman's frame; an air of bemused eccentricity in her simple bronze smock and matching slippers; her white hair escaping from its haphazardly pinned up do. But her brown eyes were shining brightly with intelligence and her grip was strong.

"You will call me Vivien." She corrected in surprisingly unaccented crisp English.

Sirius nodded graciously. "Thank you."

Vivien extended her hand to Harry who moved forward and kissed the back of her knuckles. When he went to step back, she held onto his hand, her brown eyes searching his green ones intently. Harry swallowed his nerves and his instinctive reaction to look to Sirius. Instead he held up under her regard until she squeezed his fingers lightly and let go.

"You, young Raven, may call me Grandmother." Vivien said with so much satisfaction that it sent a shiver down Harry's spine.

Sirius tensed beside him. "Vivien, if I may…"

"Do not worry," Vivien turned to Sirius with a small smile, "we will speak of this later. We all have our gifts, do we not?"

Elaine coughed and masterfully returned to the task of completing the introductions with a breezy acknowledgement that they were already acquainted with Fleur and Gabrielle. An apology from Fleur's father was provided; he had been unable to reschedule his previous business arrangements.

Pre-lunch drinks of a Summer punch were handed out and talk turned to the tournament and reminiscences of the second task. Sirius escorted the two older women back to the conservatory for lunch while Harry escorted Fleur and a giggling Gabrielle. Elaine mock-complained about the lack of her husband to provide her 'with an equally 'andsome wizard."

Lunch topics were also fairly light; Harry was asked about studying at Hogwarts and he responded with a similar question about Beauxbatons; Sirius was asked about the latest proposal the Swiss had
put to the ICW for wand-making ingredients to be monitored for proper quality.

It was only after the sumptuous lemon mousse with lemon syrup and candied oranges dipped in dark chocolate that Elaine drew the conversation around to the purpose of the visit.

"Per'aps, Vivien," she offered, "you would prefer to discuss your business with Sirius and 'arry in the drawing room with coffee?"

Vivien acquiesced and five minutes later, Harry found himself sitting on a small antique sofa next to his father. Vivien was installed in a matching chair beside him. A coffee table next to them was laden with a silver tray with hot coffee and tiny pastries.

Vivien served the drinks, adding plenty hot milk to Harry's which he additionally sweetened to make it palatable. He rarely drank coffee but didn't want to make a fuss asking for something else. Sirius's small smile of approval was enough to make it worth the while.

"I should begin with an apology for our introduction." Vivien settled back in the armoire. "I did not mean to disturb you with my words."

Sirius glanced at Harry and back at Vivien. "You recognised his animagus form?"

Vivien smiled softly. "More accurately the essence of all he is and is to become." She tilted her head. "I am not the first, no?"

"No," admitted Harry, "my friend Luna was the first one to suggest I would be a raven."

"So you are a raven and one protected by a…grim?" Vivien looked at Sirius questioningly.

Sirius nodded reluctantly.

"Appropriate that the one who guards the last of the Peverells is a man who carries the soul of a creature who usually walks with Death and protects the soul of the innocent." Vivien said knowingly.

Harry felt more than a little creeped out and he hastily took a sip of his coffee to hide his reaction. Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder grounding him.

"And you are the last of Lumiere's line." Sirius replied politely.

"Yes, the last of the Lumieres and you are the last of the Peverells." Vivien's gaze caught Harry's. "We both are the last as foreseen."

"Foreseen?" Sirius jumped on the phrase.

Harry swallowed down the fear that had sprung up; he really hoped it wasn't another prophecy.

"It starts as though a joke." Vivien said, her words unhurried as though she wasn't aware of Sirius's determination to have an answer to his question. "An apprentice wand-maker walks into an inn and sits beside a rich young wizard travelling incognito abroad before returning home to marry. But it is not a joke."

Harry was captivated by the picture she had woven and eager to know more, yet he didn't press her, knowing somehow she had to tell the tale her own way. Sirius seemed to sense the same because he remained quiet too.

Vivien sipped her coffee, lowering the delicate china cup back into its equally delicate saucer.
"Michel Albert Lumiere. He writes in his journals that they became friends that first night; Michel flush from the sale of his first wand and the wizard, who introduced himself only as Iggy, drinking to forget the war and losses he had left behind in his home country. They determined to travel together and they spent days in each other's company."

"Journals?" asked Sirius softly enough not to disturb the suspenseful atmosphere Vivien had created.

"Journals." Vivien confirmed. "There is not a single document upon which the account was written despite the rumours. Albert, Michel's son, created something to give to the Crown and to divert attention but it was not the whole truth." She took another sip of coffee and set it aside. "Michel writes that it was their last night together. They had found lodging in the medieval port where the boat Iggy would take to return to Britain was docked. It was winter and cold, the weather grey and wet with rain and sleet. They drank red wine and filled their bellies with stew and bread and as they settled in front of the fire…"

"You have never asked me my full name." The dark-haired wizard said, his blue gaze staring into the fire.

"You will always be my dear Iggy." Michel replied, tipping his glass in Iggy's direction.

Iggy's gaze shifted from the fire to Michel and once again Michel wished he could soothe the sadness and turmoil that tumbled in the blue eyes. "You are my dearest friend, Michel. I shall never forget you."

"Nor I you." Michel murmured, his own sadness and disappointment at the imminent loss of Iggy driving deep claws into his belly.

"I need...I need to tell you a story, Michel, one that you must swear to tell your children and they must tell theirs and so on because one day in the far future the last of my line will seek the last of yours to hear this story told to them."

Michel frowned at the tense lines of Iggy's face; how serious he looked. His friend meant every word. "You know this how?"

"A prophecy told to me...by whom shall be revealed within my tale." Iggy said with rueful regret.

Michel nodded. "I am listening, my friend."

Iggy cleared his throat. "At home, these past years, there rose a coven of Dark Wizards named the Seven. The High Priest claimed to be Mordred's heir. They waged war on the Ancient families and those we protect, killing indiscriminately to bolster their wealth and power, to make slaves of the rest of us."

"We heard reports even here in the countryside." Michel murmured, reaching over to pour more wine into his friend's glass. It was not a surprise that Iggy was of an Ancient family; only those with money and status tended to have the means to travel as Iggy had done. He felt honoured again that such a wizard would befriend a lowly wand-maker apprentice.

"The Seven were terrible but the Ancient families are not without power." Iggy continued, fortifying himself with more wine. "There was an army gathered." His face grew pale. "I was one of three brothers. Triplets. Born on the third day of the third month. We set aside our work and went to war." He shuddered, his whole body trembling. "War is nothing but blood and pain; a time of nothing but one terrifying moment after another with barely a second to catch your breath and grieve..." his voice cut off abruptly on a choked sob.
Michel reached over and lay a hand on Iggy's shoulder in silent support.

"After a year, each side was battered and almost by tacit agreement we all retreated for the winter months." Iggy continued again, his deep voice sliding into the silence. He shook his head casting off a memory perhaps. "My brothers and I headed home to the Hollow and our parents' estate. When we arrived though the manor was empty and the house elves were the ones who informed us that while we were at war, a wizarding plague had hit the village and killed many. Our parents were among the dead."

"Mon Dieu!" Michel ached for his friend, for the loss he had suffered. He feared he knew now who Iggy was, he had always listened to the news from afar and there were not many wizards who were one of three brothers.

"It wasn't a natural plague, Healer Daffyd said." Iggy sighed heavily. "We'd heard stories that the Seven had unleashed abnormal Death upon other villages and towns, an illness that stole your breath and stilled your heart with a fever, but we had never thought our home might have been one of those affected. We were...devastated in our grief."

"Who would not be so devastated?" asked Michel softly. "I sorrow with you, my friend."

Iggy reached out and patted Michel's arm. He sighed. "And then life moved on. There were villagers to protect; food and livestock that needed attention before the winter set in; our halls to set to rights."

Michel poured more wine for them both. "But that is not the end of the story."

"No, only the beginning." Iggy said. "Antioch, as the eldest, took up the Headship of the family and named Cadmus, the second oldest of us, as his Heir. Antioch took a wife, Cadmus married his childhood sweetheart Sarah, and I was arranged in marriage to the youngest daughter of another Ancient family to be wed when the war was over and she was of age. And then in the heart of the winter, the abomination of the plague reared its head again."

"We found a cure but not before it took Cadmus's wife." He shifted position, turning away from the fire and back to Michel.

"We buried Sarah and in our renewed grief we turned to our talents and created artefacts to help us win the war." Iggy set his wine-glass down.

Michel's heart stampeded in his chest for he had heard the rumours of three great weapons – especially of the wand – used to defeat the Seven and here Iggy was telling him of them.

"We worked all through the winter. Antioch created his wand from the Elder tree whose branches protected the graves of our loved ones and used our blood as the magical core; all three brothers together. Cadmus anchored his psychic ability to see and talk to the dead into a stone. I weaved a cloak of creature hair soaked in basilisk and dragon scales and I imbued it with every protective spell I knew." Iggy hunched forward, staring into the fire. "We sat there, these wondrous items on the table in front of us and...and we wondered how they would help us win. Antioch had made a good wand, one loyal to our blood, but it was still only a wand. And Cadmus had created something unique but what help could the voices of the dead provide? And my cloak? It would help hide and protect but only one person."

"They were still incredible, no?"

"Incredible but useless. Antioch had the idea to ask the family magic for a blessing." He took another drink. "What do you know of family magic?"
"Very little." Michel said. "Only that it is for the Ancient families."

"After Camelot fell and Arthur was sent to Avalon, Merlin drew together the most powerful and they sacrificed their lives and magic to the protection of the magical world, hiding it away from those without, and removing the evil that tainted within. The pool of that magic somehow was gifted as an inheritance to the children of those who died, and it could be used by the most powerful of a generation to continue in protecting the magical world from enemies within and without."

"Astonishing." Michel said, fascinated.

"Usually it would only be the Head of the family and the Heir, but we three had made the artefacts and Antioch decreed that we three would call upon the family magic together. We went to the cemetery and over the graves of our loved ones, shed blood, called forth our family magic and asked for help." Iggy turned away, his face hidden in shadow. "What I tell you now will make me sound mad but I swear it is the truth."

"I believe you, Iggy." Michel said.

"Our family magic totem is a Thestral and it appeared but rather than the silver form it usually wore, it was black as night, and a wizard held the Thestral's reins in his hand." Iggy shivered recalling the memory. "It was the Emrys stood before us, a man in his prime with his hair braided in the Celtic fashion, robes that showed his physical power, and magic liming his body, gold and silver in the moonlight."

Michel caught sight of his friend's tremulous expression. He reached over and took hold of Iggy's hand.

Iggy sighed. "He told us our need was truth, that the world was once again out of balance, that the evil within was powerful. He looked at us then and it was…it was as though our very souls were being judged. He told us that the magic we had called upon could help but that there would be a price."

Michel nodded.

"We all looked to each other but there was no choice. The Seven had to be defeated; our world protected." Iggy continued. "We made the bargain." His gaze drifted away to the fire and Michel knew that Iggy was looking far into the past. "With a wave of his hand, the three artefacts spun in the air in front of us. He touched the wand first and declared that the wand would be faithful to the Peverell line, would counter any spell cast against its owner, and always cast true for its owner. He touched the stone second and told us that the stone was now a true portal between life and death. He touched the cloak last and told us that the cloak would shield and hide the one within forever; its enchantments made permanent and its invisibility perfect."

Michel kept quiet. Iggy's story was compelling.

"And then he said something we didn't understand until it was too late," Iggy smiled grimly, "he told us that the three artefacts would only have these powers when used together, if used on their own they reverted to what they were; unique but not infallible objects. We thought at the time that he meant for all three to be in use on the same battlefield. He kissed our foreheads," Iggy's free hand crept up to touch the centre of his brow almost absently, "and then he was gone."

"It worked." Michel said, because he could not see how it had not given the known result of the demise of the Seven.
"We rode out the next day," Iggy said as though Michel had not spoken, "weeks went by but we gathered the army once more and we cornered the Seven by a river. The battle begun." He picked up his wine and drank deeply. "Antioch was brave and fearless; he led from the front. He was devastating; fierce and confident. He held three of the Seven in a duel, spells flashing back and forth..." his eyes glistened with tears, "and he did not see the servant of the Seven creep up behind him and stab him with nothing more than an ordinary knife. With his last breath, Antioch sent the wand to Cadmus."

Michel simply held onto Iggy, compassion bubbling for the horror of seeing a brother fall.

"Sweet, loyal Cadmus held the centre, and had called forth the dead, all those who had suffered because of the Seven, to fight among the living." Iggy shook his head. "The shades of the dead were useful, they distracted the enemy but they could not truly touch and could not truly fight..." he raised his eyes to Michel, "not until Cadmus held the wand and the stone together. Suddenly the shades became as flesh; the dead became the living...it was glorious and terrible for they could fight but they were also vulnerable again to sword and spell."

Once again, Michel could do nothing but squeeze the hand of his friend and offer comfort.

"Sarah was among those who had answered Cadmus's call. She fought close to him and...Cadmus only had eyes for her despite the drain on his magic. He wanted to keep her in the world so badly, she who was already dead, he drained his magic away." Iggy swiped at his eyes. "And with his last breath, Cadmus willed the wand and the stone to my hands."

"My friend." Michel said softly.

"I was in charge of the flank. We approached silently from the back to trap the Seven between us and the rest of the army at the front. I was an invisible assassin; I passed through the fighting men as though I didn't exist." Iggy said roughly. "I had lost both my brothers and in my hands I held their gifts, unwanted as they were. In my grief I made my way to the High Priest, and suddenly I knew how to end it – I stood there, unseen and unnoticed in front of him, and I cast with the power of the wand I held a spell to banish him and his coven through the portal of the stone to their death. They went screaming, their souls wrenched without warning from their bodies..."

Michel felt only sorrow that his friend should have had to experience something so awful...

"But then...it was as though Time itself stood still, the battle froze around me and out of the chaos a dark form appeared; a hooded faceless figure, a Raven on his shoulder and a Grim beside him." Iggy started to tremble. 'Death demanded the one who had cast the Seven to the afterlife be seen or all on the field would be taken by him, so I removed the cloak and Death looked upon me. 'Little Wizard,' he said, 'you dare to command the power of Death?'"

Michel could not speak.

"I prostrated myself. I told him I knew Death had no master but I begged his mercy and indulgence. I was willing to go with him so long as he did not undo what I had done. He caught my chin in a bony grasp and forced me to look at him; a black and dark and endless abyss...I have never known so much fear as the cold that crept in my veins then."

Iggy shivered violently and Michel stoked up the fire and coaxed him to drink some wine.

"I don't know how much Time passed, perhaps no more than a second, or as much as a day, it felt an eternity before he released me." Iggy said. '"Little Wizard,' he said, 'I will take these Seven as the power of the three Hallows you hold are their death but in return, you owe me a life.' I offered my
own again and Death laughed. 'No,' he said, 'no, Little Wizard, the price you pay is to live with the loss of all you have loved, the blood on your hands, the wounds in your soul; to live and marry and have children who will have children, but eventually there will be only one of your blood alive and his life...it is his life that will be mine.'

"I don't understand..." murmured Michel, frowning.

"Neither did I at first but then Death told me: 'The last of the Peverells will be my Champion, a Raven against one who tries to escape me. And before the last of your blood becomes a man, he will have to fight as you have fought; face losses as you have done; see his enemy rise again from the spilling of Peverell blood before the Final Battle.' Iggy recited grimly. "He wanted to use the last of my line to fight his war; to take the life of a child and make it a battle against this nameless wizard wanting immortality." His fingers tightened painfully on Michel's. "How could I agree? The child would be an innocent and I would condemn him to war, to horror and pain..."

"You could not do it." Michel acknowledged quietly.

"The price was too high. I begged Death to reconsider." Iggy's eyes were wet again and he used the back of his hand to swipe at the wetness. "I begged him, reminded him the child would be an innocent, and...and then the Grim howled its own protest. I had forgotten that the Grim protected the souls of the innocent." He shook his head as though in disbelief.

"And Death, he listened to the Grim. 'Very well,' he said, 'I will have my Champion and he will have a Grim to protect him in the world. And while he will know pain, he will also know love, and while he bleeds, he will also draw blood. He will be thrice blessed; marked as an equal to the one he fights; unable to die except at the hand of the one he fights as my Champion.'"

Iggy was rocking back and forth as though to comfort himself against the memories that haunted him.

"I debated but truly what was the life of one child against all of those which would be lost if the Seven remained alive?" Iggy sighed, guilt written in every line of his face. "I agreed to the debt. It was then Death as he walked away told me 'While your Hallows will be scattered, should the last of your line succeed in uniting them once more, he also cannot use their power to defeat his enemy or he will also condemn another to a life of pain.' I wondered how to ensure my distant child would know and Death told me to travel and find someone I trusted to tell my story to, for the last of their line would tell it to the last of mine." He looked at me then. "And so you are who I have chosen, Michel Albert Lumiere. You who have befriended me these many months and who not cared at all that I am Ignatus Peverell, the Defeater of Seven, last of the Three Brothers, the Master of the Deathly Hallows."

There wasn't a sound in the drawing room as Vivien stopped.

Harry felt his head was whirling with information; his feelings were scattered, one emotion after another storming through him.

Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, a quiet comfort which grounded and anchored him.

"Fresh coffee," Vivien declared, calling for a house elf. Her brown eyes settled on Harry's pale face as she gave the order. "And perhaps some hot chocolate?"

Harry admittedly felt a touch better when a few minutes later, the hot chocolate warmed him through.

"So, to summarise," Sirius said, jumping into the silence, "Ignatus and his brothers created three
artefacts, which the whole pool of family magic turned into a weapon that gave the one who held all three Hallows at the same time the ability to send people to the afterlife. Death got annoyed at a wizard usurping Death's role in the grand scheme of things and as a punishment declared Ignotus's descendant would be his Champion?"

"I don't understand," Harry said, cutting in before Vivien could answer, "why did Death get upset? I mean, how was the way Ignotus killed the Seven any different to him just throwing a couple of Killing Curses at them?"

"He commanded their souls through a wizard-made portal to the afterlife." Vivien replied. "They were not dead and yet he deemed their lives over. Only Death himself is said to hold such power, and so as your father said, Death was usurped."

"It's the difference between the physical and spiritual. Death commands when we die; he decides that. If Ignotus had used a spell or a blade, Death would have determined whether it would have killed them or not; some spells are more lethal than others that's true but even with a Killing Curse the opponent is given the opportunity to block it with a heavy piece of masonry, for instance." Sirius added. "However, Ignotus didn't give Death any chance to intercede when he used the Hallows and removed their souls from their bodies and sent them to the afterlife himself. He made the decision not Death and that was the reason why Death objected." He shook himself. "Well, I think that's the explanation at any rate."

"You're probably right, and it explains why I can't use the Hallows the same way as Ignotus." Harry concluded. "Because it would upset Death."

He would never choose the same as Ignotus either on the punishment if he ever was tempted to use the Hallows that way, Harry determined. It was far too similar to Albus Dumbledore's proclamation of 'the Greater Good.' To sacrifice even the life of one child…there was always another way. Ignotus could have refused and taken down the Seven the hard way. But then, he mused tiredly, could he blame his ancestor for choosing a route that ended the war sooner and saved more people?

"I am afraid so." Vivien said, dragging Harry out of his internal musing.

Sirius and Harry glanced at each other, a touch of despondency in both their gazes. They had pinned much of their hopes on 'the power he knows not' to be the Hallows.

"How did the Hallows get scattered?" asked Sirius abruptly. "At the end of the battle, Ignotus holds all three. Death obviously knew they would be scattered but…"

"Ignotus went onto explain knowing that Michel would want to see the wand although he would never have asked." Vivien explained. "Unfortunately, the wand had secretly been buried under a memorial stone for his brothers. It was vandalised by grave robbers and the wand stolen."

"Explains the old Antioch was 'sleeping' when the wand was stolen story." Sirius huffed.

Vivien smiled and nodded. "The stone, well, Ignotus spoke with the shade of his brothers after the battle, too tempted not to use it to keep them with him – the brothers had never been separated before. Cadmus ordered him to discard it rather than hold onto the dead, so grief-stricken he threw it into the river. He told Michel he was relieved not to be the Master of the Hallows anymore but feared the damage the wand and the stone could do in the wrong hands."

"With good reason." Sirius murmured.

"So the Hallows were scattered." Harry sighed and rubbed his nose. "And they are only truly
invincible if they're used together. I've got that right, right?"

Vivien nodded. "You have. The wand is a powerful wand and no doubt when in the hands of a powerful wizard it is formidable but it only casts and counters fully true when its wizard is shielded by the cloak and holds the stone."

"And the stone only truly becomes a portal between life and death when coupled with the others," Sirius finished, "and the cloak is only truly impenetrable with the others. Otherwise they're amazing objects but with weaknesses." He shifted. "Did Michel and Ignotus continued to correspond after Ignotus returned home?" He asked, drawing Vivien's attention.

"No. There was no means of regular communication even owls were rare back then." Vivien said. "Michel learned of Ignotus's death through the various reports from abroad that made their way overseas. Michel's journals have been passed down to enable Michel to keep his promise to Ignotus to tell his story to Death's Champion. Our family has considered it an honoured duty."

"Thank you for telling me and for your family's part in ensuring I would find out the truth one day." Harry said sincerely. "I appreciate knowing my family history."

Vivien smiled at him fondly. "I have arranged for the journals to be transferred from my Gringotts vault to the Potter vault, Harry."

"But…” Harry began to protest but she held up a hand.

"It is your legacy as much as mine. I am the last and there will be no more Lumieres." Vivien stated firmly. "It would give me great pleasure to know that the last of the Peverells is our Heir."

Harry looked to Sirius who gave him a swift nod.

"It's a wonderful gift." Sirius said.

"Then, I'm honoured." Harry turned back to Vivien. "And as the last Peverell, I promise that each generation of the Houses of Potter and Black will tell Michel's story to the next generation, and honour the great service the Lumieres provided to our family."

Vivien positively beamed and her hand patted his lightly. "Now," she said with a twinkle in her brown eyes, "now will you call me Grandmother, young Raven?"

Harry ducked his head but nodded ruefully. "Yes, Grandmother."

o-O-o

Sirius wasn't surprised to find Harry up and about in the dead of the night. After the day spent visiting with Vivien, Sirius had been expecting it. The apartment was almost overflowing with people and Harry had found refuge on the roof garden, perched almost on the edge of the building, staring up at the night sky. He also wasn't surprised to find the invisibility cloak heaped at Harry's feet and Hedwig at his side.

He didn't mask his footsteps as he walked across the lawn to sit beside his son. He cast a warming charm on both of them – Harry was only in striped pyjamas while Sirius had remembered to throw on a dressing gown; April in Paris was warmer than London but the nights still got chilly and it wasn't that much warmer. He followed the warming charm up with a privacy bubble.

"Alright there, Pronglet?" Sirius asked nudging Harry's shoulder with his own very gently. He had no wish to tip his favourite person in the whole world off the side of the building. Hedwig departed
with a flutter of her wings and a look that clearly told Sirius he was to look after her charge.

Harry nudged him back and snuggled slightly closer, instinctively seeking warmth. "How much of it do you think actually happened?" he asked, just as Sirius had given up expecting Harry to answer.

Sirius hummed while he considered his reply. "More than I want, truthfully." He ran a hand through his unfettered locks and let his gaze drift from Harry to the stars. "The records of that time are sparse but Grandfather's research did dig up something about a plague and a war. So, there's evidence for that part of it."

Harry made a soft sound of agreement.

"We know it's possible to call forth the spirits of old – you've been visited by Morgan Le Fey. Her sister, the Lady of the Lake, revealed herself to you in the second task. So the idea that the Peverell brothers together in a time of crisis could call Merlin himself is not really all that out there." Sirius continued.

"I guess not." Harry muttered, digging his toes into the grass.

"So, do I believe the Hallows are the result of some very powerful family magic? Yes. As for the rest, the whole thing with Death…" Sirius sighed heavily. "I want to say it's a whole load of hogwash but more because I really want the Hallows to be the power you need, and from the story Vivien told us, you can't use the Hallows without penalty and I'm not prepared to be purposefully blind and risk you or some other innocent Pronglet yet to be born."

Harry sighed, a rush of breath as though he'd been holding it for a while. "Yeah."

Sirius leaned into his son and dropped a kiss on the top of Harry's head.

"It's weird though." Harry said. "I mean, if Death were really that upset about Ignotus killing those wizards why didn't he just undo it? Why give him a choice?"

Sirius shrugged. "We really have no idea how everything works once you die, Harry. The conversation with your folks suggests that there is an afterlife; that the spirits of those lost to us are with us even if we don't get to see them or talk with them quite as definitively as we could do with the stone. But other than that?" He sighed. "I admit that I didn't think Death was an actual real being."

"Me either." Harry admitted, somewhat chagrined.

"But if we take Ignotus's story as truth…" Sirius pressed his lips together. "Then, we accept that the figure of Death is a manifestation of a being who sees your soul to the afterlife; that the raven and grim have the connection with this being that myths and legends say they do. In which instance… maybe Death isn't constrained by time and space and…and the practicalities of life."

"That would make sense." Harry said. "He has to exist everywhere because somewhere every second a death happens, right?"

"Right." Sirius agreed, pleased with Harry's reasoning. "So, if I'm Death, and because I exist everywhere in every moment and time, I see Tom Riddle's attempt to cheat death…"

"And you're upset because really he's doing the exact same thing that Ignotus did in usurping Death's role, only Riddle's choosing to keep his soul here." Harry said.

Sirius shot him a proud smirk and pointed a finger at him. "Exactly. But maybe there are rules."
Maybe Death can't intervene directly…"

"He doesn't stop Merlin and the family magic creating the Hallows." Harry stated thoughtfully.

"And he just doesn't undo Ignatus's actions. He offers Ignatus a choice either to bring back the Seven or let Death have the last of the Peverells as his Champion." Sirius frowned. "If I were Death I would have lied and worded it so Ignatus thought I could intervene directly…"

"Maybe it wasn't a complete lie," Harry leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his knees, "he could have just forced Ignatus into using the Hallows to bring them back himself."

"Maybe." Sirius said. "So, there we are then. Death basically takes advantage of Ignatus's actions to create himself a Champion to deal with Voldemort's shenanigans. And, voila! He gets…" He noticed Harry's twitching lips. "What?"

"Voila?" mocked Harry lightly.

Warmth spread through Sirius like the touch of the sun on a Summer's day; he loved moments just like this, he mused, moments when Harry was confident to tease his old Padfoot because that meant Harry knew Sirius loved him, was secure in Sirius's affections enough to poke fun at him.

"Oy!" Sirius wagged his finger and sniffed imperiously at Harry. "We are in France."

"So we are. I beg your pardon," Harry replied with exaggerated politeness, mischief shining out of his green eyes, "you were saying?"

"What was I saying?" asked Sirius, trying to grasp the thread that he'd been following before Harry had teased him.

"Death taking advantage so he has some way of dealing with Voldie…" Harry made a circular gesture with his hand to indicate 'blah, blah, blah' – or maybe that was just Sirius's interpretation.

"Right, Death takes advantage…" Sirius continued, "and he even tricks Ignatus into loading the dice for him."

Harry took a moment to work it out for himself. "You think he always intended to give his Champion help?"

"Makes sense," Sirius pointed out, "he tells Ignatus that the Champion will effectively suffer as Ignatus has suffered, but Ignatus is deep down one of the good guys, he's not immediately about to agree to his last living descendent, a child, being put into that position by his actions."

"Death figures he'll protest then." Harry nodded slowly as though accepting the proposition.

"And then Death can agree that yes, the child may suffer but he'll get a wonderfully handsome and very intelligent grim to help him…" Sirius exaggeratedly preened a little to make Harry chuckle and lighten the moment, "and gives his Champion an equal playing field."

"Except he insists his Champion can't use the Hallows to defeat Voldemort." Harry sighed.

Sirius grimaced. "Yeah, that part sucks."

"It's not like I wanted to use them." Harry confessed quietly. "I mean, I loved talking with Mum and Dad but…the wand and the stone are really creepy." He frowned. "And I wouldn't ever choose for another kid to go through the same as me."
Sirius's heart ached and he rubbed Harry's shoulder comfortingly.

"I think I'm kind of pissed off with Ignotus." Harry admitted, tugging at a nearby blade.

"I can't say I blame you," Sirius said dryly. "I might be a little pissed off with him myself."

"I mean, I get why he did it, I guess." Harry said, pushing his glasses back up his nose. "He was facing seven Voldemort's and had just lost everyone he loved...and there's this kid who isn't even real to him..."

Sirius hummed.

"But..." Harry sighed heavily again, "it kind of reminds me of the Headmaster and his 'greater good' thing. You know; making decisions for others and ignoring the negative consequences."

Or being blind to them as Albus had been all the years Harry had been with the Dursleys.

"Do you think that this means the 'power' is just the family magic?" asked Harry.

"I don't know," Sirius shifted position so he could look at his son's face better, "maybe we're focusing on the wrong thing entirely. Your parents did suggest that the power might not be magical." He tapped Harry's knee. "Politically we have him and his followers boxed into being the minority in the wizarding world now and that's not going to change any time soon. It's also given you the resources and help you've needed to overcome the tasks. Financially he hasn't got the access he once did to his followers' money. Crouch was prudent but Barty has to be going through the money he embezzled from his father at fair old rate."

"But neither is going to help me if I'm face to face with him alone on the battle-field." Harry said with perfect logic.

"No, but they all help in your preparation and in providing the cavalry which will be on its way to help you if you do end up face to face and alone with him – never doubt that." Sirius answered, holding his son's gaze until he was satisfied Harry believed it. "It's entirely possible that the 'power to defeat the Dark Lord' and the 'power he knows not' are two separate things. The only thing that links them is that they're spoken of in the same prophecy and therefore we assume that they are the same thing. Prophecies are woolly. Yes, you have 'power he knows not' because you have the Hallows and the family magic, but it may well be that you defeat him with a disarming spell like you did with Albus."

Harry bit his lip, smiling. "I don't think I'm going to defeat Voldemort with a disarming spell."

"You don't know." Sirius countered enthusiastically. "No-one knows. Prophecies suck that way."

"Majorly suck." Harry agreed. He nudged Sirius's shoulder with his own. "I think you're right though. I should just focus on training and learning, without relying on the family magic or the Hallows."

"You might also want to consider that it's possible that just being Death's Champion is the 'power he knows not.'" Sirius said thoughtfully. "If you're right and Death is everywhere and every time, then maybe he knows who wins."

Harry considered the idea and shrugged. He darted a swift look at Sirius and tensed minutely. "Have you...did you hear the bit of the story where Death told Ignotus that my blood would be spilled before the Final Battle?"
Sirius closed his eyes briefly because he had hoped he hadn't heard it. "Yeah." He opened his eyes again and met Harry's tentatively worried gaze.

"Blood is the ingredient required from the unwilling enemy." Harry stated.

Sirius nodded.

Harry grimaced. "So it looks like he's successful at getting me then if Death does have some insight into what happens."

"Or we decide to trap him." Sirius countered immediately. "Don't assume that it's a failure or a defeat on our part."

"But if we plan on him getting me doesn't that make me willing?" Harry argued.

"Not necessarily," Sirius replied. "Look, I've been promising that he won't get you through the tournament since the moment you accepted the binding, but truthfully? Tactically and strategically it would make sense for us to accept you being taken at that point. Do I want you to be taken and hurt? No. Do you want to be taken and your blood used to resurrect him? No. But would accepting that if it did happen despite us not wanting such a thing, it would force a final confrontation that we can plan in advance? Yes."

Harry huffed out a breath. "I've been thinking something similar but I didn't know how to tell you." He paused and continued. "And I did think it would make us screw up the ritual."

Pride filled Sirius. Harry had grown so much in the last few months, Sirius considered ruefully.

"It's definitely something for us to discuss with everyone when we get together." Sirius said. He cast a tempus. "You should get some sleep. Simeon, Anna and Jason are arriving at eight."

There was a grumbling murmur of something he couldn't quite hear but Harry scuttled back from the edge of the roof and stood up. Sirius pushed himself off the ground and brushed the grass off his dressing gown. Spotting grass stains on his son's pyjamas, he sent a quick cleansing charm toward an unsuspecting Harry who yelped when it hit and shot him an annoyed look.

Sirius plastered his most innocent expression on his face.

Harry's expression told him he didn't believe Sirius was innocent at all but then Harry relented and slung an arm around him to hug him sideways as they walked over to the door.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what's this for?" asked Sirius.

Harry smiled at him. "If I have to be Death's Champion then…I'm really happy he decided to give me a grim."

Sirius felt his love for his son bubble back up like an overflowing fountain. "Don't forget he gave you a wonderfully intelligent and very handsome grim."

And Harry laughed and all was right with Sirius's world.

o-O-o

Harry shifted restlessly in his sleep, turning over and burying his face into his pillow, his feet twitching outside the duvet he'd shoved off his body. A frown painted his face as his dream led him down and down…
The graveyard was cold, a definite chill brushed over Harry's form and when he looked down he realised he was still dressed only in his pyjamas. He glanced at the familiar headstone in front of him; his parents'.

"They love you very much." The melodic voice behind him had him whirling around.

The man who stood there was as tall as Sirius, but sturdier. He had flowing black hair and blue eyes. His robes were old fashioned though and a strangely familiar wand was being twirled through his fingers.

"Ignatus Peverell." Harry concluded.

"Harry Potter." Ignotus tipped his head. "Well met, descendent."

Harry shivered and rubbed his arms. "Is this real?"

"You tell me," Ignotus said, "Cadmus had the ability to talk to the dead and imbued it in the stone. You're the Master of the Deathly Hallows."

"But I'm not." Harry countered. "All I am is Death's Champion."

His ancestor tilted his head. "You think there is nothing to being Death's Champion?"

Harry's anger ignited. "What did you tell Michel about war? Something to do with it being horror and pain and terrifying and losing everyone you loved! Well, that's been my life! Pain and terror and a madman chasing me and all of it – IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!"

Ignotus had the sense to look chastened. "I had no choice."

"BOLLOCKS!" Harry yelled at him, throwing up his hands. "You had a choice! You just chose to sacrifice my life to save your own!"

"And thousands more!" Ignatus stepped forward, almost fully into Harry's space, almost nose to nose. "Could you take the chance of so many dying? I had seven wizards to defeat! I had lost every one of my brothers! I was alone and…"

"You had no right to sacrifice me." Harry repeated tersely. He pushed his glasses up his nose and turned away from his ancestor. "I understand why you did what you did but it was still wrong."

"I know and I am sorry." The words whispered over Harry's shoulder and into his ear. "But if it were your choice, if you could use the power of the Hallows to send your foe to his death right now, wouldn't you take it?"

Harry stared at the headstone at the precious words of love Sirius had placed there. 'Where there is love there is life.'

There was temptation, he wouldn't deny it. He could call the wand and the stone and his cloak and order the soul Voldemort had fractured into so many pieces through the portal into death. It would be so easy and no-one else would need to be hurt or injured. That reason alone was temptation enough but…

The consequences if he used the Hallows…

Would he condemn another child to live as Death's Champion? To have one of his descendants have to face the loneliness of no parents and a loveless home? To struggle to understand why someone
wanted them dead? To face horror after horror? Killing a man and a giant snake before he'd even turned thirteen…staring down his parents' betrayer…to be so hurt and alone…

Until Sirius.

Until the Grim had protected him as he had been destined to do.

No.

He couldn't let anyone live the life he'd led. Maybe using the Hallows was the easy option but Harry had spoken truthfully to Ignotus; it wasn't the right option.

"I won't use the Hallows to kill Voldemort." Harry said firmly. "We'll meet on a field of battle and I'll take my chance." His lips twisted. "Death chose me for a reason as his Champion. Maybe it means something more than nothing."

"And will you risk those you love, the society you fight to protect from your foe?" asked Ignotus, his voice still a thready whisper.

Harry swallowed hard, tears pressing at the back of his eyes as he considered losing Sirius as he thought he had lost him – or Remus – or anyone and he shook his head.

"I'll protect them as much as I can." It was a promise he made to himself, to them. "But I know the people who love me, they'll want to fight for me; want to protect me too. I can't keep them out of it." Even if he really wanted to keep them safe. "Besides," he added, his eyes refocusing on his parents' names, "we're stronger together." He paused, understanding flowing through him suddenly. "That's what broke you, isn't it? You'd always had your brothers and they'd died and you were alone." He turned back around and froze.

A figure stood behind him, dressed head to toe in black, a hood covering his face and nothing but dark where a face should be.

"Champion." The figure said without speaking.

"Death." Harry bowed his head a touch, hoping it was the right move. Again, he wondered if it was really happening. The crisp cold air through his lungs felt real; the breeze on his skin; the hushed silence.

"You are the Master of the Deathly Hallows just as Ignotus once was." Death said. "Only one who does not want to use them may truly have their allegiance."

"Ignotus still used them." Harry murmured.

"You are more right than you know." Death intoned. "The loss of his brothers was a devastating blow. He stood alone bereft of all power but the Hallows."

"I'll be alone at the end." Harry said. "I'm the one fated to defeat Tom Riddle. It's my blood that will be spilled when he rises again."

"But you are never alone, my Raven." Death said. "You have more power than you know."

"I don't understand." Harry sighed frustrated. "The prophecy talked of power but what is the power Voldemort doesn't know? He has so much more knowledge and experience than me and if he has a body…how do I defeat him?"
"Deep down you know what power you hold that he does not." Death said. "Look to your heart, my Raven and know that I have given you all that you need." He pointed a hand towards the headstone and instinctively Harry turned...

'Where there is love there is life.'

The words glimmered gold and silver for a brief second before fading into their carved home once more.

"I don't understand..." Harry turned back around but there was no-one there...the graveyard was empty...

Harry bolted upright in his bed, breathing heavily, his heart pounding.

The guest room of the Black Parisian apartment formed around him as he cast a wandless *lumos*. Hedwig hooted comfortingly from her perch.

He was safe.

He shivered and reached for the duvet to tuck it back around himself as he settled back against the pillow and extinguished the light.

Had it been real or just a dream, he wondered.

And if it had been real, what did it mean?

Death had told him he had given Harry everything he needed...but how did that add up to the power to defeat Voldemort?

He huffed out a breath. He really wished people would stop talking in riddles and puzzles and just *tell* him.

Tiredness pulled at him and dragged him back to sleep.
Finding Pronglet's Power: 2

14th April 1995

"Moony,

The Dark Lord has granted help to your sire and contacted old associates. He wants your bride and your child as test subjects.

Consider this warning an early wedding present.

Congratulations, Wormtail."

"I see Wormy's 'Save My Own Arse' campaign continues." Sirius tossed the note to Harry and folded his arms.

Remus nodded at him from his seat behind the wide desk in his study at Black Farm. He had offered it to Sirius but been waved back into it with a muttered 'it's yours more than mine' comment. "Gregor's pack members in the countryside have sent word that there's a coven of vampires moving in this direction."

"Voldemort probably contacted the Carrows then." Sirius stated with a scowl. "They escaped abroad and had that kinky relationship with that vampire."

"The Carrows?" asked Harry as he handed the note back to Remus.

"Alecto and Amycus." Remus stated. "Brother and sister. They were a year ahead of us at school. Vile, vile, vile people." He could almost taste his own disgust.

Harry blinked at him as though surprised at the venom but cocked an eyebrow at Sirius, silently asking for more of an explanation.

"They just like hurting people." Sirius said succinctly. "Old Man Carrow wasn't so bad. He used to work for my grandfather as an estate manager out in Croatia but he married his first cousin and their son, the Carrows' father, was always a bit odd."

"What about their mother?" asked Harry.

"Dead at childbirth." Remus said. "There was a rumour that she was actually Archibald's illegitimate half-sister because the one picture the Carrows had seemed to suggest a strong family relationship between their mother and father."

"Yikes," murmured Harry, "talk about in-breeding."

"I know," Sirius said shuddering visibly. "honestly, my own mother and father were first cousins and frankly I think it's a miracle Regulus and I came out relatively sane."

Remus refrained from making a joke because he knew exactly how sensitive Sirius was about the topic. He saw Harry restrain himself too, a bitten lip giving away that he had been going to say something before thinking better of it.

"Anyway," Remus hurried on, "the Carrows are twins…"

"Especially close twins." Sirius commented dryly. "If Mum and Dad were brother and sister then
perhaps it explains why they ended up shagging each other too."

"Ew!" Harry wrinkled his nose.

"They were found in flagrante delicto in one of the potions lab in our fourth year." Remus commented.

"Well, nobody else was going to sleep with them." Sirius pointed out. "Both of them look like the back end of a horse who's just had an accident."

"SIRIUS!" Remus protested as Harry turned slightly green.

"Look, we're getting side-tracked." Sirius said defensively. "The reason they're vile is that they like hurting people." He grimaced. "They caught Wormtail alone once, cursed him and made him pee his pants. The Marauders retaliated and after that they kept away from us and our friends. But, they were the prime suspects in a brutal assault on a first year muggleborn witch at the end of their final year only nothing could be proven."

Remus remembered that incident all too well. He'd been recovering in the infirmary from a full moon when the poor girl had been brought in. She'd been left a mess of broken bones, bruises, cuts and welts. He didn't know if it was a blessing that the Ministry Aurors who had been called, had decided that she was to be obliviated of the trauma.

"The Carrows were nominally in charge of the group of Death Eaters I was sent to infiltrate on the Continent." Sirius continued. "Voldemort effectively gave them control of his fight outside of Britain." He shook his head. "They allied with one of the vampire clans…"

"Although it wasn't known until after the war that they'd entered a marriage with one." Remus broke in.

Sirius flashed him an annoyed look at being interrupted. "They fed the vampires with muggles, muggleborn and enemies of Voldemort, in return the vampires helped them terrorise the local populations and so kept funding and resources, especially new recruits, funnelling to the Death Eaters."

"Sirius's undercover work actually helped close down a lot of the routes out of the Continent which drove the other side bonkers for a time." Remus glanced back at Sirius. "I'm surprised the Carrows weren't part of the group torturing you."

"We don't know that they weren't since I don't remember anything." Sirius said grimly. "Just because the family magic must have ripped to pieces who was with me when I was rescued doesn't mean the Carrows hadn't had their turn and just stepped out."

"Well, that's a lovely thought." Remus sighed heavily and leaned back in the sumptuous leather chair. If it was true then the Carrows would be looking to hurt Sirius along with grabbing Dora and his unborn child.

Harry flung himself into the visitor's chair on the other side of the desk, sprawling with ease over the comfortable seat (Remus refused to have chairs that belittled his guests in any way). "So, we think Voldemort reached out to the Carrows to help Greyback crash the wedding and they're bringing along a bunch of vampires."

"Good summary." Sirius said leaning over and ruffling Harry's hair.

"We need to step up security then." Harry said, fidgeting with the edge of his sweater.
"I've already discussed it with the Bulgarian security team." Remus said. "They're in charge since the wedding will be at the Ministerial Residence and…"

"Since when? Did Bogdan just take over the wedding arrangements?" Sirius complained, with enough irritation that Remus knew he wasn't joking.

"Sorry, Padfoot," Remus said apologetically, "I thought I'd told you. And Bogdan hasn't taken over the arrangements – his wife on the other hand…" his tone turned exasperated because he was sure the wedding would not have spiralled out of control if it hadn't been for Hilde. She was lovely but a force of nature.

Harry chuckled.

Sirius's ire melted away in the face of Harry's amusement. "Sorry, Moony, it's your wedding and you can have it anywhere you wish."

"I wish." Remus winced at how blunt he'd been – Harry's eyes had widened and Sirius had raised both his eyebrows. "It's just...if I had my way we'd have been married weeks ago in a town hall somewhere back in England with just the family in attendance."

Remus rubbed his brow tiredly. His feelings for Dora had truly deepened and he was optimistic that they could make a real go of it. They'd spent a lot of time together and while he'd admired Dora's irrepressible spirit and non-judgemental spirit before, now he was truly fond of Dora for those same qualities. They'd certainly helped her settle in with the pack. There were moments though he found her stubbornness was not the least bit endearing. And the thing she had become most stubborn about was the wedding which had grown into an event Remus still found baffling.

Remus cleared his throat as he realised Harry and Sirius were still looking at him. "I won't deny Dora the wedding she wants but frankly I'll be pleased when it's all over."

Sirius nodded slowly. "James said the same thing and his wedding to Lily was a much smaller affair."

"Hermione's thinking about eloping." Harry said sympathetically.

"Now?" teased Sirius, laughter bubbling under the single word and mischief lighting up his face. "You're a little young, aren't you?"

Harry playfully punched his arm even as he turned red. "You know what I mean!" He rolled his eyes expressively before turning back to Remus. "She said that if getting married meant wasting so much time thinking about materials and dress designs she really didn't want any part of it."

"Hermione was slightly upset at not having time to visit the Louvre." Sirius explained in a side-whisper.

"She'll probably change her mind." Remus said philosophically. "Dora seemed happy with the idea of a small wedding here at the Farm until…" he gestured in lieu of an unnecessary explanation.

"And I'm afraid you definitely don't get to elope, Snitch." Sirius added.

Harry snorted and grinned. "Do you really think you'd be able to stop Hermione if she put her mind to it?"

Sirius opened his mouth and snapped it shut again.
Remus found his own lips twitching into a smile. "I'll put a hundred galleons on her coming up with a water-tight plan, Pads."

Harry took pity on his father. "Don't worry about it, Padfoot. I'm not planning on getting married for years."

"Good to hear," Sirius said, wiping his brow in pretend relief. "I'm too young to be the Father of the Groom just yet."

Merlin, Remus thought half-panicking, he was going to be a Father of the Groom himself one day. His son was going to grow up into a man and get married and have children and Remus would be a grandfather!

"Remus?" Sirius leaned over the desk and clicked his fingers in front of Remus's face.

Remus batted him away. "I'm going to be a father."

Harry and Sirius looked at each other and looked back at him.

"And?" prompted Sirius.

"I'm going to be a father!" Remus stated again louder. "I'm going to be a Father of the Groom some day!"

Sirius started laughing.

"It's not funny!" Remus spluttered.

"It's a little funny." Harry said, amusement evident in his twinkling green eyes. "But if it makes you feel better Sirius will be a Father of the Groom way before you have to worry about it."

Remus huffed out a laugh as Sirius stopped his chuckling abruptly to mock-glare at his son. "Thank you, Pronglet."

Harry waved away the gratitude. "Anyway," he said seriously, "security. Are we set or do we need to put something else in place?"

"The Residence is heavily warded and there'll be an international team of Aurors given we're hosting five different Ministers." Remus shook his head. He still didn't believe who he'd ended up having to invite. "The packs are organising some kind of patrol on the outskirts as it's mostly surrounded by woodland. We've been offered rooms the night before and after."

"We'll keep the Black residences for sleeping." Sirius stated firmly.

Remus nodded. "I've already informed Bogdan that was going to be the likely decision."

"We'll tell everyone who's coming of the possible threat." Sirius concluded. "Everyone needs to be aware." He frowned. "If Dora is a specific target then we'll give her an emergency portkey." He pointed at Harry. "You'll get one too; no argument."

Harry raised his hands in surrender.

"Emergency portkeys all round," Remus agreed. "I'm sure Bogdan will agree." He kept his gaze locked with Sirius. "However, I will fight Greyback if he makes an appearance."

Sirius darted a look at Harry and Remus knew his old friend would have preferred to have discussed
it without Harry in the room. But Sirius had been acknowledging Harry had a role to play in their plan against Voldemort since the turn of the year and Remus figured he would allow Harry to stay.

"It's an Alpha thing, right?" Harry surmised quickly.

"That's right." Remus said. "If I retreat, it's the same as showing my throat to him."

Sirius finally sat down in the second visitor's chair. "I don't claim to understand the pack dynamics, Moony, but as Padfoot I understand some of the instincts, so I won't argue."

"Thank you." Remus said.

"I can't believe they'll crash the wedding." Harry complained.

"The date and the location were in the press." Sirius shrugged. "All Greyback has to do is get his hands on an invitation and he has the exact details."

"Dora swears that all the ones she sent out simply had the holding details on them." Remus said. "The ones which were sent with the party favours and the exact details were all sent via Gringotts."

"It doesn't mean we should assume that they don't have the details." Sirius mused. He quirked his eyebrows at Remus. "We'll let the invitations stand but...change things around a little."

And oh that was Sirius's Marauder grin.

Remus couldn't help but be amused, nostalgic wistfulness filling him to the brim at all the other times he'd seen that particular look on Sirius's face. "Everyone stays clothed."

Sirius clasped his hands to his heart but his eyes were smiling. "You wound me, Mister Moony."

"You mean I know you, Mister Padfoot." Remus tilted his head. "You're thinking of laying an ambush."

"They think they know where we'll be and when..." Sirius grinned widely. "We use that to our advantage."

Harry smirked. "Right. They think we're trapped but instead we trap them."

"It could work." Remus mused out loud. "We would have to change everything around about the wedding day and – oh Merlin Dora is going to kill me."

"I'll handle your bride." Sirius offered with a 'you're such a wimp' look.

"And Andy?" Remus pressed.

Sirius's eyes flickered with a note of worry but he nodded.

"And Hilde?" Remus added.

Finally Sirius flinched but he covered quickly and waved his hands. "It'll be fine." He brightened. "I'll get Narcissa to do it."

Harry started laughing.

Remus pointed at him. "We could assign you to the task instead, Snitch."
"Oh no way!" Harry said, still laughing. "Padfoot has a thing about putting myself into dangerous situations."

Sirius sniffed. "And quite right too."

He and Harry grinned at each other. Remus felt his heart turn over in his chest at the easy loving relationship the two shared. It had been more than he had dared hoped for that first night when Harry had broken down sobbing just at the thought he was wanted.

"Speaking of being a responsible parent," Sirius said with a touch more seriousness, "you should head up to bed, Pronglet. You've got an early start tomorrow to see the Quidditch stadium."

Harry stuck his tongue out but gave way, getting out of the chair. He glomped Sirius with an in-chair hug before he grinned at Remus and waved a goodnight.

Remus waited until the door was closed. "The pack loved him." He commented with a shake of his head because he'd been worried and it had all been for nothing. The pack had taken to Harry like a wolf to the full moon. His easy acceptance of them, the way he cared…it made him easy to like.

"He's very lovable." Sirius confirmed with a paternal smile.

"He looks well." Harry was tanned, fit and bubbling with energy. It was a good look on the teenager.

"We've had a few days just being regular tourists and holidaying." Sirius explained. "No tournament, no strategizing or tactics, nothing about school even...just fun. It's done him the world of good."

"And you." Remus commented, taking note that Sirius also looked well rested and relaxed.

Sirius nodded. "I won't argue with you there."

Guilt filled Remus again. His poor choices had left Sirius alone to deal with everything. Sirius had spent the second task by himself, he'd had to deal with the Lumiere situation without Remus, and the whole Death's Champion notion...Remus still had to get his head around that.

"I should be with you and Harry." Remus murmured remorsefully.

Sirius rolled his grey eyes. "You should be with your soon-to-be-wife and your unborn child." He contradicted Remus gruffly. "Let's not do this again."

"When we met for that first time back in Black Manor after I left Hogwarts, I said I wouldn't walk away again." Remus argued. "This feels like walking away."

"Look," Sirius leaned forward, his eyes intent on Remus, "you have other obligations now than our original plan to make sure Harry grows up and has the opportunity to elope with Hermione and have a lot of grandchildren none of whom will be called Quaffle."

He raised a hand when Remus opened his mouth to argue.

"Here's the thing, Moony: the original plan? That was you and me, and Harry to a very small degree, and yes, we were holding the government accountable and forcing them to do their jobs, but it was us on our own." He held Remus's gaze. "But we're not alone. We have allies and friends and family now. And it's not just our plan anymore it's Harry's own plan. And you haven't walked away, you're still here for us. We both know it."
Remus nodded his head slowly, acknowledging Sirius's point. It didn't stop the guilt from curdling in his gut though.

"I wish you didn't have to fight Greyback." Sirius said abruptly changing the subject.

"It was always going to happen, Padfoot." Remus replied. He lifted a hand. "Pack politics aside, he and I were destined to fight as soon as he signed back on with Voldemort." It was his turn to hold Sirius's gaze. "I won't let him harm Harry."

Sirius gave a huff and settled back. "It sounds like Dora and your kid have become a target too."

"I'm beginning to realise how Prongs felt." Remus admitted, and paused as something occurred to him for the first time. "How you feel."

Sirius waved away Remus's observation.

"You're a good father, Padfoot." Remus said without a hint of teasing. "Harry's come into his own with you as his parent. I hope I do half as well with my child."

"You'll be brilliant." Sirius said, but Remus could see from the glint in his eye that Sirius had been touched by the praise.

Remus decided to be kind and changed the topic. "Have I told you lately that I'm glad I have an assistant now?" He picked up a piece of parchment. "Wenlock wasn't a bad estate manager. Five properties; two in Switzerland, two in England, and one in Spain. The first property in Switzerland was gifted to Lady Wenlock as per your agreement. The second property is a farm which is turning a good profit." He cleared his throat. "The English properties have been assessed; the house in London is in good repair as it was the primary domicile when they were in England. The cottage down in Dorset is frankly in need of refurbishment but it does bring in good revenue from rental to muggle tourists. The Spanish property is out in the wilds and in ruins by all accounts."

"We're holding the vaults under the Wenlock name, correct?" Sirius asked idly.

"We are." Remus sighed. "You could by rights take the money and properties for the House of Potter."

Sirius shrugged. "Wenlock's kids don't need to lose their inheritance because he's an arrogant tosser."

"What are you going to have Christopher do in service?" Remus asked.

"I've sent him a letter saying I'll talk with him after his graduation. I want to see what he wants to do and then whether we have an opportunity for him to do that within service." Sirius sighed. "I also need to talk with his brother and sister. They and their mother are all under our House protection now."

And Sirius took that seriously, Remus knew that.

"Harry's already sent them a couple of letters." Sirius added, surprising Remus into looking at him.

"He has?"

"Said if they were going to be members of his House he wanted to get to know them so he wrote to them suggesting they all set aside Lord Wenlock's behaviour and move forward from this point." Sirius shrugged. "He and Christopher have had a couple of lunches together too."
"And they've responded positively?" checked Remus, taken aback more than he wanted to show to Sirius.

"Alex wrote back quite formally, but according to Viktor, the news from Durmstrang is that the letter helped the boy enormously; it's given him some protection after his father's shocking demise." Sirius recounted. "Anne, on the other hand, is delighted to have the Boy Who Lived sending her mail and I'm fairly certain has now chastised Christopher for not offering her in marriage when the surrender became known."

Remus started chuckling. "Poor Harry."

"She's young. Christopher's a good kid." Sirius said. "Good head on his shoulders which is why I'd like to offer him a service in line with his aspirations if we can."

"Are you regretting the lifetime of service requirement you made of him?" asked Remus. Lifetime services were rare as they kept someone tied to their oath all of their lives.

"Yes, in that I don't think I truly needed to have insisted on it to keep him from considering coming after Harry for revenge," Sirius said after a moment's thought, "and no, since the only way to be sure of his loyalty right now is the lifetime of service."

"And you don't think Alex and Anne would take revenge if their brother doesn't?" Remus asked.

"Christopher is the one who lost the most." Sirius said. "He's the one who should have inherited on his father's death. But now he's lost access to the magic, to the money, to his properties, to his inheritance and legacy. The others lost out on access to those same things but they weren't due to inherit anything but an appropriate bequest. Their loss isn't the same." He shifted in the seat. "Having spoken with him, I know he blames his father for the situation, but…his mother definitely blames Harry and me."

And suddenly Remus got it. "The service protects him from complying with his mother's demands." He said out loud. "He can legitimately refuse any plans for revenge she comes up with because of the risk to his magic."

"Exactly." Sirius said. "Harry and I are agreed. We'll discuss it with Christopher but we're going to put the bulk of the Wenlock estate into trust, which we'll manage on his behalf or he can manage himself, for his children to be given as payment on completion of his service."

Or in other words, death.

But it was an elegant solution. Ultimately the Wenlock family kept their inheritance despite Simon Wenlock's best efforts to cock things up for his children. Harry and Sirius were good men, Remus considered proudly; most others would simply have added the wealth to their own and ignored the injustice to Wenlock's children.

"I'll talk to Brian about getting that set-up." Remus said, making a note. "What about Bill? He's almost completed his service now."

Sirius nodded. " Came to see me the other day to talk about that." He smiled. "He wants to get his family seat back."

Remus's eyebrows rose. "That's going to take some doing."

"He's half-way there." Sirius argued. "Arthur's in a good position but he could never win a family seat because of his past history."
Which Remus thought was a shame since if there was one thing Arthur was it was an honourable man.

"Bill's made a good impression on the alliance Heads and Heirs." Sirius noted. "He just needs to start building relationships and alliances for the Weasleys. We can help as part of our alliance of friendship."

"He's also going to need money if he's going to be considered seriously." Remus pointed out.

"He knows that." Sirius said. "He feels duty bound to go back and finish up his contract with Gringotts and I don't think that's a bad move. He'll make a good salary as a cursebreaker and, once he's in a senior position, he'll get a proportion of the gold." He shrugged. "If he makes a good marriage, makes the right connections, continues to be himself, I think he has a good chance of winning a vote if the Weasleys get nominated in the future."

Clearly Sirius would help him, and Remus couldn't imagine a Wizengamot which included Sirius and Harry where the Weasleys wouldn't win a vote.

"As far as the other services are concerned," Sirius continued, "both of them have years before they graduate yet."

"I'm assuming you want Alex Wenlock in service for the same reason as Christopher?" Remus leaned back again, regarding Sirius with a frown.

"And you're wondering why a year not life like Christopher?" Sirius pointed a finger at him. "I don't want it to look like we entrapped the entire family. Alex can spend a year in service training for whatever he wants. He leaves us happy and knowing his brother is still in service and somewhat at our mercy should hopefully curtail any revenge notions."

It wasn't a bad strategy.

"Which leaves Theodore Nott." Remus murmured.

"Theo's a politician through and through. He reminds me of my grandfather." Sirius commented wryly. "I figure we'll make him the Ministry liaison for his service year." He shrugged. "We have a few years yet to think about it."

"Speaking of your grandfather," Remus's mouth went dry as he remembered what he'd needed to talk to Sirius about for weeks but hadn't quite gotten the courage to do it, "there's a portrait."

Sirius stared at him. "What?"

"It was buried in the back of the main vault." Remus said quietly. "It was noted as part of the inventory only as a family portrait. Penny did a complete listing for me and…well, it's there. He's asleep."

Sirius shook himself in a Padfoot-like fashion. "He can stay there then."

"Padfoot…"

"Don't." Sirius ordered brusquely. He yawned suddenly, spoiling the effect of a stern Lord, and pulling a reluctant smile from Remus.

"Maybe Harry's not the only one needing an early night." Remus commented.
Sirius shot him a look but deflated a second later when another yawn caught him off-guard. "Time
differences are a pain the arse." He said defensively. He got to his feet though. "I'll see you in the
morning."

"See you in the morning." Remus said quietly.

He waited until Sirius had left before he turned his attention back to his over-flowing desk. He
shoved most of the parchment to the side and drew a blank sheet towards him. He'd always been the
planner of the Marauders and he had a wedding ambush to set.

He smiled wickedly.

Greyback wasn't going to know what hit him.

o-O-o

15 th April 1995

"This is incredible!" Harry slipped his hand back into Hermione's and grinned at Viktor. "You play
here a lot?"

The wide expanse of grass, the cushioning spells making it slightly bouncy under their feet, spread
out in every direction. They paused by the first set of hoops. They were higher than the ones at
Hogwarts – professionals played at a greater height than the school leagues.

"International team, yes." Viktor said. "Durmstrang has own pitch and team stadium is in North."

"How do you combine school and your commitments to the team sport?" Hermione asked, her eyes
alight with curiosity.

Viktor ran a hand through his dark hair. "It not so difficult. School agrees to release for practice. I
practice at school. Games are at veekend."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He looked back over to where Sirius and Simeon were talking with the
Bulgarian Head Coach, Remus acting as translator. The Delacours stood beside them on one side,
and Leonard Abbott with Stephen Warren on the other. Satisfied that the adults were all relaxed,
Harry turned back and smiled.

Viktor's eyes were pinned to Natalie Warren. She stood by the next hoop with Cedric and Fleur,
hands gesturing enthusiastically as the two girls laughed at something and Cedric ducked his head.

"Maybe we should go rescue Cedric." Harry suggested wryly.

Hermione gave a light chuckle as Viktor immediately started over towards them. She leaned into
Harry's space. "He's so head over heels about her."

And Viktor was. Head over heels and wrapped around her little finger. Thankfully Natalie seemed
completely smitten too.

They followed Viktor across the grass and Harry took a moment to breathe in the scent; there was a
faint hint of rain.

The tour of the stadium was something that he'd really been looking forward to and he was pleased
that Viktor had opened it up to the other Champions and their guests. Harry had immediately asked
his best friends. Augusta had apologised but it was Neville's Uncle Algie's birthday and they had a
party they needed to attend in England. Hermione's parents had agreed as they were already going to be in Bulgaria for the wedding, but Molly had refused to let Ron attend despite Sirius's offer to have Bill present. She had claimed she wanted her younger children home for the Easter break since Arthur and Bill would be abroad to attend the wedding. In truth, Harry knew it was partially financial; even with Arthur's promotion, money was tight in the Weasley household and they had eschewed Sirius offering to cover the travel for all of the Weasley family to come to Bulgaria.

"It's a shame Molly wouldn't let Ron come." Hermione commented as though she'd read Harry's mind.

"I think his only solace is that Draco isn't here either." Harry agreed. He had invited Draco but Narcissa had scheduled final fittings for the Malfoys' wedding outfits in Paris so he had also missed out. Harry's face brightened. "At least Ron can celebrate Gryffindor winning the Quidditch Cup."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't you mean continue celebrating? Honestly, I didn't think the team were ever going to go to bed."

"They did good." Harry said firmly, trying to be upbeat.

Angelina had been a great Captain; Ron and the twins made an unbeatable defence once Ron had settled in, with the Chaser girls in good form, and Ginny performing well as Seeker, the team had had a good season without him.

"You'll get back on the team next year." Hermione said briskly, soothing his unspoken worry that perhaps he had lost his place. "Ginny really wants to be a Chaser."

"Maybe." Harry hoped so but truthfully the next academic year seemed so far in the future that he couldn't envisage it especially when he knew he still had to survive the third task and Voldemort's ritual plans for him.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Cedric as they approached. There was a hint of desperation in his voice which told Harry that Fleur and Natalie had been talking about something girly again.

"Quidditch." Harry grinned at him. "Gryffindor's win, specifically."

Cedric's relief brightened his face despite the gloating smugness that Harry was letting paint his. "Laugh it up now, Potter." He teased. "We'll see who wins next year when I'm back on the team."

"Kennington wasn't half as good as you," Harry acknowledged, "and Ginny had her beat hands down." In fact the only Seeker Ginny had struggled with was Draco, and even then she had almost gotten to the Snitch.

Hermione huffed out a breath. "Honestly."

"We're in a Quidditch stadium," Harry pointed out with a wide smile, "you can't expect us to talk about anything else."

"I guess not." Hermione acknowledged, squeezing his hand a touch to let him know she didn't mind.

"This is great." Cedric said. "It really gives you a feel for how much bigger everything is at the professional level. I'm glad Lord Abbott was able to bring me."

"How's your Dad doing?" asked Harry, genuinely interested. He didn't particularly like Cedric's Dad after all the nastiness in the press (even if he understood some of it had been at Wenlock's instigation and acerbated by the suggestion potions) but he wouldn't have wished for what had happened to the
"Better but he's not up to travelling." Cedric said. "They're giving him a medical retirement." He sighed. "It's hit him hard."

Harry winced but stayed quiet unsure what to say.

"Hannah and Susan didn't come?" asked Hermione delicately.

Cedric shook his head. "They didn't get permission from the parents." He said chagrined. "I wanted to use the trip to make it up to Sue as well but..." he sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets. "I guess I should let it lie really. Sue's barely spoken to me since the second task."

"I think she does like you." Hermione offered.

"Susan?" checked Natalie, dragging Viktor and Fleur over to talk with them. "She's crazy about you, Diggory."

"I'm not sure." Cedric demurred.

"So, ask her out and find out for certain." Natalie said briskly.

"She ees right." Fleur argued passionately. "You must fight for 'er if you love 'er. I weel never give up on my Beel."

Cedric held his hands up in mock surrender. "Just...can we go back to talking about Quidditch?" He turned to Viktor. "This is a great pitch."

Viktor nodded. "It is vell maintained by the grounds-elf."

"An elf?" asked Hermione tersely.

Harry jumped in before a debate could start up. He shuddered dramatically. "I can't believe they're going to build a maze on the one at Hogwarts."

Viktor grimaced. "It is a disgrace."

Cedric nodded. "Where are we supposed to practice?"

"Exactly." Harry pointed at him.

"It could be worse," Hermione said, "they might have decided to use the Forbidden Forest for the third task. A maze isn't so bad."

"The Forbidden..." Cedric stared at her. "You have to be kidding me!"

"Non," Fleur said, flicking her long hair back, "Ermione ees correct. Ze Forest was used once."

"It's not the maze part that worries me," Cedric admitted, "it's what going into the maze. I mean, we had dragons for the first task and there was that lake monster in the second which was supposed to be the obstacle for a single Champion making a run for it on their own!"

Harry nodded.

Fleur sighed. "Eet is a worry."
Viktor shrugged. "Training is most important."

Harry kept quiet. While he knew Voldemort had futzed with the tasks, the other three had all volunteered for the tournament, and a tiny unsympathetic part of him believed they had only themselves to blame for the consequences. Of course, Voldemort was making the tasks more difficult and Harry did feel some guilt about that.

Natalie wrapped one arm around one of Viktor's. "I just hope you all come out of it in one piece."

"We will." Harry said confidently.

"You might." Cedric said dryly. "Some of us just don't have your luck."

Harry stiffened. He didn't see what was so lucky about getting entered into the tournament and being pursued by a sociopathic Dark Lord. Hermione squeezed his hand gently and he turned to smile at her, grateful for the support.

"Ve need to make our own luck." Viktor said firmly. "Practice, practice, practice. Just like on Quidditch pitch."

They all nodded.

Viktor gestured back up the pitch. "Ve should return vor the votos."

Harry pulled a face but it was good publicity and while he'd never enjoy doing it, he understood the value of it, understood he needed it to keep public opinion on his side to help progress his political agenda.

They started walking. Viktor, Fleur and Natalie led the way, and Cedric joined Hermione and Harry at the rear.

"They're talking about wedding outfits again." Cedric said in a stage whisper.

Harry's lips twitched as Hermione's eyes widened in alarm. He gave her a nudge and grinned. "How long did you have to spend getting your dress?"

"Two whole days." Hermione complained huffily. "First the material wasn't right, then the colour, then there was a big deal about the shoes not being right so they were going to change the whole outfit until I told them we'd just change the shoes!"

Cedric started laughing. "You didn't enjoy it then? I thought most girls liked the whole dressing up thing."

Hermione sniffed. "I don't mind dressing up nicely, I just don't see why it took two days to pull together an outfit. There was nothing wrong with the first dress but Andy didn't like it and Tonks didn't like the second and...I would have been happy with either."

Harry knew she was mostly annoyed that it had cut down on the amount of time she'd had to go sight-seeing.

Cedric shook himself. "I take it you're in dress robes, Harry?"

"Sirius sorted it all out with Remus." Harry confirmed, thankful his father had stepped in when Andy had tried to argue about the choice of outfit being unsuitable and trying to change it. "We've been set for a while."
"I meant to thank you for the invite. Dad said it was up to me whether I should attend or not, but I know he's not comfortable with the idea of me being around so many werewolves." Cedric explained. "His younger brother was killed by one and I think if I attended the wedding he'd be so stressed worrying about me, it would put his recovery back."

"I can understand that." Harry said. "The pack we have at the sanctuary is pretty great but with your Dad's history I can appreciate he wouldn't want you spending time with them."

"Viktor mentioned there were rumours of a vampire clan on the move too?" Cedric said. "Although you should be fine if you're with a pack. Usually vampires stay away from werewolves."

"Why?" asked Hermione, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"There's an ancient tale that werewolves can rip a vampire apart." Cedric explained. "But that's never been substantiated."

"Really? All the books I've read suggested the avoidance was mostly territorial as they're pretty equally matched in strength." Harry interjected.

"I've read the same." Hermione said briskly.

"But there's so much misinformation about dark creatures around, how do we know for certain?" Cedric argued cheerfully. "One old book I read claimed vampires had sparkly skin and that's why they avoided daylight, and everybody knows that's just wrong."

"Really?" Hermione shook head in disbelief. "Sparkly vampires? Are you sure the book wasn't fiction?"

They were all laughing as they caught up with the others and headed in for the press conference.

o-O-o

Neville tugged on Blaise's arm and they slowly stepped back until they were clear of the drawing room. Neville winced as he caught his Gran's eagle eye but she gave him a nod and there was a clear shooing motion communicated with a wave of a hand that went unnoticed by the bevy of old family members around her.

He sighed with relief as he led Blaise through the less formal areas of Longbottom Manor and out to the garden. They took refuge in Neville's favourite greenhouse filled with bright leafy green plants and colourful flowers blooming in pots on every surface. Blaise wrinkled his nose at the thin layer of dirt on the edges of the benches and the floor but Neville ignored him and nudged him through to a small orangey at the back.

It had an ever-warm spell and with a sitting area of a couple of wicker chairs and matching table, it was one of Neville's hiding places.

"Sorry you got dragged into Uncle Algie's party." Neville said as he slid into one of the wicker chairs.

Blaise gave a shrug, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Serves me right for landing myself on you with no warning."

More accurately it was Nora Zabini's fault, Neville thought with a touch of righteous anger for the way she treated Blaise. She'd stopped by the manor that morning with Blaise, had been appropriately flustered and apologetic, and had requested Augusta look after Blaise until they met up at the
wedding in Bulgaria due to Nora suddenly needing to be abroad to deal with some business.

Blaise had confessed in the wake of Nora's departure that his mother had received word from a friend of a friend that the wedding dress had been commissioned in Paris and suddenly nothing else would do for Nora's own outfit for the day.

Neville thought Blaise's mother was a selfish, self-absorbed narcissist but it would be impolite to say so to Blaise himself. But despite the reason for Blaise being there, Neville was pleased to host his friend, not least because it got him out of the party for his Great-Uncle.

"Thanks for playing distraction." Neville said and smiled at the elf who popped in with cake and juice for them.

"I think they've preferred Potter." Blaise said dryly.

Neville shrugged. It was a disappointment to the older set that Harry had been unable to attend. "If Harry was here we'd have ended up with him duelling my Great-Aunt Bessie."

She had been very scathing about Tonks and the upcoming wedding.

"You have to admit politically they're walking a fine line accepting her marriage to a werewolf, even if he is the steward, and there's the baby." Blaise pointed out. "They've been extraordinarily lucky with the press making this whole thing out to be a society event rather than a scandal. They have to have something on Skeeter."

Neville made a non-committal noise and offered Blaise some cake.

"I'm not a Gryff. I'm not easily distracted with food." Blaise said as he accepted the slice with a grin.

"Just with intrigue." Neville joked back. He dug into his own slice of the raspberry ripple and fudge creation with enthusiasm. He might not agree with his uncle on everything but the man had taste in cakes.

"So I'm going with they do have something on Skeeter." Blaise concluded as he scooped up a sugar encrusted raspberry.

"Maybe you're right. I don't know for sure." Neville licked his fork and was immediately guiltily, his inner Gran remonstrating with him about table manners. "I think everyone in the alliance is very aware that we're damned lucky that they had the means to spin this the way we needed it to be spun."

"Agreed." Blaise said. "Lupin did send along a nice apology with the details of the invitation and the favour. Mother loved the brooch."

"I assume you got a tie-pin with your name engraved?" Neville asked, curious if the gifts had been the same. His Gran had been over the moon about the small bear brooch Remus had sent them.

Blaise nodded. "Charmed too?"

Neville nodded. "It'll deflect one level three hex."

"Very nice favours." Blaise shook his head. "It must have cleared out their vaults unless the House of Black gave them the cash." He lifted an inquiring eyebrow.

"Don't be crass." Neville admonished. But his Gran had commented the same, although she had also
noted that Remus had received a good inheritance from the Potters.

"I did think that the warning about the expected imminent attack by Greyback and some vamps might put my mother off attending but…no." Blaise sighed.

"Must be a difficult position for a Slyth." Neville commented, amused. "Self-preservation tells you to stay away but the fact that it is going to be a major society event of the year that you have to be seen at..." he let his sentence trail away gleefully.

Blaise waved his fork at him but his eyes were twinkling. "Laugh it up. At least we have some self-preservation skills unlike you Gryffs."

"Hey," Neville said cheerfully, "I resemble that remark!"

They both laughed.

"I'm sure we'll be well protected." Neville returned to the subject as they settled back to finishing their cake. "Harry and Sirius won't let anything happen to anyone."

Blaise nodded. "It wouldn't surprise me if we got there and found things aren't quite as planned as we've been told."

Neville nodded in agreement. Harry had sent word to the Heirs that with the known threat he wanted everyone on the guard at the wedding. "I won't argue with you."

"So I can't tempt you to place a galleon on it?" teased Blaise, pushing his plate away.

"Not this time." Neville said. "Are you taking bets on the baby?"

"Boy or girl and the birthday." Blaise replied instantly. "You interested?"

They negotiated available dates and Neville placed his galleon satisfied his inside knowledge that Tonks had already been pregnant before the couple had left for the sanctuary made his date the more likely to happen.

Blaise regarded Neville thoughtfully. "I'm surprised Hannah wasn't invited to keep you company and meet the extended family."

Neville grimaced. "She was invited but Sue's been a bit of a mess since the whole second task and fallout over Cedric and Cho so..."

"So she's doing the girly thing with Bones." Blaise gave a sympathetic grimace of his own. "Tough luck."

Neville had been slightly irked by Hannah's insistence that Susan came first, despite the fact that Hannah had accepted the invitation when it had first been raised. In fact they'd had their first real argument about it. They hadn't broken up – or at least Neville didn't think they had – but they had yelled at each other a bit. Neville had argued that she'd made a commitment to attend and she was letting him down; she'd argued that her friendship with Susan and helping her through her troubles took priority over a 'poxy party for a relative you don't even like.'

Blaise clucked his tongue suddenly. "I'm guessing from the look on your face things aren't so sunny in Neville and Hannah-land anymore?"

Neville shot him a quick 'back-off' look and Blaise raised his hands.
"Just…if you want to talk about it…” Blaise shrugged again as though it wasn't important to him. But Neville appreciated the thought and the offer.

He shifted position a touch as he tried to consider how to phrase things. He eventually sighed. "We had a row."

"Ah." Blaise said.

"It's, well, stupid really but ever since the second task it feels like every date Hannah and I have is interrupted or cut short or cancelled because of Sue and what's going on with her. I didn't mind at the beginning because it was really bad with the letters and Cho glaring at her all the time but it's been months since the second task and she shouldn't need her hand holding every minute of the day anymore." Neville complained bluntly, feeling a little better having gotten it off his chest. Hermione had listened to him complain a little before the end of term but he hadn't wanted to fully unload on her, too aware that she had formed a close friendship with Sue over the second task.

"And you told Hannah that reneging on the party was the last straw.” Blaise surmised.

"To which I got a lecture that I wasn't a girl and didn't understand how utterly humiliating being chosen had been for Sue and as I wasn't a Hufflepuff obviously I don't understand the concept of loyalty and friendship which is complete bollocks.” Neville said heatedly.

Blaise grinned at him and Neville chuckled ruefully as he considered how stupid the argument had been.

"Sounds like you have a point." Blaise said, sitting back in his chair and picking up his juice. "I don't have a regular girlfriend but it'd annoy me if she kept breaking all our dates to keep checking on her best friend."

"Thank you!" said Neville grateful that Blaise agreed with him. He sighed and rubbed his nose. "I guess Hannah had a point too. I mean, I don't know how it works with girls and maybe my thinking Sue should just get over it is a tad insensitive."

Blaise gave a half-shrug. "Well, I find women just as bizarre as you do because I think you're right and she should get over it already. Sure, the letter thing was nasty but it's not like anyone thinks Sue intentionally stole Cedric away from Cho except Cho and her cronies."

Neville's gaze sharpened on him speculatively. "But?"

"But," Blaise said raising his glass, "if living with my mother has taught me one thing, it has taught me that in any argument the man is always in the wrong even when he's in the right."

"You're not wrong." Neville murmured. He had never seen his Gran admit to being wrong ever after an argument. Even when she was. Very, very wrong. "I guess it's an apology and some flowers."

"I don't know, Nev," Blaise said, a lot more tentatively than Neville had ever heard him sound, "if you concede the argument this time, Abbott's the type that'll walk all over you."

Neville bristled defensively. Hannah wasn't that bad!

Blaise sighed at Neville's glare. "I'm not saying she's not great because I actually think Hannah's cool. All I'm saying is that your point isn't invalid and you shouldn't apologise for it. The argument itself and saying Sue should get over herself, yes. The point you made about Sue encroaching on all your time together, no."
It was the kind of careful distinction that Slytherins were very good at defining and Neville nodded slowly. Because he could see that if he did back down from his main gripe, it would set a precedent.

"You're right." He said with a sigh. He considered his predicament as he sipped his drink and sighed again more heavily. If Hannah really didn't think there was anything wrong with her behaviour then they had a problem. "It was so much easier when we were practicing."

Blaise laughed but his eyes sharpened on Neville speculatively. "You're thinking you might have to break up with her to hold your ground?"

"Maybe."

Neville conceded, partly admiring Blaise for reading him so well, and partly hating that he was so obvious.

"You'd be alright with that?" asked Blaise carefully.

Neville pursed his lips thoughtfully. He knew if he had been in the same position the year before, he would have just apologised for the whole thing and been incredibly unhappy as Hannah walked all over him. But he wasn't that same timid boy any longer. He said as much to Blaise. "If she can't see she's wrong then she's not right for me any way."

"Good on you." Blaise said approvingly. "And honestly I'm glad you're not the same as you were."

He glanced around the Orangey. "For a start I'd probably be stuck alone at home rather than here."

Neville smiled. "We wouldn't be friends."

"No," Blaise agreed, grinning. "Potter has a lot to answer for." His grin faded away. "He still doesn't get how much power he has, does he?"

"I don't think he ever will." Neville said simply, shrugging. "Harry just doesn't think in those terms. He doesn't want power so he doesn't notice that he has it." He paused. "I think he is starting to realise how much of a leader he is though, at least, for us the alliance."

Blaise nodded slowly. "He's a genuinely good guy." He murmured as though he couldn't believe it. "It makes you wonder what he'd be like if Sirius had actually raised him."

"Hell on a broom." Neville said immediately with a smirk.

Blaise laughed again. "He's that anyway."

Neville sobered, thinking about Harry, about the prophecy. He wouldn't want to be in his godbrother's shoes but he was determined to be at his side. "He needs us."

"He has us." Blaise stated simply. He raised his glass.

Neville picked up his own and they solemnly clinked glasses as though they'd made a vow.

Severus ignored the bawdy wink Rosmerta ended their exchange with and instead headed over to the table of The Three Broomsticks for his latest assignation with Bartemius Crouch Junior. He wasn't surprised to find the shapely form of Crouch's red-haired feminine alias waiting for him.

"Severus!" He purred. "Wonderful to see you again." He reached for him as though to kiss him and Severus stepped around him swiftly, placing the table between them.

He refused to remove his cloak or his gloves. He was only there for one reason; to receive whatever
orders the Dark Lord had sent via Crouch. He scanned the room swiftly but apart from a couple of wide-eyed Hogwarts students, the rest of the pub's clientele were politely ignoring them.

"You couldn't have found somewhere more discreet?" asked Severus, careful to keep his tone low as he cast a privacy bubble around them. "It is a Hogsmeade weekend for students who remained during the break."

"My dear Severus," Crouch said in a silky tone that turned Severus's stomach, "anyone would think you didn't want to spend time with me." He pouted before smiling at him winsomely. "Do not fret." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of parchment. "We are not staying here." He picked up a scarf and after securing it around his neck in a feminine style, he picked up thin leather gloves and headed outside.

Severus followed at a sedate pace, inwardly worried at the change of venue.

"Read the parchment." Crouch advised as he halted on the corner of the street and searched for something in his purse.

"You'll forgive me if I don't jump to follow you." Severus said quietly. "The last time we met, you left me alone with some unwanted company."

Crouch just grinned at the reminder that he had tried to kill Severus with the Dementors. "I seem to recall Father made me write you an apology and you survived, didn't you?"

Severus simply stared him down.

"Oh, pish-tosh, Severus!" Crouch said, slapping his gloves lightly against Severus's chest. "Let's put that in the past. This is Father's invitation. He'd be very upset if you did not accept."

Well, that changed the hue of it, Severus thought grimly. He opened up the parchment.

"Lord Voldemort, Heir of Slytherin, invites you to Riddle Manor."

Severus kept his surprise off his face. Informed of the secret, he was suddenly aware of the location again. The Aurors were monitoring but with the Fidelius in place they could no longer find it despite knowing the general area.

His heart began to beat rapidly. There had been an alarm noted a few weeks before. Had the Dark Lord decided to use it as a base? Would he be there waiting for Severus? Just the thought was enough for him to strengthen his Occlumency shields in preparation.

"Ready?" asked Crouch slyly, sliding an arm around Severus's waist. "I'd hang on, lover. I'd hate to splinch you."

Severus sniffed, took a firm hold of Crouch and in the next instant felt the pull of apparition.

They landed on a careworn country lane; hedges taller than Severus himself, the grass along the roadside tall and overflowing with wild flower. He swallowed the urge to investigate and gather; there were a number of specimens that he could see would be perfect potion ingredients. The road was narrow and Severus believed only one muggle vehicle would be able to traverse it at a time. The other side of the road was dense woodland, stretching back as far as the eye could see.

"If you look ahead…" Crouch advised sounding far too amused for Severus's liking.

Severus raised his eyes and focused on the hedge in front of him. It immediately parted revealing
ornate iron gates. Crouch tapped them with his wand and they opened immediately.

"Shall we?" Crouch asked before stepping through and beginning the walk to the manor house that was some distance away from the road.

The driveway was a pitted mess; the old tarmac had been worn away in places, holes appearing here and there. It made for treacherous walking. The surrounding landscape wasn't in much better condition; overgrown lawns and flowerbeds that barely boasted any flowers. The house at a distance itself looked in better repair; the roof was in good condition, the red brick work covered in green ivy. It was only as they neared it that Severus could see the occasional crack in the walls, the crumbly nature of the mortar.

Crouch avoided the front door, leading him instead around the side to a merchants' entrance. Severus ignored Crouch's intended insult and followed him through the door and into a narrow passageway which opened out into a cellar. Crouch ignored the dusty cellar with its shelves crammed with all kinds of items and products that would have made a historian drool, and went to a door on the far side.

Severus continued following him without saying a word and stepped into a world class potions laboratory.

It halted his step abruptly.

There was a second door on the right hand wall but otherwise both the right and left walls were covered ceiling to floor by cabinets filled with hundreds if not thousands of potion ingredients. The far wall had a fumigator on the ceiling to dispel dangerous fumes; the lower third had a storage cupboard filled with different cauldrons, stirrers, pipettes, and all the other necessary potions equipment a Master of the subject required. The middle of the wall were a series of shelves with almost every potions book known to the wizarding world, some rare and highly sought after. Two long benches filled the centre of the room; wooden work surfaces scrubbed clean and sanded to glossy perfection. Occasional stools were the only other furniture.

*The Dark Lord's own potions lab.*

Nothing had changed since he'd seen it before back in the first war, although he had entered a different way that time. It was truly the best lab he had ever worked in and despite his determination to kill the Dark Lord, there was a small bubble of glee deep inside of him that he was going to be working in the lab again.

"I trust you find this satisfactory?"

Crouch's question drew Severus's attention back to the wizard; he was resting back against the wall behind Severus, the glamour had been dismissed without a word and the crazy Death Eater returned to his normal appearance; dark hair, a handsome if cold visage with a cruel smile, and a lean athletic body. He wore fashionable wizarding robes, open to reveal a brown tailored suit in expensive material.

"It has always been more than satisfactory." Severus allowed, snidely letting Crouch know of his previous history with the lab and was pleased to see Crouch stiffen in response. "I assume our Lord has need of my skills?"

Crouch drew out a letter from the inside of his robes and made to hand it to Severus.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Leave it on the bench."
Crouch stuck out his tongue but followed the instruction. He retreated back to the wall.

Severus discreetly unholstered his wand out of sight of Crouch and cast a few diagnostic spells, reassuring himself that there was no poison or compulsion charms attached to the missive. It was sealed shut with wax, the indent of the Slytherin crest of arms in the wax. He still opened it with gloved hands and drew out the single sheet of parchment.

"My dear Severus,

Your continued service in the past months has been most appreciated and will, of course, be rewarded in time.

I have two tasks for you.

Firstly, I require a Restoration Potion. It is a vital part of the ritual that will restore me to my former glory and allow us to resume our war against those who threaten our agenda and values. I trust no other to make this potion. You will find the instructions and ingredients within the far left cabinet which has been keyed to your Dark Mark. You will also find a portkey that will allow you and only you direct access into the lab so you may always have access at the correct times.

Secondly, I have been displeased to hear how closely Dumbledore monitors the creation of the antidote to wake the elf and the Summers woman. I appreciate though that efforts to stall would raise questions and place your position as my loyal spy at risk. Therefore, continue with the antidote but ensure the Summers woman cannot speak when she awakens.

I look forward to seeing the results of your tasks, Severus. I will not wish you luck as I know you have no need of it."

Severus breathed in sharply. He refolded the letter and placed it within the envelope. "Your presence is not required for the tasks the Dark Lord has given to me."

Crouch grinned, more than a hint of crazy in his smirking face. "I wouldn't want you to wander off. I believe the rest of the manor is being guarded by the Dementors who escaped the Acromantulas you fed them to."

Severus didn't bother to correct Crouch. It was better for him if Crouch believed he'd engineered his own escape from the beasts. "Then stay out of my way."

He moved over to the cabinet. He pushed the sleeve of his left arm up to reveal the mark and the cabinet clicked open. He studied the contents for a long moment, recognising that the space had been expanded substantially.

There was a standard cauldron filled with bones seeping in liquid – bones of the father, Severus realised; the base of the potion if he remembered the details from Croaker correctly. It would provide the skeleton upon which the rest of the restoration would build. The potion required the flesh and blood added fresh at the last upon the solstice as those elements needed to be living. There were other ingredients though…

He picked up three jars; the first contained black hair, the second a green eye, the third a coiled human skin. All elements to build the Dark Lord's appearance anew, Severus mused, if they were mishandled in any way the homunculus would have an inhuman appearance.

A large snake basket sat in one corner and Severus read the note attached carefully. It held a highly venomous king cobra which was spelled into a deep slumber. The snake would need to be awakened, its head immediately severed from its body added to the potion. Again, mishandling
would result in a change to the formation of the body. Why would the Dark Lord want a snake added, Severus thought to himself. Croaker had mentioned something about some Egyptian potioneers believing the addition of an animal gave the homunculus its spirit and abilities. Perhaps, Severus considered, the Dark Lord was attempting to ensure his gift of parseltongue was maintained.

The rest of the potion ingredients were fairly standard herbs and animal parts that were needed mostly for stabilisation or to act as a catalyst for the magic to bond once the flesh and blood were added. He mentally ensure to look and catalogue the ingredients carefully into his memory; he could review them later with the Headmaster and Croaker.

Finally, he stood and locking the cabinet with a lazy wave of his hand. He didn't lean against the bench as he read over the instructions, taking note of the various days and times certain actions needed to occur. It was going to be a nightmare to coordinate, Severus thought tiredly.

He was aware of Crouch's sneaking approach behind him but before the other wizard could get close enough to read the text of the instructions, Severus hit him with a wandless stinging hex.

Crouch jumped back, rubbing his cheek. He glowered at Severus. "If you want to play rough, lover…"

"Please," Severus sneered, "your threats are pathetic. You believe if the Dark Lord was to find out about your curiosity you would receive just a mild stinging hex?" He sniffed. "You should be grateful I reminded you to keep your nose out of it."

Crouch draped himself across one of the benches. "I could make that potion as easily as you."

"You are undoubtedly a good potioneer," Severus agreed, "you have successfully made the enhanced Polyjuice potion the Dark Lord invented since you used it extensively during your months playing your father, and whatever guise you wear now in the day to day at Hogwarts." He was happy to see Crouch flinch at that a touch confirming that the Death Eater was at the school still. "You also managed to write convincingly about several different potions, their theoretical background and history in the fake letters as my supposed lover." He paused, allowing Crouch the moment of smug preening he could see in the other man's eyes. "You are not however a Potions Master."

Crouch started to scowl.

"Further, this potion requires a certain exactitude of timing in adding ingredients, preparation and brewing which I dare say your current alias would not allow you to keep to without evoking questions if you were to keep disappearing without notice," Severus continued, hoping Crouch would take the bait of the hook Severus was dangling.

Crouch breathed in deeply. "You have the same problem."

Severus gave a light shrug. So, Crouch had just confirmed that his alias leaving Hogwarts constantly would draw unwanted attention. More likely he was pretending to be a student than a professor then, Severus mused. It also explained why Crouch had waited for a Hogwarts weekend to meet with him.

"I am the Potions Master at Hogwarts and Albus Dumbledore believes me his spy," Severus drawled. "I am granted a lot of latitude in my…availability due to both roles."

He replaced the instructions in the cabinet. He would need to begin within a week but he wanted to double check everything with Croaker first. He pocketed the portkey surreptitiously. "I should warn you against trying the cabinet. It's warded to my Mark alone and there is a sleeping cobra within."
Crouch grimaced.  

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You're not afraid of snakes, are you, Bartemius?"

"Have you been around the Dark Lord's newest familiar yet, Severus?" Crouch snapped back. He shuddered dramatically. "Their closeness is downright creepy. It's like they're one being sometimes."

"His familiars have always been close." Severus murmured. He tucked the information on the snake away knowing it would be of interest. "I am done here for the time being. We may leave."

Crouch scowled but he motioned back to the cellar entry.

"Have you any information on the wedding of the werewolf?" Crouch asked abruptly, as they made their out of the house and back around to the driveway.

Severus gave a light shrug. "Only that the Headmaster has complained that the security is in the hands of the Bulgarians." He mentally apologised to Albus in his head but this was an easy seed of disinformation to sow.

"Were you not invited?" Crouch asked, evident surprise on his face.

"The werewolf wrote to the Headmaster that he would have liked to have invited all his former colleagues but understood the safety and security of the children staying at Hogwarts was paramount and allowed the staff to make their own determination of who could attend." Severus sneered. The letter had been as sappy as the wolf himself. "Minerva was invited separately to the missive as she is considered family and the old fool was not about to miss the society wedding of the year so it falls on myself, the bumbling Sprout and a half-breed goblin to maintain order and decorum for the day."

"Interesting." Crouch said lightly.

"Hardly," Severus snorted, "the Minister and Director Bones have assigned an Auror detail for extra security in the absence of the Headmaster given the international presence of the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students."

Hopefully that would discourage any kind of idea of invading Hogwarts, Severus mused.

"Pity." Crouch sighed. "It might have been a perfect opportunity to have some fun otherwise."

"Or drawn attention to the fact that you are still within Hogwarts' grounds." Severus pointed out. "Surely the endgame is more important than a few trivial upsets at this stage."

"Why Severus," cooed Crouch, "you are simply filled with unwanted advice, aren't you?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I had thought you wanted your revenge on Black more than the thrill of cheap diversions. I will say no more."

He saw Crouch flinch and knew his barb had hit home.

There was silence for a few minutes.

Crouch cleared his throat. "Did you read the article on the use of Effaret feathers to reduce addictive qualities in sleeping draughts in the last Potions Weekly?"

"Slughorn's latest?" Severus huffed. "He has only managed one successful brewing and thus can only say there was no evidence of addiction for the test animals in the scant few weeks that the potion lasted." Slughorn had published too early. "Carrigan's peer review counter was excellent."
"But you acknowledge the properties of Effaret would counter the usual addictive nature of the plants commonly used?" Crouch continued.

"Potentially but Effaret birds are rare and their colonies protected by the countries in which they are located." Severus noted. "They are not a long term or easy solution."

The debate on the Effaret birds and countering addictive qualities continued until they exited the manor and the gates closed behind them.

Severus readied himself for apparition back to Hogsmeade and froze at the touch of Crouch’s hand on his arm. He looked at the hand and back at Crouch pointedly rather than make the obvious verbal threat that he was to be released or Crouch would lose the arm.

Crouch lifted the offending appendage and waved down the road. "Perhaps we can continue our discussion? The village has a decent muggle pub."

Severus stared at Crouch, keeping his shock at the invitation well-hidden.

"You may not remember," Crouch continued, "but we used to have similar debates when you stayed with Bella during your Occlumency training."

They had. Severus had recovered all of his memories and Crouch had been welcome intellectual company. Rabastan had been smart but quiet; Rodolphus more of a thug than anything else; and Bella…Bella was insanely intelligent but expressed it only through her sadistic spell-casting.

"Back then you were more interested in Rab than serving the Dark Lord," Severus said calmly, "and I was…naïve."

Crouch grimaced. "Is it so surprising that apart from my discussions with Father, I feel starved of stimulating conversation?"

Given the rest of the entourage that the Order believed the Dark Lord had it was not surprising at all. The Travers’ were stolid at best, Fenrir feral, and Pettigrew insipid. However, Severus was not foolish enough to believe Crouch at face value. Crouch had treated him with barely concealed disdain since their first meeting; had attempted to kill him at Yule, and evidently resented Severus for possessing the Dark Lord’s favour. All of which left the invitation from Crouch very squarely in the highly suspicious category. Of course, if he was going to find out exactly what Crouch wanted he was going to have to go along with it.

"One hour." Severus stated uncompromisingly.

Crouch tipped his head, his dark eyes glittering with satisfaction. "One hour."
Finding Pronglet's Power: 3

“Truthfully,” Snape reported, “I am still unsure what Crouch intended to achieve with our discussion, but we concluded that he is in favour of Slughorn’s experiments and I am not. The only meagre connection I can deduce is that Errafet feathers are a key component in the Draught that currently has the elf and the Summers woman comatose.”

Sirius let his gaze roam around the room to gauge the reaction of the others in the War Council to Snape’s report.

In the enlarged mirror on the wall, the English participants had varying expressions: Snape appeared unflustered, Albus looked pensive and puzzled. Moody, lurking in the background, was frowning along with Amelia and an anxious looking Cornelius while Bertie was literally scratching his head.

Sirius glanced at Remus and Harry beside him in the study at Black Farm. Remus was concerned and Harry, thoughtful.

Sirius cocked his head at his son.

Harry cleared his throat. “I have, um, three theories: one, he’s really just bored and wanted to talk to someone other than Wormtail…”

“A distinct possibility.” Sirius muttered.

Harry’s lips quirked upwards for a brief second. “Two, he’s decided to abandon his strategy of needling Snape and instead form a closer relationship trying to lull him into a false sense of security from which Crouch can attack easier.”

“Professor Snape, Harry.” Albus admonished absently.

“But another valid theory.” Moody acknowledged gruffly.

“Three, he’s yanking our chains and hoping we send hours chasing our tails trying to work out whether there’s meaning to what he’s discussed with Professor Snape.” Harry concluded.

“You may be right.” Bertie said with a laugh. “It’s a bit like prophecies. We can take any normal every-day discussion and find hidden meaning that would divert and distract us.”

“As much as it pains me to say it, I believe Potter may have deduced Crouch’s possible motivations correctly.” Snape said tersely.

Sirius felt his shoulders tense at Snape’s hidden jibe at Harry but he shook it off. “That’s good thinking, Harry.” He said simply and watched happily as Harry brightened with the praise. “And any of the three or even a combination of them might be at work.” He looked back through the mirror. “It probably goes without saying, Snape, but you need to stay sharp around him and when you’re alone at this mysterious location.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “I plan to do nothing less.” He admitted.

“Where was this possible location anyway?” asked Amelia.

“The pub was in Little Hangleton.” Snape said. “As for the actual location of the place where I am to make the potion…I literally cannot say.”
“Such is the magic of the Fidelius charm.” Albus said. “We all know the location but it is now hidden from our memories by magic.”

“At least we know the general location.” Amelia said. “Little Hangleton corresponds with the location of two of our monitoring wards even if one of them doesn’t know what it’s monitoring any longer.”

“It is a fascinating magical reaction…” began Bertie.

“Perhaps a discussion for another day.” Sirius cut in. “Snape, do you think Voldemort is in residence at the place you’re making the potion?”

Snape seemed to consider the question seriously for a long moment before shaking his head. “I do not think so. He would not want to risk revealing such a location to his spy. If I cannot tell Albus something that is preferable than taking the risk of my knowing and having Albus find out.”

Once again, Sirius didn’t envy Snape the fine line he walked in his spying. “Anything else come out of your meeting with Crouch?” They had already covered the Restorative potion for the ritual; the new location; Crouch’s surprising invitation to drinks…

“I believe Crouch is already in place here at Hogwarts as a student.” Snape announced.

Sirius ignored the shocked reactions of the others and focused on Snape. “Why?”

Snape’s shoulders lifted in a light shrug. “A combination of what he didn’t say and what he did. He’s entrenched in a role that won’t allow him to make the potion that is certain. The timing of the meeting coinciding with the Hogsmeade outing for the students.” His lips twitched. “We also returned in time for the curfew.”

“He doesn’t want to draw attention to himself by being late or missing.” Amelia concluded grimly.

“Indeed.” Snape confirmed.

Sirius glanced over to Moody. “And you definitely didn’t see him on the map before the end of term?”

“The map didn’t show someone else’s name appearing for someone right in front of me.” Moody confirmed. “All the students checked out.”

“So either Wormtail does know some way around the map,” Remus broke in, “or Crouch realised the danger somehow and just had the student he’s pretending to be remain in place all of last term.”

“We cannot assume he’s taken the place of a male student.” Snape murmured. “He is surprisingly comfortable in pretending to be female.”

“Well, that’s more information than I ever wanted to know about him.” Sirius sighed.

“We have to assume we have a security breech at Hogwarts.” Moody said brusquely. “That Crouch has infiltrated us.”

“We’re definitely not going to be able to do identity checks on the students?” asked Sirius, turning to Albus.

“As you know the Board of Governors has rejected the proposal as unnecessary. Without definitive proof…” Albus shook his head in sombre negation.
“Well, we know who it’s most likely to be.” Moody pointed out. “It has to be one of the students in the castle right now. We need to keep an eye out of strange behaviour.”

“It’s exam time and they are teenagers.” Snape pointed out. “Strange behaviour is normal.”

Moody glared at him. “Constant vigilance.”

“We’ll take another look at the map.” Remus jumped in.

“We have another problem.” Amelia pointed out. “They were reported to have a vanishing cabinet on the Durmstrang ship linked to one at Riddle’s location. We didn’t find either in the two raids. If they moved the vanishing cabinet inside Hogwarts…”

“Then the bastard has a way in through the wards.” Moody swore.

Cornelius stared a little at the old auror before shaking himself. “Perhaps a search for the vanishing cabinet in the dorms? He must be keeping it somewhere close by and private to himself if he’s using it to maintain contact with…with Riddle.”

“Good idea, Cornelius.” Amelia brightened. She turned to Albus and Moody. “A room by room search for suspected contraband after the Easter return is within your prerogative, isn’t it, Albus?”

“It is indeed.” Albus murmured with a twinkle in his eye.

“It would be good to get this done now the Treasure Hunt is done except for the snake.” Sirius said firmly. “If we can identify Crouch in Hogwarts, secure the vanishing cabinet…if we can work out where it goes we can raid Riddle and get this over with before the third task.”

“I would be surprised if Crouch hasn’t already taken measures to protect the cabinet.” Snape pointed out.

“Maybe he has, maybe he hasn’t.” Moody said. “We’ll soon find out.”

“Talking of the third task,” Sirius said, “do you have an update you can share with us with Harry present?”

“I believe so.” Albus said. “It is not unknown to any of the champions that the final task will take place in the maze currently being cultivated on the Quidditch pitch.”

Harry looked disgusted again and Sirius hid a smile.

“The task was altered by Tom to be more dangerous than we had planned but the basis of the task remains the same. All of our preparations are underway and we are keeping a tight control on security given the previous sabotage.” Albus confirmed.

“Certainly no kids are getting close to the maze and we’ve got the other parts of the task on lockdown elsewhere.” Moody added.

“It would be good if we can end this before the third task.” Sirius stated plainly.

“If we don’t find Crouch and Voldemort,” Harry said, leaning forward, “then he has to grab me on that night. He has to know that apart from the time that I’m in the maze that I’m going to be well protected. What’s the potential for me to be grabbed and taken somewhere else while I’m in the maze?”

“Unfortunately, there is opportunity for any of the champions to be kidnapped during the maze task.
We have observation mirrors we are constructing to ensure the watching audience can see the progress of the champions but...the portkey ward will be down as it is anticipated that the winner upon getting to the prize is whisked out of the centre of the maze and to the podium. It was always the plan.”

“So all they have to do is get a portkey on Harry somehow.” Sirius rubbed his head. He’d always known the tournament was a stupid, stupid idea.

“It won’t be easy.” Moody assured them. “We can check everything going into the maze.”

“I agree with Sirius; we need to find Riddle before the third task.” Amelia said crisply. “That should be our focus with the diadem found.”

“We should have a plan though.” Harry said pushing his glasses up. “If we don’t find Tom then the likelihood is that he will make an attempt to grab me at the third task and we need to decide if we let that happen and use it, or try to avoid it.”

Amelia nodded.

“It’s a good point.” Bertie said. “We should plan for the worst.”

Sirius gave a nod. “Let’s put it on the agenda for when we’re back in England after Easter.” He gazed around them. “We’re in good shape. We’ve closed Voldemort down politically and financially; we’ve handled almost all the items that kept him immortal with the exception of the snake; we know who he hasn’t involved in his resurrection plans and who he has. We just need to find him.”

“Do you think there’s a possibility the Carrows or Greyback will know his location?” asked Amelia.

Sirius looked over at Remus wanting a second opinion.

“The Carrows? No. Everything suggests he’s using them because of their local knowledge to target the wedding.” Remus said. “I doubt they’ve had a face to face since the announcement of the wedding broke. Greyback, on the other hand…” he shrugged, “by all reports he’s out of favour. If he knew prior to the attacks on the alliance, I doubt he knows now.”

“I agree.” Snape concurred, the mirror rippling at his movement. “The Dark Lord will only have shared his location with as few as possible while he remains physically diminished.”

“Presumably, it would be best to capture the Carrows and determine for certain?” suggested Albus evenly.

“I agree with Snape and Remus,” Sirius paused, not quite believing he’d agreed with Snape of all people before shaking himself and carrying on, “I doubt the Carrows will know anything,” he said, “as for Greyback…”

“If Greyback or I meet before he is captured, one of us will be dead at the end of the confrontation. It will be a fight to the death as required by pack law.” Remus stated unequivocally.

Albus sent Remus a disappointed look but the others looked understanding. Cornelius looked slightly appalled.

“We’ve come up with a rather ingenious plan to keep everyone safe.” Sirius said, understanding why Cornelius looked so disturbed. “Remus?”
Only the Marauders had seen that particular grin on Remus’s face before and Sirius sat back as Remus took the War Council through the plan for the wedding. Really, Moony was the best prankster of them all.

o-O-o

Harry frowned and tried to pat his hair down for the umpteenth time. He was fully dressed for the wedding; open robes in a rich red revealed grey pinstripe trousers, a crisp pale grey cotton shirt open at the neck, and a tight waistcoat of the palest grey silk embroidered with gold brocade thread in patterns that drew the form of wolves howling to the moon. Black boots finished the outfit, polished by the house elves to a fine gleam.

Sirius appeared in the mirror, leaning forward in the open doorway with a sympathetic expression. “Hair?”

“It’s doing its own thing again.” Harry complained.

Sirius waved his wand at it and the hair settled down into something approximating tidy. Harry turned around with a grateful smile. Sirius wore a matching outfit to his own; his hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck.

“How’s Remus?” asked Harry as they exited the bathroom and headed for the Master suite.

“Good. Calmer than your Dad was anyway.” Sirius smiled sadly. He knocked on the door of the Master bedroom and entered without waiting for a reply.

Remus glanced away from the window where he stood gazing out at the early morning dawn, the first rays of light brightening the horizon. He was also wearing a matching outfit to Sirius and Harry but his waistcoat was also threaded through with red among the gold.

“You look good, Moony.” Harry said warmly.

Remus smiled at him, his brown eyes shining happily. “So do you.” He brushed a hand over his cleanly shaven face, his fingers grazing the faint scars of his lycanthropy. “Shall we head out?”

The three of them walked through the Farm, ignoring the bustle of the rest of the pack and the arriving guests, and out to the small rose garden behind the house. Somehow the flowers had been coaxed into blooming and their heady scent filled the morning air.

The garden was a square segmented by a gravel path into four segments with an arbour in the centre. It was a perfect venue for a wedding with white seats arranged in all four quarters with a good view of the arbour. There was a slight mist rising up from the grass which gave the place an ethereal look as night gave way to morning in the East.

“It’s amazing what they’ve been able to do.” Remus murmured.

“Hilde is a force of nature.” Sirius said with a smirk.

Harry nodded. Remus’s plan to move the time and venue of the real wedding had caused a flurry of panic from everyone but Sirius and, surprisingly, Tonks. The bride had hooted with laughter, hugged her groom and said she’d marry him anywhere and when he wanted.

A throat cleared behind them and Harry turned to greet Simeon. The Regent Apparent to the House of Black wore a variation of their outfit with the same grey shirt and trousers but black robes and silver embroidery on the waistcoat, the House colours.
“Nipper’s down for the count and the elves are looking after him. Anna’s in with Nymphie.” Simeon said clapping his hands together. “Cissy’s told me to get myself over to the portkey arrival point since we’re expecting the first in the next five minutes or so that’s where I’ll be. I’ve been told to remind you to take your places.”

The Malfoys and Simeon would greet the guests before handing them off to Clara and Patrick who would show them through to the garden and their seats.

Simeon held out his hand for Remus to shake. “You look good for a man about to be condemned to a life with a ball and chain.” He joked.

“I feel good.” Remus said. “Dora’s lovely and I’m a lucky man.”

Harry smiled at the genuine sincerity that coated Remus’s words and he saw Sirius’s shoulder drop an inch as though he’d breathed out in relief.

“See you on the other side.” Simeon said. He grinned and with a wave wandered away.

Sirius pointed at the formal entrance to the garden where they'd form a presentation line. “Shall we?”

The next hour flew by.

The Bulgarian Minister who was presiding over the ceremony was the first to arrive, his wife heading to the house to help Tonks. The Ministers from Ireland and France were next, and the Heads of the Werewolf Packs followed. Harry felt Sirius’s hand on his shoulder occasionally providing reassurance and support as they welcomed their honoured guests to the wedding.

The War Council arrived shortly after that; Cornelius resplendent in formal Ministerial robes and his wife in a wonderful cream and lemon outfit. Amelia was with Brian and the two wore matching shades of blue. Bertie was also in his formal Unspeakable robes which gave him an air of authority that destroyed his usual aura of absent-minded professor. The Headmaster’s outfit was a wonderful Hufflepuff yellow with red poppies blooming around the hems, petals rimmed in gold, with black centres and stalks; it was an interesting marriage of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor and Harry was impressed he’d tried to incorporate the school houses of both the bride and the groom in the outfit.

Harry brightened when the next swathe of guests was the Potter alliance. Neville and his grandmother led the way in formal blue and grey, the crests of the Longbottom house proudly displayed, Blaise Zabini with them in his own neat outfit of shades of grey. The Greengrasses arrived with both Daphne and Astoria in stunning lilac outfits that made their blue eyes almost violet. The Abbots and the rest of the Bones family arrived together and Harry noticed Hannah and Neville exchanging nervous looks across the seating area. He wondered what had happened. Nora Zabini arrived before he could contemplate it further, so much cleavage on show in the blue dress that Harry worried she’d catch cold in the chilly Bulgarian air, barely pausing to greet her son before she took her seat. Other allies and supporters arrived such as the Notts and the Wenlocks who were in service – and time seemed to blur for Harry after that until the Weasleys arrived; Bill escorting a beautiful looking Caro in a soft pale yellow, Arthur without Molly but cheerful and bright-eyed.

The Pack came next; every wolf at the sanctuary neatly dressed in clothing Remus had insisted upon buying for them for the occasion of his wedding, knowing many of them didn’t have good robes to wear. Harry and Sirius greeted all of them warmly including a subdued Sian.

Tonks’ friends from school and the aurors followed, Moody heading up the charge. Harry was impressed by the array of medals his Defence Professor had attached to the chest of his ill-fitting formal robes. Harry’s smile became a touch fixed as many of the young women simpered at either
Sirius or himself.

“Buck up.” Sirius whispered as another giggling brunette was led away with a wink by Remus’s beta Patrick. “Almost done.”

The press arrived then; the Lovegoods – a beaming Luna in summery green, followed by Rita Skeeter and the international press in the form of Esmerelda Goose. They were escorted to seats set off at the side in a small press area near to the dignitaries.

Harry glanced over at the full garden and back at the sun, low in the sky. It was almost seven o’clock. Remus and Tonks would marry at seven o’clock and seven minutes.

The first signs that the wedding was imminent was the music striking up in the background – violins and a harp playing a muted classical tune. Hilde hurried over to say hello before rushing to her seat. Her husband took his place in the arbour.

Minerva and the Grangers appeared. The Grangers wore wizarding open robes of the same grey as the trousers and shirts of the wedding party over a sharp grey suit in Wallace’s case and a beautiful cream dress in Miriam’s. They wore red roses rimmed with gold on their lapels. Minnie wore a formal robe, high necked and long-sleeved in the same grey; tight in the bodice with a sweeping skirt, and there was another red and gold rose pinned over her right breast.

Next to arrive was the Malfoys. Narcissa looked beautiful; her pale grey dress with its high waist skimmed the baby bump she had, and was covered in the same silver embroidery as the waistcoats of the men with her. She had eschewed formal robes and instead had a black fur stole. Harry had the awful suspicion it was real fur but decided not to ask. Lucius and Draco all wore matching outfits to Simeon.

The mother of the bride was escorted by Simeon. Andy looked stunning in the same shade of grey and silver as Narcissa but it was a different style; more formal with its high neckline and long sleeves. There was a warm maroon wool shawl that she wore draped over her arms.

“Right,” Sirius said, “we should take our places.” He ushered them down to the arbour at a sedate pace.

Harry settled into his place by Sirius’s side. Sirius stood next to a calm Remus who exchanged a grin with Bogdan as the music changed and the traditional wedding march began.

All their guests rose to their feet.

Hermione was the first down the pathway. Harry’s breath caught in his throat. He had thought she looked beautiful the night of the Yule ball but now…

Her hair was up in some complicated do with tendrils falling around her face. The rich maroon of the shawl around her shoulders set off her colouring, warming her complexion. The pale grey dress had a tight bodice and flared at the hips, falling to the ground. It was embroidered with the same silver as Narcissa’s and Andy’s dresses. Strappy silver shoes completed the outfit and Harry wondered how she walked in them on the gravel. The Black diamonds glinted at her ears and throat, and she carried a bouquet of silver and cream roses. She arrived in her place opposite Harry in the arbour and smiled at him tremulously.

Harry smiled back at her.

Anna was next in an outfit that matched Hermione’s almost exactly. Harry noticed she exchanged a wide grin with Simeon as she passed her husband. Anna took her place opposite Sirius.
Finally, Tonks began the walk down the pathway, her hand tucked into the crook of her father’s arm. Ted was dressed similarly to the rest of the men from the house of Black; black robes, the same grey trousers and shirt, but he had a maroon cravat tucked into the open neck of the shirt.

Tonks was a beautiful bride. She smiled happily at everyone she passed, almost glowing with an inner radiance and in her natural form; her distinctive Black features enhanced by a creamy complexion and her natural silvery-grey eyes; her hair was styled up leaving her long neck bare and elegant. Her dress was a fall of silver so pale it almost was white. It was draped in a fashion that Harry had seen in his history books in primary school in Ancient Greece. One shoulder was left bare while the other had a thick strap that draped down tightly around her bust before falling in pleats from just under the bust to the floor. A maroon silk shawl shot through with the same silver thread was draped around her lower arms. She carried a mixed bouquet that combined all the colours of the wedding; gold, red, silver, cream and grey.

Ted delivered into the arbour and once Tonks had handed off her bouquet to Anna, he placed her hand into Remus’s with a watery smile.

Bogdan cleared his throat. “The time is seven minutes past seven on the seventeenth day of this wondrous April month. We are gathered here to celebrate the union of this wizard and witch in a traditional hand-fasting…”

Harry felt a lump gather in his throat as Tonks smiled happily at Remus and Remus smiled warmly back at her, his fingers rubbing the back of her knuckles as though soothing her.

“Remus, your vows if you please.”

Remus cleared his throat. “When I was a child I used to think my parents were a fairy-tale prince and princess living happily ever after. They loved each other, respected each other, and together they faced the best and worst of their lives. That’s the marriage I’ve always wanted at heart and I promise you that I will endeavour every day to love you, respect you and stand beside you whatever our lives together bring.”

Tonks was beaming as Bogdan prompted for her to begin. “When I was a child my mother used to tell me the story of how she met my father and fell in love; how he was everything her family hated and so they had to run away so they could live happily ever after. I admired my mother for having the strength to follow her heart, my father for never giving up on the idea of them, and both of them together for working every day to bridge the differences between them with love. That’s the marriage I’ve always wanted at heart and I promise you that I will endeavour every day to love you with all my heart, to never give up on you, and to work with you to overcome whatever challenges our pack may face.”

There was a faint murmur that broke out at the last but Harry could see that Remus’s pack were pleased at the inclusion.

Bogdan waved his wand and a stream of gold magic wrapped around their hands. “You have each made vows to the other. Repeat after me; I vow to magic to take thee as my love, my heart, my soul; to cherish and honour thee; to walk with your hand in mine always; to never break the thread that binds us.”

Harry almost held his breath as Remus and Tonks repeated the vow.

Bogdan smiled brightly. “It is my very great honour to ask you all to welcome Remus and Dora Lupin.” His eyes were sparkling as he leaned into Remus. “You may kiss your bride.”
Harry cheered along with everyone else as Remus tenderly kissed Tonks for a long minute, their hands still clasped together.

Bogdan cleared his throat as the cheers settled down and some of the guests dabbed handkerchiefs at the corners of their eyes. “If I may ask Lord Black and his Heir to come forward for the next part…”

Harry followed as he and Sirius exchanged places with Bogdan, the Bulgarian Minister moving out of the arbour to a seat next to his wife.

Sirius waved his wand and a pedestal appeared with the Black ritual bowl and knife.

Remus and Tonks turned to face them again, happy smiles on both their faces.

Sirius tapped the bowl with his wand. “Familius magicus.” Silver mist rose from the bowl and there was a stir in the audience from those who had never witnessed family magic before.

Harry leaned over and tapped the bowl with his wand. “Familius magicus.” Gold mist joined the silver, the two clouds twirling around each other, weaving in and out.

Sirius cut his palm and let the blood drip into the bowl. “I, Sirius Orion Black, head of the House of Black declare my brother by heart, Remus John Lupin, a son of the House of Black by law, my magic, and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be.”

Remus took the knife and made his own careful incision. “I, Remus John Lupin, Alpha to my pack, son of the Lupin family, son of the House of Black, accept my place and the duties it entails by blood, by magic and by this oath. So have I sworn; so mote it be.”

Remus cast a cleaning spell at the knife and Harry took it from him. He sliced his own palm carefully. “I, Harry James Potter, head of the House of Potter, Heir to the House of Black have stood witness to these oaths and welcome Remus John Lupin into the House of Black. May your marriage to the daughter of our House, Nymphadora, be blessed. So have I sworn; so mote it be.”

The mist rose from the bowl and formed the family totems; a gold griffin and a silver snake. Harry was pleased that the Wenlock vulture had remained dormant. The snake hissed out a blessing and Harry’s eyes widened.

Sirius glanced at him questioningly.

Harry cleared his throat. “Our family magic welcomes Alpha Lupin and his pack.”

Another murmur through the crowd but Harry saw the pack members all looking pleased and Remus was beaming.

Sirius healed Harry’s palm while Tonks did the same for Remus. The bowl and knife were magicked away again and Sirius cleared his throat.

“With the formalities out of the way, may we all be upstanding for the procession of the bride and groom.”

And with that the music began again and a smiling Remus and Tonks, who took back her bouquet, stepped down from the arbour, making their way hand in hand down the pathway as the guests threw rose petals over them.

The wedding ceremony was over.
It was time for the rest of the plan.

\[\text{O-O-o}\]

Remus lifted his wand and the time hung in the air beside him.

It was almost three o’clock, the original time of the wedding.

The Ministerial residence was a grand place. Two hundred years old, the building’s ornate architecture reminded Remus of fairy-tale castles. The residence was set at the base of a mountain, woodland all around and only one main road in and out. The main point of entry was usually the floo, but it was locked down and anti-portkey wards had been set as part of the security measures.

Remus tapped his foot impatiently. He stood in the original marquee for the wedding, erected in the large lower garden of the residence that backed onto a stream and beyond that the forest. Gregor’s pack and his own were patrolling the perimeter as they would have been in the original plan. Some of the members from Robert’s, Giovanni’s and Otto’s packs were polyjuiced up as various wedding guests and in their places. It was an all werewolf affair to ensure nobody else was at risk from injury or infection.

The ambush was set.

Remus thought longingly of the Black Farm. The most important people in his life were there. Dora and the baby came to mind first, almost surprising him. She had looked radiant that morning in her natural form; a beautiful bride, happy and joyous on her wedding day. He still didn’t think he deserved her but he was the man she had chosen and he swore to himself that he would be worthy of her, to fulfil the vows he had taken.

And then there was the baby. The tiny scrap of life that Dora nurtured within her. The fluttery feel of his son moving against her skin under his hand was sharp in Remus’s memory. He had a son, not yet born but alive and growing stronger with every day. His own father had been wonderful and Remus promised his son that he would endeavour to be the same; to give the same strong guidance with one hand, and endless love with the other.

He would protect them with his life.

Harry and Sirius who once would have been the first he thought of were next. Remus smiled sadly. He loved Harry, worried about the weight of the prophecy and the expectations of the wizarding world that lay on the young boy’s shoulders. He would stand beside Harry; protect him as he had sworn to Prongs so many years before.

He understood more with Dora’s pregnancy, Prongs’ faint panic at becoming a father, the sheer bewildering joy that had painted James Potter’s face that day he’d broken the news Lily was pregnant to Remus and Sirius.

Sirius…

In truth, Remus had always felt closer to the other members of the Marauders. Sirius had been too reckless and wild for Remus in his younger years. Remus had been too shy, too aware of his lycanthropy, and too needful to be steady and safe for a friendship with Sirius to be wise. Yet, James Potter had pulled them together and Remus had found joy in mischief, acceptance in their willing friendship with a werewolf, and had seen the abused boy Sirius hid behind the mask of a pureblood rebel; had softened towards him because of that. The whole incident with Snape had damaged the trust between them but in hindsight Remus knew he’d always felt slightly outside of the bubble that
Sirius and James occupied. Still, all the Marauders had been brothers once...and now Sirius was his
brother and his closest friend beyond any question.

In some ways he wished Sirius was standing beside him but it felt right that Sirius was back at the
Farm guarding the people who were most precious to Remus. He had no doubt that Sirius would die
before he would let harm come to any of them.

It would be over one way or another that day. Either Greyback or he would walk away from the
fight that was coming.

Remus was determined it would be him.

Beside him, Tomas who was masquerading as Sirius scented the air. “They’re coming.”

Remus nodded. His eyes flashed amber. He was ready.

o-O-o

Harry sat tensely in the chair in front of Remus’s desk and glanced at the empty chair behind it
worriedly. Behind him, the chink of teacups in saucers broke the silence. Why had anyone thought
tea was the solution to their restlessness?

“He’ll be fine.” Sirius said from his position by the fire. He stood leaning against the mantelpiece, his
gaze on an old photo of Remus with himself and Harry’s father. The rest of the family sat in the
small seating area around the fire.

Minerva had taken one high-backed armchair; Andy and Ted took up one sofa along with a fidgeting
Tonks; the Grangers took up another, and Narcissa had claimed the remaining armchair. Caro sat in
the other visitor’s chair with Bill perched on an arm. Simeon and Anna had excused themselves for a
nap earlier, the time lag between Europe and Australia hitting them hard.

The rest of the wedding guests had been transported to various different accommodations around
Bulgaria to rest before the wedding ball that evening at the Ministry. Lucius and Draco had gone
with the Notts to their apartment in Sophia. The Potter alliance had been the last to leave with Neville
and his grandmother offering to stay behind regardless. The War Council were at the Ministry with
the Bulgarian Minister awaiting news of the showdown between Remus and Greyback.

Tonks leapt to her feet and started to pace. “We should be helping Remus instead of just sitting here
waiting for news!”

“We’d be in the way.” Sirius said before anyone else in the room could reply. He straightened. “You
think I’m happy that he’s facing off against Greyback without me? No. But I know he’s right that
we’d be nothing but a distraction. We’re safe here. He’s got the majority of his pack with him and
the majority of the other packs are supporting him. Remus knows what he’s doing.”

Tonks threw him a heated look and stomped off, slamming the study door shut behind her.

Harry winced and rubbed his head.

Andy rose gracefully from her seat. “I’ll go and check on her.”

“I’ll come with you.” Narcissa offered.

The two sisters left in a much more subdued manner than Tonks and the tension in the room eased a
touch.
“I really wish there’d been a way for this to happen without it having to be today.” Ted said, reaching for his coffee. “It is supposed to be her wedding day.”

“I’m sure if Remus had a choice, he’d have preferred to do it a different day too.” Sirius said tightly.

Ted held up his hand. “I know, Sirius, and I’m not having a go at my new son-in-law, I promise.” He sighed. “It’s just… damned unfortunate it has to be today.”

“Or a blessing.” Wallace spoke up. “If this Greyback is so determined to get to Remus, best that he has the choice of the field they meet on and the advantage.” He motioned with his cup. “And if Remus is successful, Greyback stops being a threat to him and your daughter. They can start their married life without having the bastard hanging over them.”

Ted nodded slowly. “I just hope Remus comes home to Dora.”

“He will.” Sirius said with a brisk certainty that helped ease Harry’s mind more than anything else that had been said. “Remus was always the best planner of the Marauders and he’s planned this down to the fine detail. He’ll come home.” He suddenly cocked his head. “The outer ward has just pinged.”

They all sat up straighter.

Sirius cocked his head and closed his eyes. “Something’s trying to get through the wards.”

Gilby popped in. The elf was frantic, pulling on his ears. “Lord Black!” He squeaked. “Miss Clara says wizards and vampires are at the South wall!”

“Bugger.” Sirius swore and ignored Minnie’s slightly scandalised look. “They must think any emergency portkeys would bring the wedding guests here.”

“So they’ve set up a second line of attack.” Wallace said grimly.

“Portkeys now!” Sirius ordered, already moving towards the study door.

Harry didn’t argue; he stood up and reached for the knut in his trouser pocket and muttered the phrase that would whisk him away.

Nothing happened.

Sirius stopped at the door as he realised no-one had disappeared.

“Anti-transportation wards.” He said grimly.

“Andy and Dora…” Ted said urgently, getting to his feet.

The door opened and Clara appeared, breathless and flushed. “There’s another group of wizards and vampires at the North wall.”

Sirius whirled around to Bill and Caro. “Go to the North and see if you can stop them. They’re trying to dismantle the wards.”

“On it.” Bill said.

“Clara, show them the way.” Sirius ordered.

Clara didn’t protest simply turning and leading the way out.
“Right,” Sirius said, “you all stay in this room. I’m going to seal it with family magic and only someone with Black blood will be able to through. You should all be safe. Gilby, get the women and baby Jason down here. Tell Simeon to meet me at the South wall.”

Gilby popped away.

“Sirius…” Harry began before his throat closed up, fear and anxiety bubbling up inside of him.

Sirius swept across the room and pulled him into a rough hug before he dropped a kiss on his forehead. “You protect this room, Harry.” He said firmly. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

Harry nodded and he set his jaw as Sirius walked out.

Hermione hurried to his side and slid her hand into his. “He’ll be OK, Harry.”

Harry hoped so. He’d already experienced losing Sirius once and he didn’t want to go through that again.

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The wolf patronus arrived in the tent and gave a low bow. It was from one of the Bulgarian wolves; an auror like Tomas. It signalled the advance of Greyback’s pack – or what the old wolf had been able to cobble together to face Remus. They planned to let them slip in through what would appear to be a hole in the patrols – a couple of young pack members sneaking away for a smoke – but in actuality was the funnel through which Remus was herding them.

Remus waited in the centre of the tent. Tomas stood ready beside him.

Another signal – the violin music changing as though the wedding was about to begin…Greyback was close…

And then the eerie howl as Greyback called the attack…

The tent disappeared with a wave of Remus’s wand. Tomas’s form rippled from Sirius’s into his own – all the polyjuiced guests changing back into their original guises.

Greyback stood twelve feet away from Remus; two dozen werewolves stood in a loose crowd at the back of him. They were all semi-transformed – muzzles and claws and amber eyes. Growls of unhappiness erupted as they realised they’d been tricked into a trap.

Greyback snarled and Remus felt the visceral shiver travel like ice down his spine.

Remus could still remember the nights he’d woken as a child, nightmares of the monster ripping into his shoulder, biting down and splitting the skin; the agony of the burn as the lycanthropy flooded his blood. He remembered the horror of his first transformation; pain and cracking bones, skin that shifted and changed around him; the feeling of wrong, wrong, wrong…

Greyback straightened. He’d always been a tall, broad man; the werewolf had made him more so. His upper body was bare of clothing; covered in the coarse fur of the wolf for all that the form underneath remained a man. His simple rustic pants covered thick powerful legs. His hands were already forming into claw-like shapes, the nails growing. His face was covered in hair, eyes yellow and filled with hatred, his mouth opening to reveal the dripping maw of sharpened teeth.

“Fenrir Greyback.” Remus began, noting that his pack and their allies were closing behind Greyback’s position, forming a strong circle from which none would escape. He didn’t smell
vampires but there was one wizard hovering at the back of Greyback’s party; a thin dark haired boy who bore a faint resemblance to the Carrows.

“Lupin.” Greyback growled. “I see you finally decided you’re one of us.”

“I’m a wizard,” Remus corrected coolly, “and I’m the Alpha of my pack. I can be both.”

Greyback’s yellow eyes gleamed as he took in the others standing with him. “Got ourselves a little wolf summit here, then? Otto, Giovanni, Robert, and Gregor. You taking sides finally? Putting your packs on the line over this pup?”

The four Alphas beside him exchanged amused looks.

“When we met Remus we asked for neutrality and he granted it.” Gregor said brightly. “He has kept his word and more, his pack thrives under his guidance and influence. We have seen the British wizarding world change because of the ties he has with humans he considers pack. And so…”

“We have decided not to remain neutral.” Otto said menacingly.

“The followers of your Master have been foiled once in my country already.” Giovanni growled. “They will not be tolerated.”

“In any of our territories.” Gregor added, puffing out his chest.

“We stand beside Alpha Lupin.” Robert bared his teeth. “And should he fail to put you down, one of us will.”

Remus felt his spirit swell with pride and honour. The packs were going to stand beside him and his pack. They were lost to Voldemort.

Gregor smiled. “I get the first go after Remus but I doubt I shall need it.”

Greyback’s face registered faint alarm before it melted away into anger. “I am Alpha!”

“You are not Alpha.” Remus contradicted him sharply. “You haven’t been Alpha since you showed your belly to Voldemort.”

Greyback took an angry step forward but Remus held his ground.

“You’re nothing more than his attack dog.” Remus said heatedly. “An attack dog that needs to be put down.”

“You’re nothing more than a lap dog for a boy.” Greyback shot back.

Remus smiled lazily. If people had a tendency to overlook Peter as a Marauder, they’d had a tendency to underestimate Remus – except for James and Sirius who knew just how dangerous Remus could be when riled. Everyone else though…everyone else saw the flash and sparkle of James’s charisma and the brash flair of Sirius’s drama and they ignored the mild-mannered werewolf standing behind them.

Greyback snarled again, riled by Remus’s calm. “You think they’re safe? Think again. The Dark Lord has people everywhere.”

Worry nibbled at Remus because the Carrows weren’t there and neither were the vampires, and they had to be somewhere. And if he were the Dark Lord he’d have thought about where the women and children would be sent in the event of a werewolf attack – the Farm!
He had to get there but before he could do that…

Remus’s eyes narrowed dangerously at the werewolf who’d turned him. “Well, that was a stupid move.” He informed him almost in a conversational tone.

Greyback’s eyes widened at Remus’s response.

Remus bared his own teeth. “Now, I’m going to have to kill you quicker than I’d planned.”

“Arton – NOW!” Greyback yelled.

The boy at the back threw something into the air; a clear vial that spun through the air filled with a purple liquid.

Remus had no idea what it was and no wish to find out. He banished it with a wordless spell and Greyback’s pack froze.

Remus lifted an eyebrow. “Oh. I guess you forgot I was a fully trained wizard?” And with a flick of his wand sent a flurry of silver arrows at them.

The fight was on.

o-O-o

Sirius didn’t bother running to the South gate; he grabbed hold of Simeon and apparated.

He made them appear without a noise – a skill he’d almost forgotten but remembered from his training. They were positioned behind a large tree for cover and had a good view of the gate. They immediately took up familiar stances – they’d both been through the same training even if Sirius’s had been compressed into a boot camp because of a war and Simeon’s had been in Australia.

“Damn.” Simeon said in a low dark tone.

One of the werewolves from Remus’s pack, a middle-aged man with a paunch, was negating the vampire ward by simply inviting the blood-sucking creatures over the gate. There were five of them; head to toe in black clothing that protected their skin from burning in the sunlight. A group of wizards were the other side of the ward, poking at the wards. They couldn’t get through without the express invitation of someone the wards recognised as an authority.

“We take the heads off the vamps,” Sirius murmured as they started to crawl towards the farmhouse, “deal with the wizards.”

Simeon gave a nod.

They moved out from behind the tree in dual apparition; they appeared behind the vamps almost simultaneously causing the creatures to turn.

Sirius yelled the fire-whip spell and sent it flying in a long line. He took out two vampires, their heads rolling onto the ground before their bodies disintegrated into dust. Simeon’s whip had also taken out one which left them one apiece.

The vamps moved fast, running at speed toward them. Sirius held his ground and apparated at the last minute, coming back just behind the vamp that had tried to rush him and decapitating him with an anvil spell. He looked over at Simeon and found two of Remus’s werewolves had taken down the vampire with their bare hands, Sian and another woman whose names Sirius didn’t remember. They
held the vampire down while Simeon staked it.

There was a yell from the gate and Sirius made a show of adjusting his clothing as though he had nothing better to do before walking over, his wand out and held firmly.

The werewolf who had betrayed them cowered beside the gate. “Sorry, sorry, but they made me.” He sobbed. Sian and her friend walked over and stood guard over him.

Sirius’s eyes fell on the short stubby wizard at the front of the group of four on the other side of the gate.

“Hiding behind your wards, Black?” Amycus Carrow gave a wheezy laugh. “You had nowhere to hide the last time we met when I peeled you like an apple!”

There was a flash of something in his mind – pain and terror and his skin drawing away from the flesh of his arm in a long ribbon. Sirius shook it away.

“Still kowtowing to the Dark Pillock I see.” Sirius countered. “Really Amycus I would have thought you’d have realised after all the changes I made back home that it would have been infinitely preferable for your lifespan for you to have stayed home with the vampire you’re screwing.”

Amycus simply raised his hand and revealed a small silver object.

Sirius grinned with amusement. “An auror level ward-buster?!” He motioned at Simeon. “Look what he’s got!”

Simeon folded his arms, his wand still out, and smirked alongside Sirius. “Neat.”

Amycus looked slightly taken aback.

“Go ahead and throw it.” Sirius offered brightly. “I always wanted to see the ward defences utilised.”

“This will defeat even the infamous Black wards.” Amycus sneered.

“Sure, sure,” Sirius nodded, “or the ward backlash will blow you and your companions to smithereens. I can’t wait to see.”

Amycus paused as the wizards around him broke into angry mutters.

“Did you never stop to wonder why the Black wards are considered the most dangerous?” Sirius continued. “Why my grandfather retreated behind them and why your pretentious Dark Lord never tried to get to him?”

Amycus lowered the silver ball. “Maybe you are right, Black. Maybe your wards will destroy me if I were to use this. We’ll just have to dismantle them from the inside. Dog!”

The weeping werewolf huddled into himself looked up startled and flinched but he reached into his pocket and Sirius caught the sound of a vial breaking.

Moisture started to seep through the pocket and the werewolf began to writhe.

Sian sniffed and gagged, falling to her knees.

Before long all the werewolves began to shudder and convulse.

“That can’t be good.” Simeon muttered.
Amycus wheezed another laugh. “We win!” He apparated away and his wizards followed.

Sirius watched horrified as the werewolves began to change. “Simeon, get back to the house and warn the others! NOW!”

Simeon apparated away hurriedly.

Sirius shifted into Padfoot just as the man completed the transformation and growled at him. The women had changed too but instead of threatening Sirius, they formed up either side of Padfoot. Sirius thought about the innocent souls in the house behind him and let the Grim take over…

o-O-o

Clara led the way to the North wall at high speed, Bill was grateful he kept up his physical shape because damn; being a werewolf really increased speed. Caro was just behind him.

There was a woman by the wall inviting in vampires dressed head to toe in black to protect them from the sun. A group of witches stood behind them.

The woman was a pack werewolf who Clara clearly recognised because she gave an angry huff. “Nellie!”

Nellie turned around and they could see her face was wet with tears. “I’m sorry!”

Before any of them could do anything else one of the six vampires she’d let through drew a silver dagger and cut Nellie’s throat, almost decapitating her.

“Dear Merlin!” Clara swore.

The witches were chanting something and the small one at the front moved forward…

Through the ward.

The vampire smiled nastily and started to advance.

Bill lifted his wand.

Clara lifted her head and howled, a call to the others…and suddenly she fell to the floor and started to change.

Bill swallowed hard.

Caro shook her head almost in denial. “We have to warn the others!”

They turned and ran; the vampires right behind them.

o-O-o

Remus smacked Greyback with another silver javelin curse and another. He remained constantly moving, never allowing the old werewolf anywhere close to him.

Around him the packs were engaged in tooth and claw fights with Greyback’s raggedy followers.

Greyback howled as he swatted away the silver arrowheads and leaped to avoid the rest. “Coward!” He snarled. “Meet me as a wolf and we’ll see who wins!”
Remus spun around and avoided another slashing grab. “I’m a wizard, Greyback!”

“You think your pack will follow you if you kill me with magic?!”

“I think my pack will follow me because I can protect them with magic!” Remus snapped back. He lifted his wand and sent out a flurry of silver javelin curses – they avoided the werewolves in his own pack and his allies’, darting around bodies and through legs, to score hits against Greyback’s own followers.

A howl of approval echoed across the battleground.

Remus grinned and let the magic sing through him.

o-O-o

Simeon appeared in the study with a crack that had Harry’s wand in his hand fast and quick. He had it pointed at the intruder before he registered it was the Regent Apparent.

Anna gave a small cry and lunged across the room. “Thank Christ you’re back!”

“We have a problem!” Simeon said. “They’ve released some potion into the air that turns the pack into werewolves!”

They all stared at Simeon horrified.

Harry cleared his throat. “We can’t get out and we don’t really want to hurt any of our pack.” He glanced around the room. “A werewolf will generally ignore an animagus because they’re just another animal.”

“But not all of us are animagus yet.” Hermione said before her chocolate eyes widened. “But if we were transfigured into objects…”

“That would work for anyone who isn’t pregnant.” Andy said crisply, nodding.

“Human to object transfiguration is difficult though.” Ted objected. “The reversal more so.”

“Just as well you have a Mistress of the art in the house.” Minerva rose from her chair. “The Grangers should go first. They’re non-magical and will be the most difficult.”

“We should split forces.” Harry said. “Those of who can transform should try and lead the wolves away from the others.”

“The Master suite has additional protective wards against werewolves – Remus told me he put them up to ensure Nymphadora was safe on a full moon.” Andy said. “We should get Cissy and Nymphadora up there.”

Tonks bristled. “I can stay down here and fight! I’m a fully trained auror!”

“You’re pregnant!” Andy shot back. “You need to protect the baby!”

“Your mother is right.” Narcissa interceded. “Besides, I know I will value having a fully trained auror protect me.”

Simeon nodded, his arm around his wife. “Come on. Let’s get you up there.”

Anna shook her head. “Jason and I should do the transfiguration. It’s the safest option for him.”
Simeon grimaced but he kissed her and dropped a kiss on his son’s forehead. “Be safe.”

“You too.” Anna watched as Simeon led the two pregnant ladies from the room, Andy and Ted following.

Minerva set to work transfiguring people into books.

“Gilby!” Harry called for the elf who appeared with a pop.

“All of the elves are to remain hidden. Don’t come unless I or Lord Black call you.” Harry instructed.

Gilby looked unhappy but he nodded and popped away.

Harry turned his attention to the transfigurations Minerva was doing but he knew even if he had the power to complete the transfiguration, he didn’t have enough skill to have confidence that he wouldn’t harm anyone.

There was a loud crash and a howl.

Minerva didn’t pause but continued transfiguring Wallace into a book on muggles. She lowered her wand as something hit the closed door with a loud bang.

Hermione inched closer to Harry.

“I won’t have time to transfigure you, Hermione.” Minerva admitted. “I’m almost drained.” She looked incredibly weary.

Harry cast his mind about wildly. He had to protect Hermione! “You have to change, Hermione!”

“I don’t know how!” Hermione said fiercely. “I don’t even know my form!”

Harry turned to her, his eyes blazing with determination. “You know it, Hermione! You know who you are! You just don’t trust what you know!”

Another solid thump against the door had them all jumping.

“I believe Harry is right,” Minerva said urgently, “you can do this, Hermione. Just focus!”

Hermione gripped Harry’s hand tightly in her own for a brief second before she let go and closed her eyes, her brow creased with concentration.

Another bang and the door cracked down the middle…

He glanced over at Minerva who stood ready with her wand. There had to be more he could do to help Hermione…

He raised his hand, his rings shimmering into visibility on his fingers. “Familius magicus protectus!” He called out strongly.

The griffin and the snake surged from the rings and surrounded Hermione in a fine gold and silver mist.

Her eyes popped open and her mouth formed a small ‘o’ shape before she snapped her mouth closed and…
Suddenly there was a beautiful long-haired chocolate brown cat sat where Hermione had stood.

Minerva gave a sigh of relief and changed into her tabby form. She immediately started ushering the younger cat up a height much to Hermione’s displeasure.

Harry debated for all of a second and took flight as Snitch. He wasn’t confident in his wolf form and in a pack it would only cause confusion...

The door splintered and a wolf sprang into the room...

o-O-o

Bill lashed out with his foot and managed to kick one of the vampires away from him. He spun around and managed to use his wand as a stake thrusting it into the second vampire trying to grab him before it could.

He managed to sneak a look at Caro who was fighting hand to hand with moves Bill hadn’t seen before; classy spins and punches, her body arching and somersaulting away from harm, kicks that had meaning and not just there in desperation...

His attention snapped back to his own fight as the vampire he’d kicked away, sprang at him...

He shot a spell at the leaping creature and the vampire went up in flames.

Bill dodged the lurching fiery corpse and threw himself across the clearing to take out the vampire sneaking up behind Caro...

He wrestled it to the ground with brute strength and staked it; the body collapsed to ashes beneath him and he stumbled back to his feet, whirling around to face the next threat...

Caro was bent double catching her breath but they were alone. “Thanks for the save.” She said, lifting her hand.

Bill shrugged, slightly breathless himself. “We need to get back to the house and see to that witch who crept in.”

Caro nodded. “You know Buffy makes taking down a few vamps look so easy but that was bloody hard work.”

“Who?” asked Bill bewildered as they started back to the house.

Caro stopped and looked at him for a moment with wide eyes. “When we get back to England, Bill, you’re coming round for dinner and I’ll introduce you to Buffy.”

“Deal.” Bill said easily.

A howl echoed over the open ground and they both slowed and stopped.

“Was that…?” Caro asked tentatively.

The answer to her question came creeping around the corner of the nearby barn…three werewolves, low to the ground and stalking.

Bill swallowed hard, searching around for anywhere to hide…he tugged on Caro’s arm. “Up the tree! Now!”
They scrambled up the large oak tree behind them; hands and feet slipping and sliding against the rough bark as the werewolves surged forward. Bill dragged Caro up the last few feet and into safety as the wolves reached the bottom of the tree, growling and snarling.

Caro looked up at the afternoon sky still bright with thin sunshine and back down at the wolves. “Remind to kill whoever came up with the ability to turn werewolves into werewolves without the moon.”

“Yeah,” Bill said darkly, “I’ll be right behind you.”

Sirius held the throat of the werewolf in his jaws and heard the whimpering submission. He nicked the skin a touch to make a point and backed off just a touch leaving the shuddering mess of a werewolf huddled into the ground.

The two female wolves sidled up to Sirius and Sian licked his muzzle in obvious approval.

Sirius jerked his head at the werewolf and the two females lowered theirs taking up the guard positions he wanted them to take without a murmur. He had no idea how they’d understood him but he was just grateful that they had. He turned tail and bounded back up to the farm house.

He had others to protect…

The doors of the Master suite blasted inward with a concussive force that sent Simeon spinning into the nearby wall. He hit his head hard and went down for the count. Theodore who’d been right by the doors wasn’t in much better shape; he had been caught by the splinters and was lying injured and bleeding just by the doorway.

Narcissa immediately had her hand in her wand. Perhaps in hindsight she should have gone with Lucius and Draco, she mused, rather than assuming she’d be better resting at the Farm. She noted that Andy had positioned herself in front of her and Dora.

All three women had their wands up and pointed as the stubby form of a witch dressed in head to toe black waddled into the room.

“Alecto.” Narcissa greeted her politely as though they’d encountered each other in the middle of Diagon Alley rather than in the midst of an attack on the Farm.

“Alecto,” Alecto smiled, her lips curving back to reveal crooked yellowing teeth. With her pale skin dotted with acne and her oily hair scraped back into a bun, Alecto was the most unattractive female Narcissa had ever set eyes on.

Narcissa frowned. “You have to have Black blood to enter the wards on these rooms.”

Alecto shrugged but she had an evil smirk. “Black must have forgotten that he donated some back during the last war. Did you know that there is a nifty Wiccan spell to use it to give the impression of being with child if you drink a man’s blood? Bellatrix told me of it once when we breeched the wards on the MacDougal place.”

Narcissa’s stomach turned. There were days she grieved for Bella and there were days she was glad her sister was gone from the Earth. She lifted an eyebrow. “What is the meaning of this intrusion, Alecto?”
“I’m here on business, Narcissa.” Alecto said. “Nothing personal.” Her beady eyes settled on Dora. “The Dark Lord wants the girl and her spawn.”

Andy bristled beside her. “You’re taking my daughter to that slime over my dead body.”

“And mine.” Dora muttered.

“That can be arranged.” Alecto cackled, wheezy giggles erupting. “Narcissa, why don’t you handle your sister and I will handle the little girl?”

Narcissa raised her eyebrows. “Alecto, you seem to be under a misapprehension.”

Alecto looked befuddled.

“I’m not on your side.” Narcissa spelled it out for the stupid witch. “I am a daughter of the House of Black.”

Alecto flushed red in anger. “Then you’ll die with them too.”

Andy smiled, dangerous in the way only a mother protecting her child could be. “You first.” And she attacked…a purple spell lashing out across the space…

Alecto barely deflected it…

Narcissa followed it with a blasting curse and Dora with a slashing spell…

Alecto dodged the first and stepped into the latter. Her eyes went to the stub of her wand arm which was bleeding profusely; her forearm and hand still clutching the wand lay on the floor. She looked up at them shocked.

“But you…you’re weak.” Alecto protested. “Muggle lovers…” She collapsed onto the floor and reached for her wand with her good hand.

Andy’s wand flickered out again and took off the other arm, sending Alecto the floor in a tumble.

Alecto’s shock-glazed eyes stared up at her.

“We’re daughters of the House of Black.” Andy said frostily. “We’re anything but weak.”

Alecto moaned.

Narcissa smiled, satisfied as Andy and Dora ignored the witch and moved forward to check on the men. She gracefully glided over to Alecto herself.

The witch was semi-unconscious, her bulbous eyes staring out at Narcissa with disbelief. She was breathing shallowly, the bleeding had slowed; immediate medical care would save her. Narcissa spelled Alecto’s nose and mouth shut. The witch’s eyes widened in horror and Narcissa smiled at her. Alecto had dared to threaten the House of Black and would pay the price for her folly.

“Be grateful,” Narcissa whispered in a low voice as Alecto’s body shuddered desperately seeking air, “Bella would have tortured you for hours, but I’ve always favoured putting animals out of their misery sooner rather than later.”

Alecto shuddered once more and went still.

“Cissy!” Andy’s panicked voice broke through Narcissa’s satisfaction. “Ted’s bleeding!”
Narcissa smoothed her hair back and went to save her sister’s husband.

o-O-o

Remus stood over Greyback, splayed on the floor, bleeding from a variety of silver inflicted wounds. Remus had his wand at his temple. “Submit.” He growled.

Greyback snarled but the old werewolf was a survivor and he arched back, revealing his throat.

The urge to kill him was strong; to rip out Greyback’s throat…but Remus was a wizard first and he wrestled the wolf inside back.

Remus shot a rope spell at Greyback, tying him up. He stepped away from the werewolf and called out for Tomas. “I believe he’s wanted in Bulgaria as much as Britain for crimes against wizards and witches.”

“Yes.” Tomas growled.

“He will get a trial and be executed justly.” Gregor said, walking up to join them.

Remus nodded, wiping the sweat off his brow. “I need to get to the Farm.”

“Go.” Gregor said. “We have things under control here.”

Remus looked around and saw that they did have everything under control. All of Greyback’s people were on the ground, hogtied or injured enough to be out for the count.

Patrick hurried over to him. “Remus!”

“We need to gather and get back to the Farm.” Remus ordered briskly.

“Wait!” Patrick said urgently. “That boy – the one who threw the vial. He said the liquid in it would have turned us all to werewolf form!”

“Merde!” Robert snarled, overhearing them.

Remus’s blood ran cold. “The Farm…”

“If they attacked with that potion then the air around the farm is contaminated.” Patrick said. “We could go but if it is and we get tainted with it too.”

If it was contaminated then it meant the werewolves at the Farm were already turned and his pack was attacking his loved ones!

Remus thought wildly, his mind racing. Bloody Greyback! He’d wanted the advantage of being in his werewolf form…wanted the advantage of fighting Remus as a wolf and…

There was an inhuman growl and Greyback lurched upwards, breaking out of the rope bonds, sending them snapping and flying in all directions.

Remus whirled around and sent a slashing spell across his throat; Greyback’s head toppled from his body.

He was dead.

Clearly, Remus thought irritated, Greyback was an old dog incapable of learning new tricks since he
hadn’t understood that Remus was always going to react as a wizard first and…

Remus frowned, looked down at his wand and smiled. He stepped over Greyback’s head and motioned at Patrick. “Let’s get to the Farm. I have a plan!”

o-O-o

Harry watched as Hermione smacked the nose of the blond wolf with a paw, scratching its muzzle badly, before she leaped out of the way onto a higher shelf in the study, skidding slightly across the wood.

Minerva gave an approving yowl and jumped to a safe position nearby on the top of the bookshelf.

Harry launched himself off the light fitting and swooped down to the wolf, diving down to get its attention and then darting quick as a snitch out of the way, flying swiftly through the broken study door and –

Down a corridor the young werewolf following him.

Harry sped up, darting through the open back door of the kitchen and into the sunshine.

There was a bark behind him and he increased his altitude just in time to avoid the werewolf’s snapping jaws.

Harry’s tiny heart beat as furiously as his wings as he glanced back.

The young wolf’s tongue hung out of the side of his gaping mouth; he seemed to be almost grinning. And made another leap for Harry.

Harry flew upwards again and around the back of the barn and…almost froze at the sight of Bill and Caro hiding in a tree with three other werewolves at the base; two circling them like sharks while the other stood up on its hind legs, front paws on the tree bark trying to reach them that way.

He was almost so stunned at the sight that another leaping attempt to catch him almost worked.

Harry gave a squawk of surprise and back-pedalled as fast as he could with his wings.

An angry bark sounded to the left of him and Harry got up a height to see a Grim bounding across the grass towards them. He took the young wolf completely by surprise, barrelling into him and putting it on its back quickly.

The youngster immediately submitted.

Padfoot gave a satisfied growl and stood up, facing the other three werewolves who’d turned from the tree to investigate.

They all scarpered, dashing away towards the barn. The young werewolf scrambled to hurry after them, away from the glowering Grim.

The werewolves gone, Harry lowered himself until he could safely change back on the ground. Bill and Caro tumbled out of the tree in a mostly controlled descent as Sirius changed back to human form.

Harry hugged him briefly and Sirius kept an arm around him as they greeted Bill and Caro.

“A witch got through the wards but we took care of four of the vampires.” Bill said breathlessly.
“What is up with the werewolves?”

“The potion must be airborne.” Sirius said soberly. “The two I was with at the South gate seemed to understand who I was. They’re standing guard over the werewolf who betrayed us but most of Remus’s pack that were left behind were young – they might not have the same level of control.”

“We had another at the North. A vampire took care of her.” Caro said. “Clara changed but the last we saw of her she was running off another of the vamps.”

“We should get inside.” Sirius said.

“Simeon warned us in time.” Harry said. “Aunt Minnie and Hermione changed into cats and I diverted the wolf. We changed Anna, Jason and Hermione’s parents into books. The others went to the Master suite.”

“Let’s hope they’re still there.” Sirius said with a sigh. “They should be safe enough if Remus’s wards held.”

“You should all change to your animal forms.” Bill pointed out.

Sirius nodded and Harry moved away from him so they could both turn back.

Caro grimaced. “You should do the animagus training, Bill.” A moment later she was a sparrow.

She and Harry flew at the back of Bill, guarding the only one who wasn’t an animagus as he followed Padfoot to the farmhouse.

Sirius transformed back to himself as soon as they entered the study, the wrecked door fixed with a wave of his wand.

Harry changed back and made his way to the bookshelf.

The two cats on the very top shelf meowed at him and the tabby leaped gracefully down to the mantelpiece and then to the floor. The chocolate brown cat Sirius assumed was Hermione clung to the uppermost shelf with every claw she had, and hissed at the coaxing fingers of her boyfriend.

Minerva shifted back in a blur that was seamless. “The situation?”

“Still assessing.” Sirius said grimly. “Werewolves are still werewolves. We have a witch on the loose and a couple of the vampires are unaccounted for. Amycus Carrow left when I convinced him breaking the wards was going to get him killed.”

“He always was a mealy mouthed little slug.” Minerva said tersely.

“Bill and Caro went to check the Master suite; we should get up there.” Sirius said.

“I’ll leave the books here for the time being.” Minerva pointed at the stack on the desk. “They should be safe.”

Sirius nodded. He glanced over to Harry and found him with his arms full of a chocolate cat.

“I don’t think she knows how to turn back.” Harry said worriedly.

It was probably safer for Hermione if she remained a cat in the interim but he didn’t fancy carrying
her all the way to the Master suite.

“Perhaps I should stay here with Hermione in my other form. We should be perfectly fine with the door fixed and closed.” Minerva suggested briskly. “You and Harry head up to the Master suite and check on the others.”

Sirius didn’t want to agree but he nodded. “Stay safe.”

Minerva changed back and Harry placed Hermione gently down onto the sofa.

They left the study, closing the door on the two cats inside.

o-O-o

“Woah.” Harry muttered as the remains of the doors to the Master suite came into view. He exchanged an anxious look with Sirius and moved forward.

The dead witch on the floor was the first thing Harry saw and he blanched.

Sirius grabbed him and turned him away from the sight. He glared at somebody over Harry’s shoulder. “A little warning would have been nice.”

“How did Alecto get through the wards?” asked Sirius, ushering Narcissa into a chair.

Harry tried to ignore the body by his feet.

“Something to do with having some of your blood at her disposal and a Wiccan spell Bella had taught her.” Narcissa explained crisply.

“Great.” Sirius said dryly.

Harry opened his mouth to speak but something caught his eye beyond the window – a flash of black…

“Watch out!” he yelled.

The window smashed inward as the vampire sailed through the glass.

Sirius threw himself over Narcissa and Harry ducked down to avoid the glass splinters.
“Snitch now!” Sirius yelled and Harry changed form quickly as the vampire landed beside where he’d been a moment before.

The vampire leaped over to Tonks and made to grab her but Tonks side-stepped and punched him hard sending the vamp scuttling away.

Harry flew up to the light fitting to get out of the way.

Another vampire entered, jumping in through the destroyed window.

Andy hit it on the head with a lamp.

A wolf bounded into the room and landed heavily on the first vampire…

CRACK!

Remus and two others appeared in the middle of the bedroom.

Remus swore and his wand flashed out, decapitating the second vampire who had dodged another ornament Andy had thrown at him and was trying to grab for Tonks. It fell to the ground in a shower of dust.

Tonks gave a happy cry and threw herself at her new husband as the echo of a sickening crunch was heard through the room.

Harry glanced over and told himself he didn’t want to throw up in bird form – the werewolf had ripped out the throat of the vampire.

“Clara!” Remus ordered, the Bubble Head around him quivering with the force of his order. “Move away!”

The werewolf growled but complied, slinking over to sit beside Remus like a recalcitrant house dog.

Sirius made his way across and finished the vampire off – cutting off its head with a simple spell.

The vampire dissolved into ash.

Harry flew down and changed back.

Sirius reached over and tugged him into his side. He gazed in relief at Remus. “Greyback?”

“Dead.” Remus smiled brightly and looked around the room with wide eyes. “Looks like you’ve been having some fun of your own.”

“Fun?” Sirius repeated with an incredulous laugh. “Moony, you have to get out more.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as Sirius’s grip tightened around him.

It was over.
Severus watched as the potion strip turned a bright neon pink and frowned.

The light in the oil lamps on the walls flickered momentarily in the dim private potions lab which was located to the side of his Hogwarts' quarters. The lab lacked the state of the art set-up the Dark Lord had provided at his manor for Severus's work but Severus preferred his own space. He had spent several years making it into the lab he wanted after all.

It was a square with cabinets around the walls filled with ingredients, books and equipment and a square centre work-table complete with sink. Pride of place on the work table was the potion he was making as the counter to the Sleeping Beauty Draught with which the Crouch elf and the Dark Lord's former hostage had been dosed.

The potion was at a delicate stage – two ingredients away from a perfect counter but it could still fail. Given the heavy hints that the Summers woman in particular knew something the Dark Lord didn't want to come to light, it was imperative that Severus complete the potion perfectly.

But it was proving problematic. The pink suggested that the potion needed more acid but the obvious counter-agent would make the potion poisonous to the elf but it would be fine for human consumption. The less obvious counter-agent wouldn't be able to be harvested for another five months. They didn't have that much time. The elf would have to wait.

He carefully reached for the crushed beetle heads and added no more than a few small bits to join the potion. They would steep without stirring to get the maximum benefit for a day, Severus mused, as he resisted the urge to reach for the silver stirrer beside him. His work on the potion was at an end for another day. He picked up his discarded wand and cast a spell that would ensure the potion would go into a stasis at precisely one full day from his adding the beetles. The stasis would ensure that he could return at his own pace.

Severus checked the time. He had some time before he needed to leave for the manor and begin the Restoration potion. He couldn't deny that on a purely intellectual level he was looking forward to the challenge of creating the potion. Indeed between Black engaging him on the counter potion for the Summers woman and the Dark Lord giving him the job of delivering the Restoration potion, he was having the most interesting year he had ever experienced in his career. He thought longingly of the career he had once dreamed about where he would always be inventing and creating potions, before he bundled the wistful thought to the back of his mind. He cast one last look around his own lab and, satisfied that everything was in order, left the room.

He wandered back to the sitting room and picked up the newspaper he had discarded. He grimaced at the headline proclaiming the happy news of Lupin's marriage the day before and the accompanying photo which showed a smiling House of Black with a clearly delighted Potter beaming at the werewolf.

He was bemused that the important news that Fenrir Greyback was dead had been buried within the pages of the paper as little more than a footnote. Nothing had been said about Lupin's involvement with credit given to the Bulgarians for the kill. There was no mention at all of the attack on the Black Farm by the Carrows. Severus had been informed of the full scale of what had happened along with the War Council ahead of the wedding ball.

A knock on the door disturbed his ruminating and he called for the visitor to enter, frowning as he checked the time again.
Albus glided in and Severus only just managed to hide his surprise that the Headmaster was back at Hogwarts. He had expected Albus to remain in Bulgaria for most of the day dealing with the fallout of the wedding.

"Severus," Albus smiled at him warmly, "I'm glad I caught you."

"Only just," Severus commented dryly, "I will have to depart shortly."

"Of course," Albus said soothingly, "I won't keep you long."

Severus was certain that Albus would keep him as long as Albus intended. He gave voice to his original thought. "I am surprised you are here and not debriefing with Black."

Albus gave a small shrug. "There was no need." He said with a hint of disapproval. "There was hardly anyone left to question."

Severus found Albus's discomfort with Black's ruthlessness amusing. He personally had no issues with Greyback's demise nor that of Alecto Carrow. "You wished to speak with me?"

"Yes," Albus smiled again, "I wanted to ask how the counter potion is progressing?"

Severus hid his irritation at Albus's question. "Acceptably. I had to make a minor adjustment this morning which will render it unusable for the elf but I believe speaking with the Summers woman is the most important outcome."

"I assume you will return to the matter of the elf another time?" Albus said.

"If Black wishes me to continue." Severus stressed Black's name, subtly trying to convey that it was Black who was funding the project.

"You are due to begin the Restoration potion today." Albus began. "Do you think that Bartemius will be there?"

"Possibly," Severus agreed, "regardless of his request to debate potion ingredients with me, he doesn't trust me. Of course it assumes he will be using the vanishing cabinet he has access to rather than leaving Hogwarts through conventional means."

Albus made a humming noise under his breath. "I need you to warn Bartemius about the search Alastor will perform when term begins."

Severus stilled. He knew Black wanted Crouch found; to force the confrontation with the Dark Lord before he regained his body, before Potter had to face whatever horror the ritual involved. He couldn't blame Black for wanting to give Potter the best advantage in a meeting between the boy and the Dark Lord, agreed with the principle in fact - which begged the question of why if Severus agreed with Black over the matter, the Headmaster didn't share that view.

"If I warn him we will lose the ability to capture him ahead of the third task." Severus warned mildly. "It is more than likely that Potter will end up facing the Dark Lord at full strength."

"The prophecy suggests that they will meet as equals." Albus said in a carefully neutral tone.

"If they are truly to meet as equals," Severus said dryly, "then surely they have to meet before the Dark Lord obtains a new body."

Albus sent him a chastising glance. "There is new evidence provided to support their meeting once
Voldemort has performed the ritual." He must have caught the faint hint of a sour expression flitting over Severus's features. "The information is in regard to the potential power Harry has with which he will be able to defeat Voldemort."

And therefore not only was the information being designated need to know, Severus determined, it was definitely too dangerous for him to know given his position as spy.

"What does Black think of this new evidence?" Severus prevaricated.

"Sirius wishes to spare Harry any confrontation." Albus admitted. He tucked his hands into the folds of his lime green sleeves. "I believe it would be better to allow the prophecy to unravel without interference."

Severus stifled his immediate reply that Albus's request could be seen as interference. For once he was in the very uncomfortable position of siding with Black. "My vow is to protect Potter not to enable his death." His tone was biting; a warning to Albus that he wasn't going to be manipulated into following along.

The light in Albus's blue eyes dimmed a little but he rallied. "I truly believe that Harry will prevail."

Severus snorted. "You believe that a fourteen year old barely trained wizard will prevail against a vastly more experienced adult wizard who is a Master in Dark magic?"

"Harry has power…"

"Perhaps," Severus allowed cutting in, "but so too does the Dark Lord, and your wish that Potter will be the one to prevail does not mean that he will."

Albus sighed. "We cannot fight against fate."

"But we do not have to help it on its way." Severus countered. "As much as it pains me to admit it, Black is right to insist we attempt to find the Dark Lord and deal with him before we allow a child to fight him."

"Providing the information to Bartemius would consolidate your position with him." Albus tried another tack. "The War Council as a whole has not considered that as a spy you need to provide information to the other side as much as you share information with us."

Severus stared at him for a long moment. Black had risked his life to ensure Severus's position as a spy was consolidated at Yule by delivering him to Crouch. He couldn't believe Albus was so willing to disregard it – or perhaps Albus believed Severus would disregard it because it was Black. He raised his hand as Albus made to continue. "Crouch is likely to assume there is some trick to my warning him about anything. He doesn't trust me and I don't trust him. We both know this about the other."

"If you warn him, he will owe you." Albus pointed out. "He did make an overture of friendship towards you."

Severus lifted one eyebrow mockingly. "Bartemius Crouch Junior is mad. He is incapable of reacting in predictable ways."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Severus wondered what was going on in Albus's head that he would risk going against Black's wishes in respect to Potter. From what he could tell the Headmaster was already on shaky ground with Black following the revelations of abuse in the home Albus had placed Potter within; for missing the abuse; for attempting to direct events to Albus's will
even after Black was made guardian; for the events at Yule. Unfortunately, Severus mused unwillingly, that the venerable old wizard was so prepared to risk his relationship with Black and Potter spoke of how certain Albus must be in regards to the prophecy unfolding.

"You are not prepared to offer Bartemius the information?" asked Albus finally.

"Not without Black's approval." Severus confirmed, surprising himself almost as much as Albus with his reply.

Albus's eyes widened comically before he shook himself. "I find myself rueful at encouraging you and Sirius to come to terms." He admitted.

"Black and I do share the same goals." Severus said evenly.

Albus looked completely disheartened and while Severus took a modicum of pleasure at seeing the Great Albus Dumbledore so off balance, his conscience twinged. Regardless that the root of Albus's care for Severus was the fight against the Dark Lord, Albus did care for him. Severus knew that he had been given a lot of latitude over the years he'd spent teaching at Hogwarts. Perhaps he owed the Headmaster something…

"Bartemius will have anticipated a search." Severus said breaking the silence. "It is highly unlikely that you will be able to pinpoint his identity in the new term."

Albus startled at Severus's words.

"Furthermore, even if he were to be caught, he is mad." Severus repeated. "He is more than likely to kill himself before he provides any kind of information about the Dark Lord's whereabouts especially if he believes that his death will hinder Black." He let that sink into Albus's mind before continuing. "I do not believe that we will discover the location of the Dark Lord before the third task."

"And this is the opinion that you have shared with Black." Albus enquired delicately.

"I have." Severus confirmed, pausing a moment. "It is a view that he shares."

"Then…"

"Both of us are still determined that it would be best if the Dark Lord was found and will do nothing to impede that." Severus said firmly.

Albus deflated, and once again Severus was reminded of the Headmaster's age. "I fear that I am once again proving Sirius's view of me as a meddling old wizard true." He murmured.

Severus determined that his agreement was not needed.

Albus drew himself up. "Severus, I would appreciate…"

"Black will not hear of this conversation from me." Severus confirmed silkily.

"Thank you, Severus." Albus inclined his head, his floppy hat almost sliding off. "I will leave you to your preparations."

Severus watched as Albus swept out in a bustle of lime green robes. He shook his head and checked the time. He needed to depart…

The wooden box on top of the mantelpiece began to vibrate. He swore under his breath and drew out the mirror that Black had gifted him. He glared at the ornate hand-mirror torn between admiration of
the Marauders' inventiveness and his usual disgust at the same.

"Black." Severus muttered tersely.

It only took a moment for Black's visage to swim into view.

Black looked tired and worn. The previous day's events no doubt catching up with him. "Snape."

Severus acknowledged the greeting with a frown. "This will have to be quick. I'm due to begin the Restoration potion and the Headmaster has already delayed me." He paused. "I was surprised at his early return."

"The Bulgarians are doing the official clean-up," Black pointed out. "there's not a great deal for the War Council to do." He shook himself making the image waver. "Did Albus tell you that Amicus Carrow was spotted entering Belgium this morning?" he asked, changing the subject.

"No." Severus said, hiding his annoyance at Albus; that was a useful piece of intelligence.

Black grimaced. "You might want to share that with Crouch to take back to the Dark Lord."

Severus gave a slow nod. He understood Black's reasoning; Carrow had failed in his mission and had run away. The Dark Lord's punishment would suffice as Black's vengeance until Black could get his hands on the wizard.

"I will inform him." Severus confirmed.

"If you can do some digging on that Werewolf potion." Black sighed heavily. "We've deemed it need to know. I have some blood samples on their way to you for analysis."

Severus didn't react to the assumption that he would look at them. The potion which had turned afflicted men and women into their werewolf selves without the full moon did need investigation and a counter as soon as it was possible to make one.

"I'll begin as soon as they arrive." He cleared his throat. "I should leave; I have a short window to begin the Restoration potion."

"Watch your back, Snape." Black said and the mirror went dark.

Severus replaced the mirror in the wooden box and summoned his cloak to him. Black was a surprisingly competent leader. He paused a full second, arrested by the thought before he pushed it away. They may have reconciled enough to respect each other's skills and experience but Black was still Black after all.

o-O-o

20th April 1995

"Dear Merlin!" Clara breathed out beside Sirius. She shielded her eyes with one hand and gaped at the impromptu flying acrobatics above her. "Is that safe?"

Sirius grinned at her and glanced upward. He hid his own wince at Harry's speed and tricks. "Safe, no." He said dryly.

"Maybe he should come down now." Sian commented.

Sirius darted a look at her and she turned away with a faint blush. She'd been weird with him since
the attack and Sirius had a feeling it had something to do with pack dynamics and his proving himself a competent beta, even if his canine form was a Grim and not a wolf. Since they usually could still hardly stand to be in the same room together he had decided he was going to ignore the whole thing.

Another youngster went barrelling over their heads and Sirius sighed. Trust Harry to realise the pack's youngsters hadn't had flying lessons and to insist on buying brooms and giving them instruction before they went back to England.

That thought brought on a wave of melancholic resentment at the need to return and Sirius ignored that too. His and Harry's European vacation had been great – vampiric stealth attacks aside – and while a large part of him simply wanted to continue travelling with Harry and thinking about nothing more than the next sight-seeing trip, they did have responsibilities and a life back in England they needed to return to living.

Of course returning to England also meant acknowledging that they would be returning to the thorny problem of Voldemort and the third task; of dealing with Crouch who was most likely hiding at Hogwarts as a student. Sirius had come to the conclusion that Crouch wasn't going to get caught by something as simple as a search for contraband; that Wormtail had helped him subvert the map somehow (Harry had commented that it would explain why George and Fred had never spotted the rat was Pettigrew); it meant that Crouch was taking his disguise seriously. And even if he did get caught Sirius agreed with Snape's theory that Crouch would kill himself before he'd give up information. What they needed was to get hold of Wormy who would clearly sell his own mother if it protected his own hide…

"He's fine." Sirius dragged himself back to the present and the worry of the two women beside him. "He'll be down soon."

"I don't know how you can stand it." Clara admitted. "I'd be worrying about him falling all the time."

"He's a good flyer." Sirius stated firmly. Plus he knew that Harry could change into Snitch at a moment's notice, saving himself.

"He's going to be missed." Clara said fondly.

"When you move into the Black Estate you'll see him more often." Sirius said.

Sian made a tutting sound. "I don't understand why we can't come back now.

"Politics." Sirius answered anyway. "We want people to get used to the idea of you before we bludgeon them with the presence of an actual organised pack on British soil."

Sian pulled a face but subsided. "When is Remus due to arrive back?"

Remus and Dora had headed for Paris for their honeymoon once the wedding ball was over. Sirius had gifted them the trip hoping that the semblance of normality would counter the very abnormal wedding day.

"The Alpha and his mate will be back within the hour." Clara confirmed.

Sian gave a huff and walked away quickly.

Sirius shook her head. "She's not going to accept Remus is off the market, is she?"
"She will if she wants to stay in the pack." Clara grinned. "Of course, she's also realised there may be a benefit in hooking up with his beta."

Sirius regarded her with an even grey stare. "I wish Patrick all the best with her."

Clara hooted with laughter.

Sirius smiled back. He liked Clara. He could see why Remus had been so enamoured of her before his friend had found out that she preferred the fairer sex herself. She also seemed genuinely fond of Dora which endeared her to Sirius even more.

"I wish you and Harry could stay for longer." Clara said a touch wistfully as they tracked the youngsters in the sky. "It's been good for the pack having you stay here."

"We've enjoyed it." Sirius said simply.

"I can't believe he's bounced back so quickly." Clara commented quietly, folding her arms and rubbing them slightly.

"He has the advantage of youth," Sirius said wryly, "and Harry's a survivor." Some days he wished Harry hadn't been through as much as he had but he had to admit that he appreciated that Harry wasn't wallowing in angst over the events of the wedding day.

Harry had managed to put aside the terror of being chased by a werewolf, being attacked by vampires, and the sight of a dead witch with surprising aplomb. Either that or he was saving his freak out for the mind healer.

But Sirius worried that Harry was simply getting far too used to life threatening situations. He, himself, was still wrestling with what had happened – had almost happened – enough that he would be keeping their mind healer occupied for months.

He had run the forensics before the Aurors had arrived and removed the evidence of Narcissa's cold removal of Alecto Carrow. Sirius wasn't about to hand over his pregnant cousin to the Aurors for putting down a witch who would have killed their entire family. Narcissa hadn't done anything that Sirius wouldn't have done himself in her shoes.

Which was a rather depressing thought.

But then he and Narcissa had always been ruthless in their defence of the people they loved. Frankly he was impressed she'd simply snuffed Carrow like a candle rather than chopping off her head in the same way her sister and niece had chopped off Carrow's arms (and Sirius took a moment to wonder at how scary all his cousins actually were).

Still…perhaps Albus's disapproval of Sirius's satisfaction at Carrow's death wasn't all unduly warranted.

Then he remembered how Simeon had taken a day to heal before he, Anna and Jason had headed back to Australia; how Ted had spent the last few days in Saint Helga’s in the Bulgarian capital recovering from his wounds…and the tiny hint of remorse he felt vanished like snow in sunshine.

Sirius glanced over at Clara. It wasn't just the Black women who were scary, he mused, remembering how she'd taken down the vampire. He thought, not for the first time, that she would have been a good match for Remus. But Remus had Dora now and Sirius was feeling much more optimistic about that relationship after the wedding.
The vows had been particularly poignant and revealing, Sirius mused as he watched Harry demonstrating a sharp turn with marvellous precision. Remus's commitment to building a partnership similar to his parents was a wonderful reassurance for Dora, just as her declaration that Remus was who she wanted was a wonderful reassurance to his worry that no-one would ever see past the wolf.

Maybe, Sirius considered, as Harry demonstrated another move, Remus and Dora would both find the happiness they deserved after all; the happiness that he'd once believed their getting together would engender before the baby had complicated things. Dora was having to grow up faster; Remus needed someone to lean against in the midst of his Alpha responsibilities.

They were going to have to talk at some point about Remus's continuing position as steward when really Remus needed to fully assume his Alpha position; be a leader in his own right. Sirius understood that more having spent time with the pack. But Sirius knew Remus wouldn't want to fully let go of the steward role – Remus was too stubborn and honourable for his own good – but they would need to settle on some form of compromise.

Something else to think about in amongst the reality that they needed to start planning for the third task; for taking down Voldemort once and for all.

"I have to admit," Clara said breaking into his thoughts, "I think Harry is dealing with it better than I am."

"You defended your pack." Sirius said.

"I killed." Clara said tersely. She tightened her arms around herself. "And worse, I killed as a werewolf. I know it was only a vampire but…"

"You were defending your pack." Sirius stated again more firmly. "If you hadn't been given the potion, if you had been a witch in that moment rather than a werewolf – what would you have done?"

Her expression went from annoyed to contemplative to chagrined. "Huh." She sighed and met his eyes. "I don't know if I want to thank you for opening my eyes to the reality that I would have killed that vampire either way."

"I was nineteen when I killed my first Death Eater." Sirius replied. "Odis Branaugh. He was wanted for the murder and rape of an entire muggleborn family – the Perkins. I'd gone to school with the youngest brother, David Perkins. He was a Hufflepuff, a genuinely nice guy. We'd tracked Branaugh down to this crappy little tavern in Wales and…there was a fight. He managed to land a particularly nasty spell on Prongs – James, Harry's father, and he went down, and Branaugh was going to…" He paused. "I might have lost it a touch then. My fire-whip spell cleaved him in two. I thought…I thought I'd just provided the evidence they were right to everyone who said I was Dark because I was a Black."

Clara didn't interrupt as he paused again; she just waited.

"I was in the bathroom, throwing up in a toilet when James and Lily walked in. They held my hair, made me rinse my mouth and do a freshening spell. And then they both hugged the dickens out of me and thanked me for saving James's life; told me that it didn't matter that I killed someone, that I was a good man who'd defended his brother, his family." Sirius reminisced, unaware of the fondness that coated his voice and shone from his grey eyes. "I think when they asked me to be Harry's godfather, it was because they knew I'd kill to protect him. I killed more vampires protecting him and the rest of the pack than you, and while the likes of Albus Dumbledore may not approve, I know I'm still a good man." He reached out a hand and touched her gently on the shoulder. "And you're still a
good woman, Clara."

Clara gave a small huff but she nodded. "Thank you."

A rush of wind as Harry buzzed them, coming into land, the young boy he'd been flying with landing just behind him, broke the shared moment of camaraderie and understanding.

Harry patted Dougal on the back and waved him goodbye as the young werewolf scampered off towards the house.

Sirius greeted his son with a wide smile. "Good flight?"

"The best." Harry grinned. "I love this broomstick."

As the broomstick in question had been Sirius's Christmas present to him, his words gave Sirius a warm glow.

"Everything OK?" asked Harry, perceptively picking up on the serious undertones between Sirius and Clara.

"I was worrying about killing a vampire." Clara admitted honestly, winning her brownie points with Sirius for her straightforwardness. "Your father was helping me put it into perspective."

Harry's worry melted away and he darted a look at Sirius. "He's good at that."

Clara nodded. "I'd better go and check all the work on the new Master suite have been completed. I don't want Remus and Tonks coming back to a half-finished room." She waved a goodbye to them and headed off back to the house.

Sirius had declared the space where Carrow had died to be repurposed into a closet. He'd rearranged the rooms on that wing, placing the Master suite into the eaves of the farmhouse. It had been a nightmare finding a wizarding construction company to come and do the work at short notice but both Bogdan and Gregor had provided him with useful references.

Harry poked him in the arm. "Are we still leaving tomorrow?"

Sirius nodded and slung an arm around Harry's shoulders as they began their own walk back. "'Fraid so."

"It'll be good to get back." Harry said, surprising Sirius. "Not that it hasn't been great being out here and seeing everyone but…" he sighed heavily, "is it bad that I just want the whole thing with Tom to be over already?"

"Pretty normal if you ask me." Sirius replied calmly. He just wanted it to be over too. "There'll be a War Council at the beginning of next week," the first week back at school, "we should do some planning then. We'll see what falls out of the Headmaster's raid for contraband and Snape thinks he'll have the potion ready for the Summers woman soon now he doesn't have to worry about trying for a combination that would wake up an elf at the same time."

"Planning's good." Harry said. "We need the alliance members to think about what to do with Crouch in the school? And Hermione said she and Daphne had been talking at the wedding ball about the third task."

Sirius nodded.
"I think they have some more spells for me to learn." Harry frowned. "She said Hannah was saying she wasn't sure she and Sue should come to the meetings after what happened on the second task."

"They think they might get conscripted into the third task as a hostage?" Sirius asked, bemused.

Harry pushed his glasses up his nose and shifted the grip on his broomstick. "They've been acting weird since the whole thing with Sue and Cedric."

It had to have been humiliating for Sue to be chosen as Cedric's hostage in some ways, and certainly the fallout and threatening letter incident hadn't helped. But it seemed like an extreme reaction to back away from helping Harry completely and they had both taken the Heir's oath of fealty which meant magic might judge their inaction. Sirius wondered if he needed to have a chat with Richard and see what was going on. He mentally added it to his list of things to do.

"I think Neville's pretty much reached the end of his rope with Hannah." Harry commented idly as they navigated a set of steps. "And I think Ron's thinking about ending it with Lavender."

Sirius's lips twitched at the teenage angst; remembered with nostalgia when his own life was consumed with teenage romance. "It'll be shame about Hannah and Neville." He commented. "I think both families were hoping it would end up being a match."

"Yeah." Harry blew out a breath. "It just…"

"You're worried you and Hermione might be next to slide onto shaky ground." Sirius said, understanding the unspoken worry that coloured Harry's tone because he'd heard the same in James's too many years before. "Is there any reason to worry?"

"Not really." Harry admitted ruefully. "Just…I know she doesn't expect us to last. She's dropped a couple of hints in the past about how most people don't end up with their first girlfriends or boyfriends and…" he shrugged. "I guess I think the others breaking up will kind of make her point for her again?"

"Well, she's right." Sirius replied. "Most teenage couples don't end up together for life." He brought Harry to a stop; they were within touching distance of the house but Sirius knew the conversation would somehow be deemed over once they were within its walls. "You and Hermione make a great couple, but you are young, and if you did break up it wouldn't be the end of the world even if it would seem like it for a few days or weeks even."

"I don't want to break up with her." Harry toed the ground in frustration. "And I don't want her to get any ideas about breaking up with me because the others are breaking up."

"Well, you just have to trust that she won't." Sirius said. "I don't think she will. Hermione's not the type to be influenced by peer shenanigans."

Harry nodded, a glimmer of relief in his green eyes. "She was pretty annoyed about the whole cat thing."

It had taken Harry invoking the family magic again to change her back. Which she promptly did with no clothes. Minnie had quickly sorted her out with a blanket, but it had been deeply mortifying for Hermione and it had taken a day before she'd talked to Harry without the pair of them blushing furiously.

"If she'd didn't break up with you about you changing her back naked, I think you're pretty solid." Sirius commented as he turned them toward the farmhouse again.
"She knows I didn’t do it on purpose." Harry pointed out, a red flush rising in his cheeks again. He looked away and back again. "Do you think it means anything that she isn't...that her form has nothing to do with mine?"

"Your Mum identified heavily as your Dad's wife at the time she took the potion." Sirius answered calmly, having expected the question since Hermione's transformation. "Hermione's determined to be her own person regardless of who she's dating. Her cat form is an expression of her independence in that regard."

Harry nodded slowly. "So it's not a representation of how compatible or not we are?"

"Merlin, no." Sirius snorted. "It's a nice romantic thought that the love of your life will also share your animagus form but it's rare that a couple can even become animagi together. Your Mum might have found her form mirrored your Dad's but she never actually changed into it."

Harry fell silent again.

They entered through the back door, Harry stowing his broomstick in the utility room. Sirius shrugged out of his outer robe and happily wandered into the kitchen where the divine smelling stew permeated the air.

"That smells delicious." Sirius said, beaming with approval at Gilby. The elves had been disgruntled over Harry's orders to be safe (and Sirius understood the protective streak that had Harry wanting to keep the elves out of it even if they could have been useful) but it had quickly been forgiven in the need for the massive clean-up. Kreacher wasn't speaking to any of them since he'd been denied the opportunity to defend Narcissa.

Harry's stomach rumbled. He blushed again. "I guess I worked up on appetite."

"You're a growing boy." Sirius agreed lightly as Gilby sprang into action to make sure Harry had a snack.

"So Remus comes back tonight." Harry said after thanking Gilby for the plate of sandwiches that had been pressed upon him.

"Yes," Sirius said, "and we go back tomorrow."

Harry nodded, chewing on his chicken sandwich thoughtfully. "You know, even though I want to go home and get the whole thing with Tom over with, it's going to be weird being back at Hogwarts after this holiday."

"Weird." Sirius agreed cheerfully.

Harry rolled his eyes expressively. "Can we visit the pack in the Summer? I promised Dougal we'd do some Quidditch."

Sirius felt his heart lighten a touch. It was the first time Harry had suggested plans for after the end of the school year. It gave him hope that Harry was planning to survive his confrontation with Voldemort.

"Yes," Sirius said, ignoring the lump in his throat and reaching out to ruffle Harry's hair, "we can visit again in the Summer."

o-O-o
Hermione gave a sigh of relief and slumped back on her bed. The train journey back to Hogwarts had been long and tiring, the welcome back feast tedious and she was glad to retreat to her dorm and enjoy the peace before her dorm mates arrived.

Crookshanks jumped up beside her and gave her a friendly bump with his head. She petted him absently, chewing on her lower lip as she considered that her animagus form was feline. Had her familiar known? Had that been what had drawn him to her? She knew if she transformed it was unlikely that she would be able to understand him. He'd remain a Kneazle and she'd be a human transformed into a cat. Of course, she had to actually transform first.

She gave another heavier sigh and wondered whether she really wanted to pursue transforming into a cat. She was a touch disappointed in her form. She liked cats, she did. And she loved her familiar, she hastily thought, fingers sinking into his fur again. But she wasn't sure she was ready to accept what it said about her.

There were a lot of positives, Hermione told herself firmly. Cats were intelligent, curious and independent. That was her. They were also sneaky, ruthless and could be stand-offish. OK…maybe that was also her. She frowned. It rankled that she wasn't something else; she could admit it to herself. She liked cats but she'd wanted to be something fiercer…something different.

At least it explained why she and Ron butted heads a lot of the time. Between his inner dog and her inner cat, it was a wonder they managed to connect on any level at all. Well, they wouldn't, Hermione reminded herself, if it wasn't for Harry. Harry who was a raven in his true form.

A bird.

Cats preyed on birds. So what did that say about their relationship? She shook her head, sending her hair flying and prompting Crooks into giving her a disapproving stare. She'd had the lecture from Sirius and Professor McGonagall that she shouldn't read anything into her relationships with others because of her form. And Harry had certainly looked at her admiringly when she'd been naked…

She felt her face go bright red with remembered embarrassment. She reached over and pulled a pillow over herself as though to hide from the memory.

Maybe she should speak with Luna, Hermione mused. The Ravenclaw had become a good friend and always seemed to help Hermione find clarity.

She shook herself lightly and pushed the pillow aside. It seemed selfish to focus on her issues with being an animagus when so much else had happened. The wedding had been surprisingly touching for all it had been prompted by a pregnancy and the aftermath…

The events at Black Farm had been quietly pushed aside in favour of the wedding ball. She and her parents had been transported to the Ministry and looked after beautifully, while Sirius had stayed behind with Aurors dealing with the clean-up. It had been frightening but quickly forgotten. She knew her parents had talked to Sirius about whether it would be safe to attend anything further until the matter of Voldemort was taken care of once and for all, and had concluded they wouldn't let him win by staying away. Hermione was thankful, all the more for knowing before she'd been adopted by the House of Black, her parents may have made an entirely different decision just out of a lack of knowledge and understanding about the wizarding world.

The dorm room door opened and Lavender raced through, throwing herself on her bed with a wail.
Hermione's eyes widened as she struggled up into a sitting position, readying herself to comfort the other girl. Parvati hurried in and closed the door immediately heading for Lavender.

Hermione scuttled off the bed. "What's happened?"

Parvati stroked a hand over Lavender's hair as the other girl sobbed into her pillow. "Ron broke up with her!" Her dark eyes turned accusingly on Hermione.

Hermione held up her hands. "Don't look at me!" She said. "I had no idea he was planning to do that!"

And she hadn't. Boys, thought Hermione exasperatedly.

"I don't understand!" Lavender sobbed. "We were having so much fun!"

Maybe too much, Hermione mused inwardly. She did know that Ron had been taken to task by Molly during the Easter break for the lewd behaviour the couple had engaged in – the twins had teased him most of the journey back. She sighed and tried to pat Lavender consolingly on the arm.

"I could go and see if I can find out something?" Hermione offered slightly hesitantly.

Lavender hurled herself upright so fast, she dislodged Parvati who almost slipped off the bed and forced Hermione to take a step back lest she get an elbow in her face. "Would you?!"

Hermione waved a hand toward the door. "I'll go right now."

Lavender smiled tremulously at her, her eyes shining bright with new tears. "Thank you!"

Behind her, Parvati rolled her eyes expressively. "Thanks, Hermione. While you do that I'll get Lav cleaned up."

Hermione nodded and hastily made for the door. It only took her a few minutes to traverse the stairs down, make her way through the busy common room – and seriously shouldn't the prefects be herding people to the dorms already? – and up the boys' stairs to the fourth year boys' dorm. She opened the closed door and stormed through.

Neville, to her left, yelped and dove over the bed, throwing the curtain across the side to hide himself.

"HERMIONE!" Ron dived for his bed and she caught a glimpse of pale freckled flesh before his body disappeared beneath covers.

By the bed next to him, Harry snatched up a discarded towel and yanked it around his lower body. Her eyes widened as she took in his blushing torso.

A half-dressed Seamus settled his hands on his hips, trousers gaping open to reveal Merlin underpants, and glared at her. "Merlin, Granger! Don't you knock?!"

Thankfully, Dean seemed to be in the bathroom if the off-key rendition of the latest Take That song over the faint sound of a shower spray was any indication.

Hermione felt her face heat up, knew she was red-faced, and averted her eyes from Seamus. She naturally turned to Harry, whose hand tightened into a white-knuckled grip on the blue towel he had covering him. She frowned.

"Why are you here?" Hermione demanded.
"Shouldn't we be asking YOU that?" asked Ron grumpily, huddling into his bed covers.

She glared at him. "Lavender's in bits. I came to find out why you dumped her!" She snapped, ignoring Seamus's exclamation at the revelation, and returned her attention to Harry. "Well?"

"Sirius asked Aunt Min...I mean Professor McGonagall, if I could stay over in the dorm more this term." Harry said, his free hand patting the bed behind him for his robe.

"Oh." Hermione vaguely recalled he had told her something about Sirius's plan to get him used to Gryffindor again while they were in Paris. "But what about Crouch? If he is pretending to be a student, isn't it dangerous for you to stay in the dorm?" She stared at Seamus as though her glare was enough to detect if he was an imposter.

"Seamus and everyone here took a blood identity test and Sirius is going to be right outside the door once lights out is called." Harry shrugged. "Besides, I told you; at the alliance meeting yesterday everyone agreed we act as though we don't really suspect anything so we don't tip Crouch off and just make sure we're never alone so he can target one of us." He grasped his robe tightly.

Hermione blushed lightly remembering how she'd escaped up to her room to spend time alone earlier. She had promised her parents that she'd be extra careful knowing that as Harry's girlfriend she'd be a tempting target for Crouch. Her parents had been close to pulling her out of Hogwarts – actually a lot of the alliance members had been unhappy at the idea of sending their children back to the school knowing it was very likely Crouch was hiding in the student population. It had taken a lot of discussion before it had been agreed that everyone would return and safety measures taken.

"What about Lavender?" Hermione asked changing the subject and glaring at Ron.

"I told Lavender that I thought we didn't have enough in common to keep up being boyfriend and girlfriend!" Ron retorted, answering her primary question. "Not long term."

That was surprisingly perceptive of Ron, Hermione mused, before remonstrating inwardly that she was being unfair to the red-head.

"Best to end it before we went any further." Ron concluded.

"Quite right." Hermione agreed. "That was a very sensible thing to do, Ron."

Ron looked taken aback by her approval.

"Uh, Hermione..." Harry had his robe clutched in one hand, the towel in another. "Do you think..."

She bit her lip as she realised Harry was still blushing. "Oh sorry. I'll turn my back if you want to put your robe on."

"Thank you." Harry said fervently.

"Or alternatively Miss Granger could remove herself and make her way back to her own dormitory." Professor McGonagall's dry voice drifted over Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione slowly swivelled to face the open doorway and she flushed bright red at the sight of the Head of Gryffindor stood between Professor Moody and a beaming Headmaster. "Professors! This is, uh..."

"We heard, Miss Granger." Professor McGonagall said sternly. "Since you have satisfied your curiosity in regards to the end of Mister Weasley's romance with Miss Brown, I suggest you take
"Of course!" Hermione said immediately, mortified. She glanced over her shoulder at Harry who smiled sympathetically back at her.

"See you tomorrow." Harry said softly.

Hermione nodded and stepped out of the room.

"Perhaps you should consider knocking before entering next time, lass." Moody commented as she inched past him to take the stairs down.

She blushed again but nodded in agreement.

"Right, now!" Moody's voice boomed down the stairwell. "Line up next to your trunks! Spot check for contraband!"

Hermione hurried down into the common room and back up to her dorm. She quickly closed the door behind her and slumped against it.

"Well?!" asked Lavender impatiently, pushing away from Parvati to make her way over to Hermione. "What did Ron say?"

Hermione rubbed her nose tiredly. "Not much." She admitted. She ushered Lavender back towards her bed. "We got interrupted by…"

"Oh, the Professors!" Parvati blurted out. "They'd doing checks for banned items!"

"But Ron said something?" Lavender was like a dog with a bone, her attention never wavering from Hermione.

Hermione perched on the end of the bed. "He said he didn't think you had enough in common for your relationship to go further."

Lavender's hopeful expression crumpled into dismay. "Oh."

"I'm sorry, Lav," said Parvati, sweeping Lavender's hair back over a shoulder before hugging her.

"No," Lavender sniffed, "actually he maybe has a point." She plucked at the coverlet absently. "We didn't really have a lot to talk about once we stopped, you know…"

"Snogging each other's brains out?" suggested Parvati a touch tartly.

Lavender pushed her weakly and grinned. "Yeah, pretty much that." She sighed. "He was a fantastic kisser."

Hermione managed to keep the wince off her face. "Right. Well, I should get ready for bed."

"Thanks, Hermione." Lavender said brightly. "For finding out."

Hermione waved away her thanks as she made for the bathroom. She closed the door and shook her head. To think she'd embarrassed herself in front of the Headmaster, Professor Moody and Professor McGonagall for no real reason…

The farcical nature of her entry into the boys' dorm ran through her head again and a chuckle took her by surprise, amusement bubbling up as she recalled the way they'd all dived for cover. She smiled as
she headed for the shower. At least she and Harry were kind of even now, she thought happily. He'd seen her when she'd transformed back from being a cat and now she'd seen him. It did make her feel a lot better about that.

Now all she had to do was feel better about being a cat and half her problems would be solved.

If only Harry's problems could be solved so easily, Hermione considered with a grimace. Her boyfriend was still facing the final task of the tournament and the denouement to whatever dastardly scheme had been concocted by Voldemort. But he wasn't alone and Hermione had every intention of being right beside him for as long as she could – hopefully without either of them having to be naked.

_o-O-o_

"Well, that was close." Seamus said as soon as the door closed on the three departing professors.

Harry, who was in the process of finally being able to lose the towel and get dressed into his pyjamas, glanced over towards Seamus and wondered again why he'd thought spending time in the tower was a good idea. He sighed inwardly. It was a good idea if he wanted to feel a part of Gryffindor again. But he couldn't help wish for a moment that he was back in the rooms with Sirius and where nobody barged through his bedroom door.

Seamus leaped over his trunk and made his way to the window. He opened it, reached around the window to the ledge on the wall and pulled back with his hand wrapped around a large bottle of muggle Irish whiskey. "Ta da!"

"Blimey!" Ron muttered.

"Sneaked it out of my Ma's kitchen last night." Seamus said proudly.

Dean wandered in from the bathroom, stopped and stared at Seamus for a moment. "Did I miss something?"

"Nothing." Neville replied dryly, smoothing his hand down his pyjama front. "Just the Professors checking we don't have bottles of whiskey and Hermione wanting to find out why Ron chucked Lavender."

"You broke up with Lavender?" Dean blinked at Ron. "Really?"

"Yeah," Ron shrugged self-consciously, "didn't really fit, you know?"

Dean nodded slowly and made for his bed. "Sorry to hear that, mate."

"Sometimes it doesn't." Neville said morosely, slumping down to sit on his bed.

Harry put his glasses on and peered in his godbrother's direction. "You and Hannah?"

"I'm breaking up with her tomorrow." Neville confirmed with a forlorn shrug. "Today was the last straw."

The other boys looked at Neville and then back to Harry. Harry rolled his eyes at the silent plea that he be the one to step in. He made his way over and sat next to Neville. "You want to talk about it?"

"Here," Seamus said suddenly, "let's gather round and have a drink." He unscrewed the bottle and
took a gulp before handing the bottle to Neville.

Neville grimaced but took a drink. He offered it to Harry who shook his head.

"Not unless you want my magic out of control and flattening Hogwarts." Harry said, remembering the Summer and his disastrous drinking with his American friends.

Neville blanched a little and handed the bottle instead to Ron who had stumbled over to sit beside Harry. He took a drink, coughed and spluttered his way through the burn and handed it onto Dean who'd sat on the floor in front of Neville along with Seamus.

"So…" Seamus waved the bottle. "You and Hannah?"

"She and Sue were meant to sit with me on the train." Neville explained. "Only they didn't turn up to the compartment at King's Cross and when I went looking for them Hannah said Sue wasn't up to seeing anyone and made me leave." His voice had risen steadily throughout and Harry couldn't help thinking he was entitled to the note of indignation at the end.

"Wow, mate." Ron shook his head and reached for the bottle. He took a large swig and handed it to Neville.

Neville took a sip, grimaced and handed it back to Seamus who drank again before handing it to Dean.

"It's just..." Neville sighed heavily, his cheeks flushed pink from the alcohol, "I really like her but it's the last straw. She keeps cancelling on me for Sue and Sue just won't buck up from the whole thing with Cedric!"

"That poisonous letter really traumatised her." Harry noted quietly. He had felt for Sue. If he hadn't had owl wards and an overprotective Padfoot, he'd probably have received similar missives through the post himself. He could understand Sue's retreat.

"I know," Neville said, simply passing the bottle to Ron when Seamus handed it to him, "and I'm not saying she isn't right to be upset or anything but is it so wrong to want to spend time with my girlfriend?"

"No, Nev." Harry agreed with a sigh. It was a valid argument and Hannah was making it clear just how unimportant Neville was to her in the way she was ignoring him in favour of Sue. He did want better for Neville who deserved to have someone put him first – or at least maintain some semblance of a relationship while helping a friend.

"Oooh." Ron's eyes widened suddenly and he made a gesture with the bottle that almost had whiskey splashing onto Neville's bed.

Harry grabbed the bottle and handed it over to Dean. "What?"

"I was just thinking about what Moody said about changing habits and…" Ron stared at Harry, horror in his pale blue eyes, "you don't think Crouch Junior is hiding as Sue or Hannah do you?"

They all stared at Ron with varying degrees of horror.

"No!" Neville shook his head wildly. "Just...no!"

"But it explains why they've been so mental!" Ron pointed out passionately. "Whoever one of them's him has the other under the Imperius! They alibi each other! It all makes sense!"
"It does not make sense," Harry stated firmly, crossing his arms over his chest. Although, he mused, he did see why Ron had jumped to that conclusion. They were admittedly acting weird even if they did have a good reason.

"It does!" Dean argued. "Ron's right! Hannah wouldn't have treated Neville this way back at Christmas!"

Neville paled. "But it's...it can't be..."

"Look," Harry said, "Sue and Hannah were home over the Easter and we're pretty convinced if Crouch is masquerading as a student he was here over the holidays. So it can't be them!"

"Or Crouch has a whole group of students he's pretending to be and he's rotating through them or something!" Ron countered.

"What if they _are_ in trouble?" Neville wondered out loud.

Harry dragged his gaze from Ron to look at Neville. "Nev?"

"It's just..." Neville made an impatient gesture, "they are acting weird!"

"Sue was threatened!" Harry said with some exasperation. "Hannah's protective! They've been friends for years!"

"Even so," Ron butted in, "ignoring your boyfriend so completely? Sue hiding away like a meek little thing? She almost took my balls off in duelling class at the start of the year!"

"They have a point." Seamus said from his sprawled position on the floor. The mostly empty bottle of whiskey dangled from his fingers and Harry got hold of it, closing it and setting it aside before it spilled over and the room was drenched in whiskey smell.

"We should investigate!" Ron proclaimed suddenly, standing up on the bed. "We should follow them tomorrow!"

"I don't think stalking them is a good idea." Harry said, trying to keep his voice steady and firm. "It's a great idea!" Ron argued, slurring his words. "We follow them and when we have evidence that they're him, we jump them!"

Harry pinched the brow of his nose and wished again he was back in his rooms with Sirius. Why did he have to be the sensible one, he mused tiredly. Probably because he was the only sober one. It sucked.

He sighed and broke into the babbling plans of the group of boys around him.

"You can't follow girls around the school and attack them!" Harry said loudly. "You'll get into trouble! Or expelled!" Merlin, he sounded like Hermione.

There was a stunned silence.

"Harry's right." Ron conceded.

"Thank you." Harry said.

"What we need to do is be stealthy!" Ron declared.
Harry dropped his head into his hands.

"We can sneak out…"

"You can't sneak out!" Harry hissed. "Sirius is out there!"

"Why?" asked Ron, visibly perplexed.

"He's protecting Harry." Neville spelled out. "Harry said before, remember? When Hermione asked him why he was here?"

"Bugger." Ron flopped back, causing the bed to heave in an uneven bounce. "Well, how do we corner Sue and Hannah now?"

"I'll tell Sirius tomorrow." Harry stated with what he hoped was stern finality. "He can raise it with their folks and if there is something else going on, they'll discover it that way."

Ron grumbled but nodded.

Neville gave a quick nod of gratitude.

"Bed." Harry declared. "We've got an early start." He made his way back to his own and the others followed to theirs. Seamus staggering haphazardly over to simply throw himself atop his covers.

The lights went out and Harry turned over, pushing his pillow into a more comfortable position. Could Ron be right, he wondered. He shook his head. Crouch was smart. If he were Crouch he would choose some student who had no visible connection to any of the alliance. In fact he'd choose someone who wasn't friendly with anyone very much so he could fly under the radar…

Harry frowned heavily.

He couldn't see Crouch taking the place of a first year…no, Crouch wouldn't be able to hide his knowledge so he had to be hiding in the upper years. Probably in Slytherin or Ravenclaw somewhere where advanced knowledge of spells wouldn't be unusual…

A loud snore to his left brought his racing mind into sharp focus. He wasn't going to be able to sleep until he spoke with Sirius and confided his suspicions. He slipped out from under the covers and grabbed his robe. He padded over in his bare feet to the dorm door and opened it.

The black Grim on the landing immediately raised its head. Harry stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him softly.

Sirius shifted straight away. "What's up?"

"Can we go back to our rooms?" asked Harry urgently. "I need to talk to you."

Sirius nodded gravely and Harry gave a sigh of relief as they headed down the stairs.

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Sirius raised an eyebrow as Harry came to a stumbling halt.

He cleared his throat. "Right, so let me summarise just to make sure I've got this straight." He began. "You went to spend the night in the boys' dorm and ended up thwarting a drunken attempt to spy on Sue and Hannah by promising you'd raise the possibility of them being part of Crouch's schemes to me?"
Harry nodded and sipped the mug of hot chocolate Dobby had given him as soon as he and Sirius had entered their usual suite of rooms at Hogwarts. Sirius took a sip of his own and leaned back into the plush cushions adorning their living room sofa.

"But then you got thinking about who Crouch was likely to be and came up with a...a profile." Sirius pressed his lips together. Harry's logic was hard to argue with.

"You think I'm right, don't you?" Harry said.

"I think you have a very plausible theory of Crouch being one of the seventh years." Sirius confirmed. "I'll speak to the Heads in the morning – well, later this morning, we're likely to narrow that down to the ones that are independent and potentially friendless."

"But there's no proof." Harry sighed, rubbing a hand across his face.

"The contraband check went pretty much the way we thought it would; nothing was found." Sirius gestured with his mug. "I mean, apart from a bit of alcohol, some prank stuff and one hideously fluffy bunny someone was keeping as a pet. And he's definitely not showing on the map."

"So he still has a vanishing cabinet stashed somewhere." Harry bit his lip.

"If we can narrow down the suspects, we can keep watch on them." Sirius said. "Snape thinks Crouch will attempt to maintain his guard duty when Snape is doing the potion as much as he can. If he does then we will catch him using it and verify who he is."

Sirius was still split on whether they should leave Crouch in place if they did identify him. There were pros and cons on both sides. In his heart Sirius wanted Crouch locked up or put down. Sirius grimaced. He knew the time for a decision was fast approaching and it wasn't his alone to make.

Harry yawned. "What about Sue and Hannah?"

"I don't think either of them are Crouch or under his spell." Sirius replied absently, his mind still on the thorny subject of what to do if they found Crouch.

"Me either," Harry said pointedly, "I meant...Ron was right in that something's not right with them."

"I'll talk with Leonard and Richard." Sirius said. "It's likely that the girls are reacting to the attack on Sue but it looks like they're not dealing with it in a healthy way."

Harry nodded, relief flooding his tired face. "Can we just stay here tonight?"

Sirius let his gaze roam over Harry and read the anxious hope that was written there with a frown. It was good Harry felt he could relax in the sanctum of the rooms they had; bad that Harry didn't feel comfortable returning to the dorm.

"You don't want to head back?" inquired Sirius gently. "Wake up with the others tomorrow?"

Harry shook his head. "It's late and...they're all going to be hung over."

"There's that." Sirius sighed and nodded. "Go on then. Up to bed with you. I'll get Dobby to retrieve what you've left in the dorm."

Harry flung himself over the gap to hug Sirius quickly before he called out a brisk 'good night' and was up the stairs before Sirius could draw breath to wish him the same.

It looked like the first attempt to get Harry used to Gryffindor again was a spectacular failure. Sirius
sighed and made for his own bed.

The next morning brought with it a flurry of activity as Sirius settled back into the routine of life at Hogwarts. Harry slept late, had a rushed breakfast and made off for his schooling in the company of Bill Weasley with barely a word about their discussions in the middle of the night. Penny arrived on the dot of nine and Sirius wasted no time starting the mountain of work that awaited him. He sent an invitation for dinner to the Abbotts and Bones' before diving into the paperwork Penny had set aside for him.

The day disappeared in a blink of an eye. The time off for a European vacation and a wedding meant there was more than enough to keep him busy. A message to the Heads of Houses, two mirror calls with Remus provided clarity on a few things, and all too soon Sirius was wishing Penny a good evening as Harry arrived back with the news that Neville had ended things with Hannah at lunch.

Sirius pushed him in the direction of the bedrooms to change for the War Council just as Dobby greeted the contingent from the Ministry at the door; Cornelius, Bertie and Amelia. Albus was close on their heels, arriving with both Alastor and Snape. A few minutes later, Minnie arrived and was also ushered into the study. Sirius waited for Harry to join them before he called Remus on the mirror and started the meeting.

"We're almost at the end." Sirius began. "Since we began we've made some good progress; most of the treasures that we've been seeking have been found." He nodded at Bertie. "Only the snake remains as a possible anchor for Voldemort in this life. The Treasure Hunt has taken out his other means."

Amelia raised her cup in Bertie's direction and he accepted the praise with a tilt of his head.

"I'm going to miss young Bill when he heads back to the Goblins." Bertie admitted wistfully. "He and Caro have done a sterling job." He paused. "And we should also remember Lawrence."

"He won't be forgotten when this is done." Sirius promised softly. He turned to Cornelius. "Our power play in the Wizengamot has also achieved a great deal."

Cornelius beamed at him. "Our objectives have been met." He stated smugly. "The Potter alliance holds the majority; we've pushed through the laws on creatures and magical races with improved relations across the board. Our new laws on muggles will be in place within the next couple of months. Financially we're starting to regain stability in the government budget." He nodded sharply. "We're in a good place."

"We couldn't have done it without you, Cornelius." Sirius said sincerely and Cornelius preened at the praise. "And I would agree that our objectives have been met. The wizarding world is changing and Voldemort won't find it quite so easy to take over. His previous supporters are bound by their Marks but there are few who are unquestioningly loyal and the support among their Heirs is minimal."

"But we should not underestimate those who hate and resent the current tide of events." Snape commented slyly. "He still has support even if some of that is based on fear."

Sirius acknowledged Snape's commentary with a tilt of his head and glanced toward Amelia. "I know you think Tag hasn't been as successful as a strategy but it has helped us even if it hasn't always led to arrests and information."

Amelia huffed out a breath but gave a sharp nod. "We've had some successes." She conceded. "But I won't deny we need to do better if we're to catch the bastard." She sighed. "The facts are that the main players remain at large; Riddle, Pettigrew, Crouch, and Travers. We may also need to add
Amycus Carrow to that list since he has eluded authorities on the continent and is anticipated to be heading for Britain."

Sirius didn't dispute her take on progress. For all they'd caught Travers Senior, taken down the trap in Italy and had a hand in the arrests at the World Cup, the Squad had failed in its main objective to track down Voldemort and his cronies. It had been Greyback's mission to kill Remus that had led to the old werewolf's death and that confrontation hadn't been one the Squad had played a role within.

"Crouch though is the primary immediate concern." Amelia continued. "Given Professor Snape's information we have reason to believe he's at Hogwarts to interfere with the third task of the tournament and in possession of a vanishing cabinet that would allow a way around the wards. With the threat to the students he represents we need to find him as a matter of urgency."

"Too right." A disgruntled Alastor said. Sirius knew the ex-Auror was furious that Crouch had found a way around the security he'd put in place.

"I believe the tournament and Hogwarts must take some responsibility." Albus commented without a twinkle in his eye. "We have failed to secure the safety of the students in the tournament at every turn. Only Harry's performance in the tournament is a boon as it has most assuredly failed to provide Tom with the victory he wished for when he entered Harry within it."

Alastor snorted but didn't say anything further.

Sirius's lips twitched. "I think Albus has managed to succinctly summarise the position. Harry's tournament strategy remains on course..." he dipped his head in Harry's direction and his son smiled back at him. "But Voldemort succeeded in getting him into it and Hogwarts isn't secure and won't be until this is over." He shifted position, straightening a touch. "Which leads us to what we need to discuss; the endgame." He looked at each of the Council in turn establishing silent agreement before settling on his son. "Harry?"

Harry stepped forward into the centre of the loose circle. He'd dressed in simple open robes with dark muggle clothing of black jeans and an emerald button-down shirt underneath. They conveyed an impression of formality rather than youth and Sirius had been proud at Harry's choice; he was learning the impression he gave was half the battle.

"We all know there are two options to ending this," Harry said, "find Voldemort before the third task and end this then, or wait and plan a counter-attack for after the third task." He clasped his hands behind his back. "The former relies on us finding him before the third task and is plan A. The problem is finding him..."

"Which makes this plan bloody unlikely to succeed." Alastor grumbled, his eye whirling. "He's well hidden and he's not contacting anyone we've got eyes and ears on."

"We have eliminated the teachers who all voluntarily underwent an identity check." Albus said despondently. "Unfortunately that has left the students as the only possible place to look."

"The Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students have been cleared," Alastor confirmed gruffly. "As we don't have permission to check our students it's more than likely Crouch is one of them."

"Speaking of which...Harry had a few theories and we have narrowed it down to a list of suspects based on his profile." Sirius tapped his wand on the table and a parchment appeared.
Amelia was the first one to pick it up. "Two Ravenclaws, a Gryffindor, four Slytherins and a Hufflepuff."

Minnie nodded grimly. "Based on Harry's profile, which Sirius shared with the Heads of Houses today, these are the individuals that conform to the parameters. They all stayed over Easter; are in the upper years; are…solitary or anti-social, and have few ties outside of the school." She cleared her throat. "None of the students seem out of character."

"The map also shows all eight as if they are themselves." Sirius confirmed.

"We believe Wormtail has managed to find a way around it." Remus's voice drifted from the mirror perched on the mantle of the fireplace.

Sirius turned to nod at him. "Or he always had a way around it."

"It doesn't really matter since we know now that the map can't help us." Harry said.

Sirius nodded. "Even with this list it won't be easy finding Crouch amongst them."

Snape inclined his head, his dark hair falling forward. "If we are able to narrow this list," he pointed with his wand to the parchment Amelia held, "to one single individual, the problem remains how to trap them without endangering another student and how to make Crouch speak if captured." He paused for what seemed like dramatic effect to Sirius. "He is insane. I believe he will kill himself and anyone in the near vicinity rather than allow us any victory in taking him alive."

"I agree." Alastor said. "Crouch is a badly timed hex waiting to explode."

"Regardless," Minnie spoke up frostily, "one of these students is potentially being held hostage by Crouch while he uses their identity. We have an obligation to find and save them."

"And Crouch will kill them the moment he believes his cover is known." Snape rejoined. "They are safer wherever he has stashed them and if we do deduce which student Crouch is, we would be better informed leaving him in place and watching him." He glanced around the horrified group. "I may perhaps be able to gain Crouch's confirmation of where he is keeping the student in time so we may secure their safety at the end."

Alastor gave a loud harrumph. "I know we have some hard calls to make but keeping an innocent locked up for months to maybe gain some information isn't one I want to make. I gave an oath to protect and serve, and I know I wouldn't want to be locked up and kept as a potion's ingredient for any longer than I had to, lad."

"Hear, hear." Amelia said forcefully.

Harry raised his hand. "Surely we can't allow Crouch to keep impersonating a student? It puts too many people at risk."

"Well said, Harry." Remus said. "Our initial plan must be to identify who Crouch is and to try to capture him for information on Voldemort's whereabouts."

"But Severus has highlighted the issues with that plan." Albus pointed out.

"Namely that Crouch is mad." Harry said, folding his arms over his chest.

"And a danger to others." Sirius added thoughtfully. He let his gaze rest on his former nemesis. "I can see why Severus is advocating 'identity and leave alone' as the course of action; it provides some
"Surety of getting the student he's impersonating and the rest of the student population out of this without harm – as backwards as that might seem."

"Maybe…" Harry began, his eyes taking on the look that Sirius recognised as his son working things out; puzzling things through.

"What?" demanded Snape impatiently.

Harry glared at him a touch but appeared to bite back whatever retort had been on his lips. He swallowed and began again. "Look, the main reason for pinpointing Crouch is for him to lead us to Tom but he's mad and he's not going to just let us do that either by tracking him some way or by capturing him."

"I believe we've made this point already, Potter." Snape said curtly.

Sirius was the one to glare at him then; Harry rolled his eyes clearly used to the treatment from his Professor.

"So plan A using Crouch is a bust." Harry said simply. "It's a non-starter. There's no point going after Crouch with the aim of him leading us to the others in mind." He stopped Amelia with a raised hand when she would have spoken. "We should just look at finding him so we can help whoever he's holding hostage."

"That makes perfect sense, Harry." Minnie said approvingly.

"Tactically sound, lad." Alastor confirmed.

Albus smiled happily.

"You have an idea, Pronglet?" prompted Sirius proudly, ignoring Snape's slightly sour look at the others' praise of Harry.

"I think so." Harry said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "If we assume he is one of the eight then, if they're willing, we have a house-elf follow them discreetly the next time Professor Snape leaves to deal with the potion. I know there is some risk to the house-elves but nobody notices them and he won't think twice about a house-elf cleaning something near to him if he spots one."

"I think the risk would be acceptable." Albus said thoughtfully. "We can but ask them to participate."

"So the house-elves will identify which of the eight leaves Hogwarts through the vanishing cabinet." Bertie murmured.

"Which will help us spot the damn thing since we had no luck last night." Alastor said.

"Any way once we know who it is, we let him come back to the castle and have the house elves keep following him so he'll hopefully lead them to where he has his hostage." Harry continued. "Then, in the early hours of the morning, we have Professor Snape bundle him out of Hogwarts on the premise that he's been found out, while another team rescues the hostage."

"That does place Professor Snape at some risk, Harry." Albus commented.

"But it is a reasonable risk if we are to save the child Crouch is pretending to be." Snape countered, surprising Sirius – and Harry who looked fleetingly wide-eyed until he covered it up with a head-shake.
"Then, we're agreed?" asked Sirius, giving Harry a proud look. "We give up on Crouch being plan A and focus on saving the hostage he has?"

There were murmurs of agreement from everyone.

"We'll have to put the school on lockdown after." Alastor warned. "No Hogsmeade visits and nobody leaves without an identify check on return."

"I believe I will be able to convince the Board that such a step is necessary once we have proof that Bartemius kidnapped a student so easily." Albus said sadly.

"So am I right in thinking that effectively ends plan A before we've gotten started?" Remus asked from the mirror. "We have no other leads."

"Unfortunately I concur with your assessment." Bertie said.

"What about the Summers woman?" Amelia asked, setting her cup down with a thud. "He's keen that she doesn't get a chance to speak to us."

"I doubt that he would be worried at her giving away his current location." Snape replied. "He has moved a number of times since we found her."

"More than likely it's something to do with the ritual." Bertie said. "He is afraid he has revealed something that would give us an advantage."

"Well, if we're putting plan A on hold pending any kind of lead concerning his whereabouts, I'm right in saying that the ritual will play a large part in plan B?" Amelia asked.

Harry waved a hand towards himself. "Plan B is that we let things play out with the third task and Tom making a grab for me."

Sirius felt his breath catch, just like it caught in his chest every time he thought about Harry being abducted and used in the ritual. He hated the idea of it. Hated it. As if Harry sensed his thoughts, his son moved closer to stand beside him.

"We can use me as bait and when he takes me I lead us to him." Harry said simply. "He does the ritual. We take him and whoever's helping him down."

Nobody in the room looked happy.

"Foolish Gryffindor recklessness." Snape muttered under his breath, just loudly enough for his words to be audible.

"You're agreeing to this?" Albus asked sharply, his full attention directed to Sirius.

Sirius sighed heavily. "Do I want this? No. I'd prefer we spent the time between now and then trying to find a way to make plan A happen so it doesn't ever come to this. I don't want Harry used as bait." He answered just as sharply as the question which had been posed to him. "I don't want that abomination anywhere near my son."

"But it is the easiest way to trap Riddle." Bertie said quietly.

"And it provides an opportunity we can plan for just like we knew they would hit the wedding." Remus added.

"But is it an opportunity we can win?" Amelia asked bluntly.
"I don't intend losing," Harry said as he met her gaze.

There was a steady resolve in his young eyes and Sirius felt himself swell with pride, even as his heart ached with worry.

"And *that*, ladies and gentlemen," Sirius said placing his hand on Harry's shoulder, "is our endgame."

Harry was going to win against the bastard, Sirius thought darkly, because any other possibility was just not one Sirius could live with.
"No, your wrist is too weak here." Hermione reached out and corrected Susan's stance. "Try again."

Sue frowned at her but did as she ordered. The hose spell flew out of her wand in a stream of water into the waiting bucket the room had provided. Sue relaxed and grinned weakly at Hermione. "Thank you."

Hermione smiled and pushed her hair back over her shoulder. "Shall we move onto the next water spell?"

"Sure." Sue agreed. Her eyes glanced across the room to where Harry stood instructing Neville and Ron. "Harry's pretty great keeping these defence classes going." A flicker of worry appeared in her eyes before disappearing again.

Hermione placed a hand on her arm, trying to reassure the other girl. "Don't worry. We're pretty certain that hostages won't be used in the third task."

"It's not that…" Sue sighed. "I'm worried about the real reason for these sessions; that there's still someone walking around pretending to be a student."

"Me too." Hermione answered immediately.

She had been a little horrified herself when the adults had agreed that Ron's supposition was truth, and a Death Eater walked among the student body. Safety measures were in place though; none of the alliance went anywhere alone even in the relative safety of the dormitories (Hermione recalled the first night when she'd escaped to her dorm for solitude and blushed but she hadn't done it since); they all carried emergency alarms, and they were all taking Harry's defence class which doubled as a tournament training session for him. She did wonder if Sirius had rethought allowing Harry in the dorm since Harry hadn't been there since the first night of term, but then given the boys had been hung over the next day maybe that had less to do with Crouch and was just plain old parental caution.

"I think it's only natural everyone is going to worry until we know for certain that they're captured." Hermione stated, realising Sue was waiting for a reply. She made the wand movements for the glacial spell.

"That's what Healer Allen tells me." Sue quipped dryly.

Hermione gave a visible wince and made to apologise but Sue waved her off.

"Ignore me, I'm just…" Sue sighed heavily and tucked a strand of hair back behind one ear. "It's embarrassing you know. Having to see a healer because I flipped out."

"You didn't flip out." Hermione argued quietly. "You were traumatised and fell into a state of heightened anxiety. It could have happened to any of us."

Sue grimaced. "Well, it happened to me. You were fine after the second task and so was Natalie. I was the only one…"

"You were the only one who received hate mail and humiliation at being chosen." Hermione stated.
firmly. "Besides, Natalie is much older and I'm, well…"

"Used to it?" Sue suggested with a fleeting smile.

"Yes." Hermione replied with a smile of her own. "It's kind of a side effect of being friends with Harry. And honestly, you shouldn't feel embarrassed. Don't forget Harry sees Healer Allen himself."

Harry had continued seeing the Healer weekly since he'd returned from Bulgaria. Hermione often wondered what they spoke about but she wasn't going to ask – his healing sessions were private. She was working on accepting that there were things that Harry couldn't tell her. There was something big about the third task. She and the others knew that there was a risk that Voldemort would try again to sabotage the task; that he'd use it to try to kill Harry but there was something else going on too; something which Harry wasn't talking about.

"Hannah said the same thing." Sue attempted the glacial spell and grinned when she got it first time. Her eyes flickered back to the boys. "I feel guilty about what happened with her and Neville."

Hermione hummed under her breath, tried the spell and gave a satisfied nod when it worked. She sympathised with Sue's feelings of guilt but she sided with Neville. Sue's spiralling anxiety and depression had been bad and made worse by Hannah trying to deal with it on her own instead of confiding in her parents or another adult. It hadn't been until Sirius and the parents of both girls had confronted them on their strange behaviour that the truth had come out. But then…Hannah had been trying to keep Sue's confidence and Hermione couldn't say with certainty that she wouldn't have done the same thing in Hannah's place. She still thought Hannah had treated Neville appallingly.

"She still likes him." Sue said softly, her gaze shifting guiltily to where Hannah was practising spells with Ginny just along from them. "Do you think…?"

"I don't know." Hermione said. Neville hadn't started dating anyone else but he had been close-mouthed about Hannah, especially once the truth about Sue had become known within the alliance.

"Could you…could you maybe tell him? Sound him out?" Sue asked tentatively.

Hermione turned to look at her fully. Sue's eyes held a measure of hope along with trepidation. "I'll let him know she still likes him but I wouldn't get Hannah's hopes up. She hurt him quite badly."

Sue nodded slowly. "Thank you."

Hermione gave her own sharp nod and raised her wand. "Shall we try the fountain spell?"

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"Merlin, you are hopeless at water spells." Blaise commented as Draco failed to achieve the hose spell again.

"You're not saying the incantation correctly." Theo pointed out and proceeded to demonstrate the spell with accuracy.

Draco sniffed. "I hardly think Crouch is going to be taken out by a stream of water."

"Not when it's barely a trickle." Theo agreed, gesturing towards Draco's bucket. "But if he gets hit by all of us together?"

"Come on, Draco." Blaise said impatiently. "All the Gryffindors have mastered this already."
Draco lifted his chin, pointed his wand and performed the spell perfectly.

Blaise exchanged a knowing look with Theo that had Draco frowning.

"What was *that* look for?" he demanded.

"You still need to work on that Gryffindor button you have." Theo pointed out bluntly. "Anybody presses it and it works every time."

Draco spluttered angrily and launched into the next spell aiming it directly at Theo who simply shielded before the ice could hit him.

"At the buckets, people!" Harry's voice carried over the length of the room separating them. "Not each other!"

"You know I think he's the best defence teacher we've had." Blaise commented breezily as Draco subsided with a sulky frown.

"Moody is better." Draco rejoined, although secretly he had to admit that Harry had a talent for teaching. "Potter is acceptable and it's only right he's providing us with some form of protection against Crouch."

Theo rolled his eyes and did the glacial spell. "You could have moved into the Black suite of rooms if you were that worried."

"I'm not worried," Draco corrected huffily, ignoring the nerves that fluttered uneasily within his belly at the idea of coming across Crouch on his own, "but the situation here is causing Mother to worry needlessly especially at present."

His mother's burgeoning pregnancy wasn't something he liked to contemplate very often. She was tremendously happy – glowing. He wondered if she'd been the same way when she had been expecting him. The new baby had been confirmed as a girl though which was one worry off Draco's mind.

"At least your mother worries." Blaise commented almost casually.

Draco tilted his head in silent acknowledgement of what Blaise didn't say – that Nora Zabini hadn't so much as sent a letter of support to her son.

"Father thinks it's unlikely that any of us will be targeted by Crouch." Theo offered quietly. "He says Riddle can't afford to lose too many supporters by endangering any of the progeny of his Marked followers and he's likely to leave Slytherins alone completely."

Draco lifted a pale eyebrow. "Perhaps but from everything I've heard he's just as likely to off one of us to make the point that going against him is wrong."

He shifted position, trying to lose some of the tension that had crept into his frame. He had received word from his mother that his father and his allies were considering their position in light of the very real possibility that there was an imminent climax to the Dark Lord's pursuit of Potter. Given the discussions in the Summer, Draco was almost sure his father wasn't going to choose to side with the Dark Lord openly but slyly in order to save his life? Draco could believe his father would do that.

His mother's choice was obvious. She had made her position clear at Easter in her defence of Black Farm. He doubted that the Dark Lord was going to just sweep his mother siding with her sister and niece against the Dark Lord's agent under the rug.
Draco’s gaze moved back to Potter. His former nemesis was demonstrating an advanced water spell to Longbottom. The power and skill required to make the spell work were enormous and proved without Potter saying a word just how powerful he was. He thought again of Halloween and his own stand in the Slytherin common room; the decision he’d made in the Summer to take power as part of the House of Black. His spine straightened almost without thought. It was a decision he stood by, he realised. Potter was better than the prospect of living under the thumb of a Dark Lord who would kill at a whim.

"We should be practising cutting and bludgeoning spells." Draco said, remembering how his aunt and cousin had dealt with Alecto Carrow.

Blaise raised both his eyebrows. "Merlin, you Blacks are a bloodthirsty lot."

Draco smiled haughtily. "And don't you forget it."

Theo gave him an approving nod and pointed at the bucket. "You know a thinly directed hose spell with enough pressure will punch a hole through an object."

Blaise grinned. "How about it then, Malfoy? A galleon says you can't do it before the end of the session."

Draco pointed his wand at the bucket. "Prepare to lose your money, Zabini." And considered that perhaps the two of them knew all his buttons far too well.

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Ron breathed in deeply and thrust out his wand again. He grinned at the rain of ice that appeared, showering itself mostly into the bucket.

"Good form." Harry grinned at him. "Neville?"

Neville pursed his lips, adjusted his stance and moved. Ice fell into a steady stream straight into the bucket.

"That's great, Nev!" Harry patted his back.

Neville gave a happy smile and turned around to tease Ron but his gaze caught on Hannah and the words died on his tongue. He yanked his eyes away from his former girlfriend and back to the bucket.

Harry's pat turned into a consoling squeeze.

"You know she still likes you, mate." Ron commented, not without sympathy. He twirled his wand around his fingers.

"I still like her." Neville shrugged. It wouldn't change what had happened.

Hannah had been courteous enough to request an audience to explain what had gone on with Sue and Neville had accepted. He'd already heard through a letter from his Gran the main details – Sue’s anxiety and Hannah’s attempt to help her friend through it despite struggling to deal with Sue’s ever spiralling situation. He had even accepted Hannah's apology for her behaviour and told her that he understood why she had acted the way she had. It didn't erase the months of ignoring him in her attempt to deal with Sue, and perhaps if she'd had more faith in him or them, she would have confided in him long before they'd gotten to the point of breaking up.
"You could give her a second chance?" said Ron, breaking into his reminiscing.

Neville was somewhat surprised that it was Ron who had made the sensible suggestion but he shook his head. "That's…"

"It's up to you, mate." Ron said immediately. "Merlin knows I've had enough hassle about breaking up with Lavender. I'm not going to give you grief over Hannah."

"It's not the right time for us to be together." Neville summarised out loud. "She's dealing with the fallout from what happened with Sue and she needs space."

"That sounds remarkably specific." Harry commented, pushing his glasses up his nose and frowning at him.

"Possibly because that's what she said when we talked and I suggested it." Neville replied trying and failing to keep a hint of bitterness out of his voice.

Both of his friends visibly winced.

"Sorry, Nev." Harry said quietly. He gave Neville another comforting squeeze.

"Girls, eh?" Ron scratched his chin with the butt of his wand. "Mental."

Neville shrugged again, just wanting to drop the subject. Across the room Blaise sent a questioning look and Neville gave him a short nod, confirming all was fine. Blaise had been a good friend in the wake of the break-up and had even refrained from starting a betting pool on how long it would take the couple to get back together, or for them to find someone else. The last five weeks had seemed like an eternity and yet at the same time as though they'd disappeared in a blink of an eye.

"You want to try that split water spell again?" Neville motioned at Harry who nodded.

"Why are we focusing on these water spells again?" There was a touch of a whine in Ron's voice.

"Because the research group found out that in at least ten of the tournaments elemental obstacles had been used to challenge the champions?" Harry responded briskly.

"Rather you than me, mate." Ron commented.

Neville sent Harry a sympathetic glance and Harry acknowledged it with a small smile.

"Are you planning to try staying over again in the dorm now Blakely's been cleared?" asked Neville, changing the subject again for Harry's benefit. He wasn't sure whether the presence of a Gryffindor suspect had altered Sirius's decision to allow Harry time in the dorm but it seemed evident in the fact that Harry hadn't stayed over since the first night.

Casper Blakely, though, had ended up spending over two days in the infirmary after one of the Beauxbatons' horses had kicked him and that had proven he was himself. Hardly any other progress had been made in finding Crouch as, according to his Gran, every time they thought Crouch would make an attempt to leave, all the suspects had had classes making it impossible for them to go without blowing their cover and so no-one had.

Ron's face brightened with anticipation. "You should come over this weekend! Seamus has another bottle of whiskey. We can have a party and…"

"Can't have alcohol, remember?" Harry poked his first friend in the side.
Ron's face fell. "Right."

Frankly, Neville wished he had the excuse of not being able to drink alcohol. He hadn't enjoyed waking up the next morning the last time, his mouth dry and furry, his head pounding and his stomach churning. He had silently decided that he'd stick to butter beer until he was of an age to drink alcohol. His peers were clearly not thinking the same thing. Neville pressed his lips together; he could say he was supporting Harry's abstinence and that would probably get him out of having to participate.

He pointed his wand at the bucket and tried the fountain spell, frowning when it didn't work. Harry corrected his wand movements.

"Maybe I'll try and sleep over one night this weekend." Harry offered. "If Sirius agrees."

Ron beamed and Neville couldn't help feeling a flare of satisfaction at the idea of having Harry back in the dorm.

"It would be good to have you back." Neville commented out loud.

"No," Ron slung a friendly arm over Harry's shoulder, "it will be great to have you back!"

o-O-o

Harry walked beside Bill on his way back to his and Sirius's rooms without complaint about the escort. Bill kept an easy pace as though he was aware Harry wanted to use the time to think.

The practice session had gone well; most everyone had managed the hose spell and the glacial. The fountain took quite a bit of power and only the oldest or determined (such as Hermione) had succeeded at first go.

Harry yawned and covered his mouth with his hand. He was tired. Since his return to Hogwarts it felt like every spare moment had been spent planning or training for the third task and what lay beyond it. Maybe it would be good to have a night off in the Gryffindor dorm and just sit around playing chess with Ron or providing an ear for Neville.

"You need a good night's sleep." Bill commented as they entered the corridor that led to Harry's quarters with Sirius.

Harry nodded. "Practice was tiring."

"You need to pace yourself." Bill advised. "You've got a lot of magical power but if you keep pushing yourself you'll end up in Poppy's care with exhaustion."

Harry grimaced but didn't refute it.

The door opened at the password and Harry entered with Bill just behind him. Harry spotted their visitor and stilled.

Snape rose from his seat in the armchair. "I shall take my leave."

Sirius didn't move from his place stood in front of the slumbering fire, leaning on the mantel. He raised his cup in acknowledgement. "Saturday then?"

Snape inclined his head before whirling around and sweeping out of the room with a billow of cloak.

Harry headed over to the living area and collapsed onto the sofa. "He had some news?"
"The next part of the potion he's making requires him to leave Hogwarts on Saturday. Three of our suspects have the duelling class but the others are free." Sirius explained, leaning against the mantle and smiling at Harry. "Hopefully this will reveal who Crouch is pretending to be or narrow the field again."

"About time." Harry said with a sigh. "It's taken forever!"

"It's taken far longer than anyone wanted it to." Sirius agreed. He nodded at Bill. "How are things going with the ritual research?"

Bill perched on the arm of the sofa and grimaced. "We're missing Lawrence." He said. "We've managed to gather up as much information as we can but we think Riddle has the only definitive copy of what it involves. There are a couple of first-hand accounts from a resurrection back in Greece; Caro's working through the translations." He motioned at Sirius. "Are we sure we don't want to screw with the potion?"

Sirius shook his head. "Both Bertie and Albus think that's a bad idea and Snape has confirmed that the structure of the potion means that the only possible sabotage would provide Voldemort with a less than human body which would be to our detriment if anything. Animals are more instinctive and we need him to respond in a way we can anticipate."

Bill nodded. "What about this antidote for the preggers lady? I thought that would have been ready by now?"

"Friday." Sirius confirmed. "It was Snape's other bit of news. Apparently the last ingredient took a few more weeks than he anticipated to be at the right point but it's ready now. The potion should be completely ready Friday evening. We think we'll be able to wake her then and hopefully find out what she knows that Voldemort's so keen to keep her quiet about. Bertie's planning to be there since the most likely thing for her to know is something about the ritual."

"Good. Well, I should head out." Bill said getting up again. "Mum's expecting me for dinner." He grimaced. "I think she's invited another one of her friends' daughters."

"Best not to keep her or the prospective bride waiting then." Sirius agreed with a smirk. "Send her and Arthur our greetings."

Bill laughed at the teasing, gave a nod and a moment later he was gone. Harry breathed out, relaxing as Sirius came to sit beside him, nudging his shoulder.

"Alright there, Pronglet?" Sirius asked gently.

"Long day." Harry said, nestling into the sofa and allowing the warmth of the room and Sirius to lull him into a sleepy contentment.

"Long month." Sirius said, settling into a more comfortable position. "I think on Sunday you and I should take the day off. Head out of Hogwarts and do something fun."

"Yeah?" Harry brightened at the idea. He missed the Sunday father-son days with Sirius that they'd had in the Summer. "That'd be great."

Dobby popped into view in front of them and held out the vibrating mirror with a waggle of his ears. "Wolfy calling his Paddy."

Sirius grinned and took the mirror. "Thank you, Dobby." He tapped the mirror and grinned again. "Moony!"
"Padfoot." Remus smiled warmly at Sirius and his smile widened as Sirius turned the mirror so it caught both him and Harry. "Snitch."

"Moony." Harry smiled back.

"Dora sends her regards." Remus's eyes warmed with affection and Harry was pleased to see it. Ever since the wedding, Remus seemed to have fully embraced his marriage with Tonks and the result was a happy couple. "She's gone to bed early. The cub keeps tiring her out."

"Really? Cissy's bouncing with energy." Sirius commented dryly. "She spent three hours dragging me around London yesterday looking for the perfect crib. Don't worry; she ordered one for you too. It's being shipped so should be with you next week."

"How did she manage to inveigle you into shopping?" Remus asked visibly amused.

"She needs protection from a possible attack from Carrow and Malfoy is out of the country right now on business." Sirius countered seriously. "Besides," he smiled, "I'm just cementing my case for godfather to little Reggie."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You know Draco thinks he's got that sewn up?"

"He's her brother." Sirius argued. "He can't be her godfather. Besides, I am an excellent godfather."

"The best." Harry agreed, smiling.

Remus chuckled. "Narcissa is going to have your balls if you continue calling her child Reggie."

"What about you?" asked Sirius. "Any names in the frame?" He smoothed a hand down in his front. "I'd like to remind you that Sirius is a good name."

Harry burst out laughing.

Remus shook his head. "Dora suggested Theodore John after our fathers since it follows Black tradition to name him after forefathers, but I'd rather name him something unique."

"Do not call him Quaffle!" Sirius instructed with mock sternness.

"I was going to suggest Bludger." Remus countered.

Harry laughed again and the two men joined in. The hilarity died down and Sirius pointed at the mirror with a wagging finger.

"I assume you called to catch up on my meeting with Snape, Moony?" Sirius didn't wait for a reply but launched into it a summary.

Remus regarded them with a frown. "Sounds like you have a busy weekend coming up."

"We were thinking of taking Sunday off." Sirius said brightly.

"Good idea." Remus seemed to look past them for a moment and turned back with a sigh. "Got to go. Dora's just freaked the house elves out asking for Angel Delight whatever that is."

"It's a muggle pudding mix." Harry explained. "You just add milk and whisk and you get this thick mousse kind of thing. My Aunt Petunia used to make it for posh dinners when they had people over."
Remus smiled at him. "Thank you, Harry. Have a good night." His gaze drifted to Sirius. "Good luck with the alliance meeting tomorrow."

The mirror winked out and Sirius placed the mirror carefully down on the coffee table. He slung an arm around Harry. "I think you need an early night."

Harry didn't argue. He was very tired. He gave Sirius a quick hug and said his goodnights. His bedtime routine was quick and he clambered into his bed with a sigh of pleasure at the crisp clean sheets that surrounded him.

Hedwig gave an approving hoot from her perch and Harry closed his eyes…

_The cemetery was cold. The gravestone in front of him was all too familiar. He reached out and touched the words reverently._

'Where there is love there is life.'

_It wasn't the first time he'd dreamed of the cemetery and his parents' graves since Paris. Every night since he'd returned to England it seemed he dreamed of it again and woke with a sense of foreboding. So much so that he was almost afraid to sleep…_

"You are drawn to this place." A voice intruded into the hushed silence and broke Harry's remembrance of his parents.

He turned to face the visitor, a young man who looked remarkably similar to Harry but with an old-fashioned style of robe he had seen once before. "They're my parents."

"Your blood." His ancestor said crisply. "Your flesh and bone." He approached another step and paused beside Harry. "Our parents make us more than any other. You should remember that."

Harry shivered. "I'm not sure I'll remember this any more than I remember the other conversations I've had here." He could only remember fleeting glimpses of his conversation with Ignotus; only a faint memory of speaking with Death.

_The young man smiled at him. "You'll remember this one because I am the reason you can speak with the Dead."_

_Cadmus. Harry stared at him for a long moment. "You're Ignotus's brother."_

"Yes." Cadmus agreed. "Your many times great-uncle." He lifted a hand and revealed an image of the gleaming Resurrection stone. "I harnessed my gift and it is now yours. You could speak to whomever you wish."

"I spoke with my parents already." Harry admitted. It was singularly his most brilliant and painful memory. He knew he couldn't use the stone again. It was too tempting. "Why are you here?"

"Ignotus thought you might respond better to someone else other than him this time."

"It's not that…I don't…I dislike what he did." Harry said grudgingly. "I was upset before but I understand it."

"Yes, you more than anyone would." Cadmus agreed. "You won't make the same choice."

"No," agreed Harry, "I won't make the same choice."

"Good," Cadmus said, "you shouldn't make the same mistakes we made. We spent so much time
making the Hallows, we forgot their blessing." His smile turned wistful. "I spent so much time wishing to be with the dead, I forgot to want to live."

Harry could remember when he had felt the same; when he'd felt the pain of losing Sirius and his parents. He turned back to the gravestone, aching with empathy.

"Ignutus lost Antioch and I when we fell on the battlefield. He paid for our mistakes. You are paying for them now." Cadmus said. "But for all you have lost, you have love, Harry, and where there is love…"

"…there is life." Harry completed the quote and turned back to Cadmus only to find him gone.

Harry startled awake, his heart pounding. The conversation was clear in his mind, so clear…and yet still so enigmatic. He scrubbed a hand over his face, frustrated, and turned over again in his bed, punching his pillow. He’d have to discuss the dream with Sirius and Remus, Harry mused wearily. Maybe they’d be able to decipher the message Cadmus had given him.

He snorted.

Or maybe it was just a dream.

o-O-o

"…and I say that all he needs is a good sharp smack in the mouth with a trout!" Griselda Marchbanks declared with a smirk.

"Really, Griselda!" Augusta commented.

"I don't think I've ever seen that particular move employed in a Wizengamot debate before." Daniel Greengrass murmured as Carl Branstone laughed beside him.

Albert Goldstein lifted his cup. "Griselda always has a unique outlook on political debate."

Tiberius Ogden gave a huff. "You have that right!"

Sirius barely allowed his own smirk to grace his lips for a moment before he cleared his throat and brought the meeting of the Ancient and Noble Houses in the Potter alliance to order.

"We're here to prepare for the upcoming Wizengamot session and share news." Sirius stated. He nodded toward Daniel.

"Politically we're in a good place," Daniel stated firmly, "the legislature remains under our control. There is a small minority on the old Pureblood side though Malfoy has conceded public leadership of the group to Benjamin Nott. Nott is a true political animal; intelligent, capable and focused. He’s not prone to emotional outbursts or rushing in; he makes good arguments." He set down his cup. "We could have done worse."

"Isn't such a capable leader bad for us?" asked a subdued Richard Bones idly.

"Actually, the opposite." Sirius answered. "Nott will keep them under control and we'll have a forthright debate. It's good for the law to have a balanced view and it will mean that our laws will gain more credibility having taken into consideration any valid points they raise."

"The next set of laws that are under review will be the muggle laws we want to bring in. Arthur is going to make a proposal to begin reviewing the Statute of Secrecy legislation in the next session
based on the findings around muggle technology his Department have made recently. We expect some opposition but that the proposal will pass."

"The laws that Arthur will want to make will be problematic." Tiberius said gruffly. "But we won't have to deal with getting them through for another few months."

"Arthur intends targeting the August session." Sirius confirmed. "It provides enough time for us to ensure that the arguments on our side will be well constructed and to sound out the counter-arguments they are likely to make."

"The other proposal the Wizengamot is likely to have before it is one Avery is making." Daniel grimaced. "All we've been able to find out about it so far is that it is a proposed amendment to the revised Magical Race and Creature laws and its primary thrust is a move to keep any kind of organised creature governance off British soil."

"So a move to ensure Remus can't ever bring the pack here." Sirius summarised with a sigh.

Daniel nodded. "I fear so."

"I can't participate in the debate." Sirius said. "I have too much of a vested interest."

"Exactly." Carl agreed. "I expect they'd object if you did try."

"They may insist anyone in the Potter alliance be prevented from debating on the same grounds." Augusta noted dryly. "We all fall under the House of Potter which is supporting the Lupin pack."

"Agreed," Daniel said, "which is why I will make a motion to have Dirk make the rebuttal for Avery's motion."

Griselda slapped a hand onto the table. "Splendid! I haven't seen that protocol employed for years!"

"Protocol?" asked Richard delicately saving Sirius the trouble.

"The lawmaker defends his own law." Elphias explained simply. "After all, if such an amendment was necessary why wasn't it included in the first place?"

"It's a good move and let's us defeat the motion without calling undue attention." Sirius said.
"Anything else on the political front?"

"Remus has sent over some information about international law and progresses they've made where we've fallen behind." Augusta said. "A group of us are looking it over to see where we might want to propose change in the future."

"Good." Sirius nodded, remembering how Remus had reminded him they need to build bonds abroad as well as at home just the day before. Remus himself was making a lot of headway in that regards because of his position in the European werewolf leadership.

"So, leaving aside politics, shall we move onto other topics?" Daniel looked around and a flurry of nods and gestures confirmed agreement.

"The next topic is Riddle and crew then." Sirius said. He updated them on what little news he had. "It's our hope things with Crouch will be brought to a head this weekend and at least we'll be able to lockdown Hogwarts until the third task."

"I have to admit that I'll be relieved if all that happens is we get Crouch out of Hogwarts." Richard
said grimly. "Just the knowledge that there's a Death Eater among the students...I've thought about pulling Susan out a dozen times."

"I've given the same consideration about Tony." Albert admitted.

Daniel nodded. "It's a difficult task simply leaving our children in place suspecting there is a snake in the grass that could strike at them at any moment."

"The kids have been great." Sirius said. "They're protecting each other. No-one travels the corridors alone; no-one is alone in their dormitories. They've managed to ensure that Crouch's ability to attack anyone is much reduced."

"It doesn't stop us worrying." Augusta said crisply. "While we all agreed that the children were to remain at Hogwarts, it's maddening knowing we are leaving them in the company of an unseen enemy."

Sirius nodded understandingly. "Believe me, I have the same worries, the same anxieties."

"We know." Daniel said. "And we know of all our children he's most likely to strike at Harry."

"Which he's potentially doing by interfering in the third task." Sirius said, turning their attention to the reason why Crouch was at Hogwarts in the first place.

"Do we know how we think he's going to sabotage it this time?" asked Albert.

Sirius shook his head. "Albus has said that the task is dangerous enough on its own to be life-threatening – just like the second." He paused. "Of course we don't think the aim of this task is for Harry to actually die. To be challenged, yes; mortally, no."

"Because the bastard wants to get Harry at the end of it." Griselda growled.

"Yes." Sirius sighed. "If anything I suspect the task to be designed to Harry's advantage to enable him to succeed."

"The assumption then is that Crouch is in place to ensure that Harry is abducted as soon as the tournament is feasibly over." Daniel surmised with a gesture of his hands. "That's why he needs an agent close; not to sabotage the task but to ensure he gets what he wants from it."

Sirius nodded slowly. "Unfortunately the War Council is of the same opinion. However, even if Crouch gets caught or booted from Hogwarts there's no guarantee that Riddle won't use some other means to get Harry for the final confrontation." More than likely he'd just use Snape – his one remaining agent at Hogwarts.

"Ultimately it may not matter to him if it is your lad who ends up at the end of his wand." Tiberius pointed out. "All the Champions could be considered to have gone through the same challenges as your boy."

"Yes, the thought has occurred to Albus too." Sirius said. "The most likely way for Voldemort to take Harry is with a portkey on the night of the third task. Bagman announced the aim of the task to the Champions just over a week ago now and it's well publicised that they have to traverse a maze with hidden dangers to find a cup." He shifted. "Albus has confided the original cup was to be in the centre of the maze and when the Champion reached it, it would portkey them to the winner's stand at the entrance of the maze. The task has been changed so that each individual has to find their own cup but they still get portkeyed out of the maze ostensibly to the winner's podium."
"I take it the cups are under lock and key." Daniel said soberly.

"Unfortunately all four cups will be on display the night before the task in the entrance hall of Hogwarts thanks to the conditions Voldemort set in the parameters." Sirius said. "They'll be guarded but the risk remains that someone will be able to get to them."

"Daphne says the training plan and sessions are going well." Daniel said breaking the silence that had followed Sirius's proclamation.

"As well as they can." Sirius agreed, lightening his tone. "The alliance is doing their best to help him and we're very grateful."

"Pish-posh." Griselda said strongly. "We only wish we could do more."

"Has anything more been discussed about his affinity with the family magic? Or an alternative to defeating Riddle?" asked Albert.

"There are a couple of possibilities." Sirius prevaricated. "I can't say more than that." His eyes caught Richard's and the Head of the House of Bones winked at him.

There wasn't very much more to cover and Sirius made his way to the Ministry with a sense of satisfaction. The alliance was being wonderfully supportive. Politically they were doing the most of the work leaving him to spend time with Harry.

His spirits rose again as thought of the broom race he had in mind for Sunday. It would be good for them both to get out and do something other than brood over events. Harry looked tired and worn. Sirius had a suspicion he wasn't sleeping well and his son's confidence that morning at breakfast about a dream involving a Peverell suggested it was fact.

The dream was the reason why he was making his way through the Ministry to the Department of Mysteries. He tapped lightly on Bertie's office door and went in at the faint call to enter.

Bertie greeted him with delight and Sirius soon found himself seated with a steaming cup of tea. "So what brings you here today, Sirius? I'm afraid if it's progress on the ritual research…"

"No," Sirius shook his head, "Bill gave me a brief update on that yesterday." He sipped his tea and set it aside. "Harry had a dream last night." He briefly sketched out the detail which Harry had provided that morning. "Do you think it's possible it was the spirit of Cadmus Peverell and that Harry has been having conversations with him and Ignotus in his dreams?"

"I think all things are possible." Bertie said, looking at Sirius over the rim of his own cup. He took a fortifying sip. "Harry united the Hallows the night he spoke to his parents at the cemetery. He wore the cloak, called the wand and unlocked the stone. It's remarkable that all that happened that night was a comforting talk with his parents and your reunion."

Sirius nodded slowly. "You don't have to explain to me what could have potentially happened, Bertie."

"Since Madame Verte was kind enough to share the story of the Hallows with you and Harry, it's been clear that there are forces at work we cannot comprehend. If we take the story at face value, Harry is Death's Champion. He is barred from using the Hallows as Ignotus did to end a life but… nothing has been said to discourage using the Hallows otherwise." Bertie continued thoughtfully.

A faint stirring of hope began to unfurl in Sirius's heart.
Bertie gazed into his tea as though it held the answers. "Three things strike me. Firstly, Harry's ancestors are reaching out through Cadmus's gift to talk to Harry and share knowledge. You say Harry doesn't remember the first dream?"

"He dreamed it back in Paris and barely remembered it on waking. He dismissed what he did remember and put it down to an overactive imagination after Vivien's tale. He vaguely remembers yelling at Ignotus, clearly remembers it took place in the cemetery, said he thought Death turned up somewhere in all of it, but he says the rest of it is just a jumble of impressions; frustration more than anything." Sirius said.

"In this dream, we have Ignotus send Cadmus as an envoy. The brother who could speak to the dead sent instead to speak to the living." Bertie said. "This is an attempt to ensure that Harry remembers which would make the detail important." He put his cup down and clasped his hands. "The dreams have both taken place in the cemetery by his parents' graves. Cadmus draws attention to that in Harry's dream and notes blood, flesh and bone come from the parent." He tapped his fingers together. "It's interesting that these are the three ingredients required for the resurrection."

"Do you think he's trying to tell Harry something about the ritual?" Sirius asked soberly.

"Perhaps." Bertie allowed. "The bone is from the father but we've never focused on the importance of Riddle's own genealogy within the ritual." He pursed his lips and picked up a quill to scribble a quick note to himself. "We shall look into this more, I promise you."

Sirius nodded. "What about the rest of the dream?"

"It's interesting that it focused on Cadmus warning Harry not to make the same mistakes they made." Bertie frowned and reached for his tea.

Sirius waited a tad impatiently but he knew from the thoughtful frown that Bertie was working things through in his brilliant brain.

"Let us start with the first mistake; Lumiere's account suggests that the three brothers split up on the battlefield. They were separated from the start, each with their own artefact but it was not enough in the eyes of magic to make the Hallows work as one, to imbue them with the blessings Merlin and the family magic had given them."

"Ignotus was left alone without his brothers." Sirius said out loud, trying to understand the point Bertie was making.

"They didn't stand together." Bertie stated again. "That was the first mistake. Thus, Harry should not fight alone but with those that provide him strength." He set his cup down. "If we allow him to be taken on the night of the tournament then it follows that for a period of time he will face Riddle alone."

Sirius nodded slowly. "If we knew where Voldie is doing the ritual we could be there and set up an ambush. Harry wouldn't be alone." Or if they found Voldemort before the third task – despite that possibility looking more and more remote as time went on.

"It is something we should aim for but realistically, Sirius?" Bertie said gently.

"I know." Sirius sighed heavily.

Bertie tapped his fingers together. "Of course, Cadmus could have been speaking about a metaphorical loss rather than a physical one. It is entirely possible that the brothers metaphorically 'lost' each other either through an argument or some other kind of schism."
"So Harry just has to keep in mind that he isn't alone?" Sirius hummed, his mood brightening.

"Perhaps. There is strength in numbers, in allies." Bertie said.

Sirius nodded again. Hadn't Harry won the Heirs to fealty with just such a statement? Hadn't Lily and James counselled that Harry was weaker when he pushed others away? He gestured signalling a change of topic. "Cadmus mentioned mistakes and for Harry not to make the same."

"Each of the brothers relied on their own artefact alone. Bertie said. "The magic wanted them to work in concert. If Harry uses the artefacts then, he cannot pick and choose; he must use all three."

He continued solemnly. "Nor can he make the mistakes the brothers made."

"Antioch relied too much on the fight in front of him and forgot that sometimes there is treachery from behind." Sirius stated. "Cadmus dwelt too much in death and not enough in life. I think the conversation with Lily and James helped Harry in that regard. It had helped Sirius."

Bertie nodded compassionately. "And Harry has confirmed he will not use the Hallows to take Voldemort's life from him as though he was Death himself as Ignotus did with the Seven. That mistake will not be repeated."

"So, if Harry takes the artefacts into the battle with Voldemort he should be able to use them." Sirius nodded decisively. "That's good to know."

"'All for one and one for all.'" Bertie said quietly.

Sirius raised his eyebrows in silent question.

"A quote from some literature I once read." Bertie explained. "It was a fascinating tale of treachery and adventure, romance and friendship, particularly brotherhood."

"The Marauders had that once." Sirius replied. "'All for one and one for all' – that could have been us at school."

"Do you think Pettigrew will help you?" Bertie said.

"No," Sirius shook his head, "I rather think he's the 'treachery' in all this." His grey eyes dimmed with memories. "He certainly was the last time." He sighed. "If I think back to 'eighty-one, I know we went ahead and made the same mistakes the Peverells did. James didn't see Wormtail stabbing him in the back; I focused too much on vengeance for the dead and not enough on taking care of the living; and Remus stepped back from Harry because he didn't have us to strengthen him." He lifted his tea-cup. "And yet, in many ways, we were already lost; we'd already allowed distrust and distance to start separating us."

"You won't make the same mistakes this time." Bertie commented.

"Not the same mistakes," Sirius agreed dryly, "but I'm sure we'll make all new ones!"

The thought kept echoing in his head as he headed out to his last meeting of the day. It had been requested that morning and it wasn't one he was looking forward to attending. He mentally prepared himself as he stepped into the Ministry floo and out into the reception room at Black Manor.

Penny greeted him, taking his cloak swiftly. "Lord Nott and the Malfoys are waiting for you in your study. They have a tea-tray; would you like anything?"

"I'm swimming in tea." Sirius said with a quick negative shake of his head. He left Penny in the
library and entered his study, wrapping the mantle of Lord Black around himself like a shield.

Two of his three visitors rose when he entered; Lucius had already been on his feet. Sirius ignored the men and greeted his cousin first.

"Cissy. You look blooming." Sirius bussed her cheek and squeezed her hand supportively. She did look stunning; pregnancy suited her, adding colour to her complexion and providing a healthy weight to her body.

"Thank you, Cousin." Narcissa replied formally. She allowed him to usher her back into her chair while he greeted Nott and Lucius with handshakes.

Sirius remained standing when Lucius demurred over taking a seat. He was Slytherin enough to understand the subconscious power exercise of standing over someone who was seated and he refused to allow Lucius to use the tactic on him.

"Good to see you back in the country, Lucius." Sirius said evenly. "When did you get back?"

"We travelled this morning." Lucius inclined his head toward Nott.

Sirius hadn't realised they had gone together. "And the first thing you requested was a meeting with me?"

Nott nodded. "The Dark Lord has been busy abroad. Carrow's pet vampire is in charge of raising an army and to spread the word of his imminent return on the night of the third task."

Sirius's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You heard this abroad?"

"From Elbert Blanc." Nott said giving up his contact bluntly enough that Lucius raised his eyebrows. Blanc was a prominent politician in the French Court de Magicale. He was the head of an old family and a brilliant tactician. He had been the public face of the French government's refusal to lend Britain aid in the last war. He wasn't a Death Eater but his sympathies were not far removed.

"His estate neighbours mine in Brittany." Nott explained. "Our families have enjoyed a cordial relationship for over a hundred years."

Sirius inclined his head. "His source?"

"A messenger." Nott grimaced. "From the description I would say it was Dennis Travers."

"Makes sense." Sirius commented coolly. "We believe Crouch is at Hogwarts still, Pettigrew is tasked to remain close to Voldemort, and Carrow is persona non grata on the continent after the incident in Bulgaria."

"Travers is a poor diplomat." Lucius drawled casually, flicking lint from his sleeve. "But he is effective at delivering a message."

Sirius frowned. "There's been no sight of him travelling abroad."

"The vampires have supply lines." Nott explained brusquely. "We believe he was secreted out in this fashion and landed in France almost four weeks ago."

Sirius crossed his arms. "I can't help but note that you're telling me all of this information very freely."
Nott sighed and leaned back the chair he had selected. "You know my motivation, Sirius. I will not restate it."

"I'm certain we all share the need to protect our children." Narcissa asserted, drawing Sirius's attention. "If the Dark Lord returns, none of our children will be safe." She looked at Sirius with determination. "You know more than you have shared with us."

"I do." Sirius agreed. There were many things which he wouldn't share with the Malfoys.

"We know that the Dark Lord plotted to get Potter into the tournament." Lucius said. "We know he is plotting to return."

"The date of the third task is magically significant." Nott continued. "There is a resurrection ritual that calls for the blood of an enemy who has been challenged and in fear of their lives for nine months – a condition which could be said to be met through that same enemy being a champion in the tournament."

Sirius debated for a long moment whether to concede the information. It wasn't surprising that they'd pieced some of it together. "You know the ritual?" He asked instead, knowing his question was as much of an admission as though he'd stated it explicitly.

Nott withdrew a book from his cloak and placed it on a side table. "I once lent this book to Tom Riddle. I don't doubt that he has remembered the contents."

Sirius almost swallowed his tongue. A book! An actual book! They'd been searching for information about the ritual and Nott had just handed it all to them without...without asking for anything in return...

"We have a détente but nothing that would press you to provide this level of aid and support. I assume you want protection?" asked Sirius bluntly.

"For Theo." Nott reiterated.

Sirius held Nott's gaze for a long moment but found only sincerity and determination looking back at him. He made his decision abruptly. "Lucius and Narcissa will be covered by family oaths," he said, "I'll need an oath before I tell you anything further."

"I'll make a vow." Nott agreed unhesitatingly.

The wording took a few moments to agree but the vow was swiftly taken.

Sirius directed Lucius to a seat and took one himself as he confirmed their suspicions regarding the ritual and the role of the tournament. "We think Voldemort will try to grab Harry from the tournament and use him in the ritual."

"You have a plan to prevent this?" Lucius asked snidely.

"A couple." Sirius confirmed in a sharp tone that warned Lucius to watch himself.

Narcissa cleared her throat. "You are not confident that either will work."

Sirius tilted his dark head in his cousin's direction. "Both plans rely on us either finding Voldemort or the agent he placed within the castle, or finding out what method he will use to abduct Harry before it happens. For the latter, we can close down many avenues but the portkey ward will be down during the third task and the champions will be ostensibly alone in the maze."
Nott grimaced. "It would be easy enough to plant a portkey in the task's obstacles keyed to your son."

Sirius nodded grimly. "On the former…well, we might find Crouch before the third task but we all think he's insane enough to ensure we wouldn't get anything out of him unless we managed to completely immobilise him and dose him with truth serum before he could do anything."

"I see your dilemma." Nott said, his face creased in thought. "I assume you are contemplating allowing Lord Potter to be taken so you can find Riddle and finish this?"

"It is one option." Sirius said calmly.

"You can't be serious!" Narcissa exclaimed, her eyes widening with horror.

Sirius repressed the urge to make the obvious joke – it wasn't the time for levity. He turned to his cousin instead. "Voldemort has an obsession with Harry. If we don't find Voldemort but stop him from taking Harry that saves Harry from one torment but means Harry continues to live with the threat of Voldemort hanging over him until they do meet. Knowing he will try for Harry on the third task gives us a window of opportunity." He raised a hand when her eyes flashed angrily. "I don't want to use Harry as bait or have him involved at all but Harry believes that this might be the best way to end this and I can't argue with his logic."

"How very Gryffindor." Lucius sneered.

"And Slytherin." Nott countered. "Turning an enemy's plan back on themselves is very Slytherin."

"Harry has some Slytherin traits." Sirius acknowledged. "If this plan goes ahead, we would have a small advantage but an advantage." He grimaced. "Although the news Voldemort is out amassing support is not welcome."

"You do realise that the first thing he will do when resurrected is call all who wear the Mark to him." Lucius said derisively.

"Lucius is correct." Nott said. "Riddle will call us and punish any who do not answer. In this you may be comforted that he will not kill your son immediately if he has him; he will want an audience."

"How many of you will be called?" asked Sirius bluntly.

"Within the country and not imprisoned?" Nott hummed. "Perhaps twenty or thirty of us that are known to each other although he may only summon those in the Inner Circle of which they were around fifteen, about ten of us who are not imprisoned."

Sirius hid his own satisfaction at Nott's openness. "I guess it's likely that you'll end up being called either way."

"The question is what do you want us to do when we are called?" Nott rejoined. "If he wants us to injure your son we can argue, those of us with the détente that is, we can argue we cannot harm him, but we will do that at risk of torture and death."

"He'll ask you to make a choice sooner or later regardless of the when." Sirius pointed out. "You know that and accepted the risk when you agreed the détente."

Nott conceded with a gesture.

"I assume you wish for me to spy." Lucius said cuttingly.
"You assume wrongly." Sirius said firmly. "You've done a great deal for the House of Black since the Summer, Lucius, and he won't forgive you for placing yourself back under the House primacy. I'm not interested in sending you in like a lamb to slaughter so you're safe. If the worst comes to the worst and Voldemort survives the encounter and is free, you can go abroad and hide."

Lucius was unable to hide his surprise for a moment but he swiftly covered with another sneer. Narcissa raised her cup in gratitude.

"Myself and the others are not so fortunate." Nott stated dryly. "We shall have to think about our response carefully." He caught Sirius's gaze again. "Theo talks with passion of your son's power and prowess. Are you confident that he will be able to defeat him fully?"

"He can defeat him." Sirius responded forcefully.

"He has affinity with the family magic." Nott noted, his eyes shrewd and calculating. "Does he mean to use it?"

Sirius raised one eyebrow in mocking acknowledgement. "He has an affinity, yes, but that may be because he has the oaths of fealty and alliance from the others. Whether all the magic would come when it's called…"

Nott grimaced ruefully. "I can see why there is doubt. You are not certain the magics of those who are branded with the Dark Mark would accept his call."

Sirius gave a slow nod.

"Something for us to think about." Nott said quietly almost to himself. "Perhaps our oaths to do no harm would suffice…" he shook his head and got to his feet. "Thank you for your candidness, Sirius. We will need to discuss a way forward with our allies. Do you give permission for us to speak to them on this?"

"I'll allow you to reveal the likelihood of the third task's link to the potential resurrection, and to talk in general terms that it is likely that Voldemort had a plan for abducting Harry and what you might want to do, or not, if he does call you to bear witness to attempting to kill my son again." Sirius said sharply as he stood. "Nothing else. You don't mention explicitly that we may use it as an opportunity to take him down."

Nott picked up the book and handed it to Sirius. "You may keep this."

Sirius nodded his thanks and after Nott took his leave from the Malfoys escorted him out to the floo. He returned to the study and the Malfoys who sat in stony silence.

"You should have already confided in us." Narcissa remonstrated with him coldly. "We are useless to you if we are without inside knowledge and you know we are bound to keep your secrets."

Sirius glared back at her. "And if I trusted you wholly you'd consider me a fool."

Narcissa conceded the point with an angry toss of her head.

Sirius sighed and gestured with the book. "There is not much else to tell, Cousin. You know about the prophecy."

"Then you seek to resolve it on the night of the third task." Lucius said stiffly.

"Now you sound like Albus." Sirius commented aiming for a cheery tone.
Lucius flushed a purple colour. "There is no need to insult me."

Sirius held up a hand in silent apology but inwardly awarded himself a point.

Lucius gave a huff and finally sat, perching himself on the sofa next to his wife. His hand caressed the top of his cane giving away his nervousness. "It is a sound stratagem to ambush the Dark Lord when you have knowledge he is to strike."

Sirius sat and leaned back in his own chair giving the impression he was more relaxed than he felt. "I'd be happier if we didn't have to risk Harry in the effort."

Lucius acknowledged Sirius's words with a small nod. "A pity but he is up to the challenge."

There was a hint of a question in the remark and Sirius ignored it.

"What's your take on his gathering support abroad?" Sirius asked instead.

"The Dark Lord will want to return in a position of strength." Lucius said. "He cannot be unaware of the political environment you have created here. He knows he cannot retake the ground he has lost with the few followers he has that remain loyal to him."

Sirius nodded. It made an unfortunate kind of sense.

"You cannot trust though that those who have sworn détentes will keep them in the face of his presence." Lucius said quietly.

It was a fair warning and Sirius nodded. "I'd hope they'd think twice about lifting a wand to help him but I'm not counting on it."

Lucius nodded in reply and fingered his cane again. "Speaking of trust, Severus Snape has informed Avery that he is now working on a key potion to restore the Dark Lord. I believe it was this rumour which alerted Benjamin to the exact nature of the ritual the Dark Lord intends to use."

"I'm aware of what Snape's up to." Sirius said dismissively.

"Very well." Lucius glanced at Narcissa who raised an elegant eyebrow. He sighed and turned back. "The other thing of note you may wish to consider is that a large consignment of magical snakes has been procured and is on its way to Hogwarts. Nott and I witnessed the magical transportation this morning at the Ministry."

It had to be for the third task, Sirius realised. Magical snakes would provide a good obstacle in the maze – and it validated the theory that Voldemort would have stacked the third task in favour of Harry assuming he knew about Harry's Parseltongue abilities.

"There were a number of poisonous breeds included." Lucius continued with a sneer.

"Perhaps it would not be remiss for Harry to learn some healing spells as part of his training." Narcissa added.

"That's a good idea." Sirius acknowledged and made a mental note to talk to Harry about including it in the training plan.

Lucius changed the topic to the upcoming Wizengamot session and Sirius let him, interested to see how much Lucius would give away about Avery's petition. It was another hour before the Malfoys took their leave.
Sirius flooed back to Hogwarts and took sanctuary in the small study in his quarters. He sent a letter with Hooter to Bill asking him to call around that evening. He planned to give him Nott's book to aid the investigation into the ritual. Hopefully it would provide some details they didn't have; give them some kind of advantage.

His mirror vibrated and Sirius picked it up quickly, grinning as he answered and Moony's face swam into view. It took Sirius quite a while to catch Remus up with the events of the day. His oldest friend looked grave when Sirius had finished.

"You've had quite the day." Remus commented, stroking his chin. "It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since we last spoke."

Sirius shrugged. "Things are beginning to move."

"Which is why I was calling you." Remus said. "Dora and I have been talking and we think we should come home…"

"Moony…"

"Hear me out, Padfoot." Remus said firmly. His warm brown eyes met Sirius's through the mirror. "Politically, we're out of the woods in terms of mine and Dora's relationship. Yes, there's still some fallout but not much. With your permission we'll move into the Black estate and Dora will be behind major wards and protected; out of sight then for the most part. But we'll be able to spend time with you and Harry, and be there for the third task. Dora knows she can't be part of the fight but I will not let you and Harry face that alone."

Sirius battled with his head and heart for a long moment. His heart wanted his friend beside him but also wanted to protect him; his head believed their plans would only benefit from having Remus closer but was also concerned that the political fallout of having Remus back in England wasn't going to be as minimal as Remus thought. He sighed heavily. "You have permission to move you and Dora to the Black estate."

Remus began to smile triumphantly.

"But, Moony, you keep a low profile and you both stay out of the fighting." Sirius stated sternly.

"We'll make the arrangements and aim to come back early next week." Remus said with only a touch of smugness.

Sirius harrumphed but his expression warmed. "You've been missed, Moony. It'll be good to have you home."

Remus smiled brightly at him. "It'll be good to be home, Padfoot. We'll talk more tomorrow."

The mirror went blank and Sirius gave a small chuckle. He couldn't deny he was relieved Remus would be with him again. It had felt so wrong the werewolf being so far away…he frowned as a thought drifted through his head.

Hadn't Cadmus warned of schisms and distance? Hadn't James and Lily?

Sirius shook himself as though he were in his Grim form suddenly pleased that he'd agreed to the homecoming. It was time for them to come together, time for the allies to make sure there was no distance separating them. His lips firmed. They wouldn't make the same mistakes as the Peverell brothers; Harry's survival depended upon it.
Harry scoffed down the last of his toast and hummed at the headline in the Prophet. It was clear that the imminent Wizengamot debate about werewolves in Britain had already come to the attention of the newspaper and there was a tentative article presenting both sides of the debate. He wondered if Moony returning with Dora would be reported as a good thing or a bad thing…

Sirius bounded up to the table, taking his place with a swish of his wand to lay the napkin on his lap and start the pot pouring his early morning coffee.

Harry stared at him a little bemused. "You're in a good mood."

"Moony was on the mirror," Sirius explained, "He's confirmed he's coming back on Sunday to oversee the preparations and then Dora and the bump will follow after him. Patrick's staying behind on the Farm but Clara's coming with them to give Remus some help with the steward work."

Harry smiled back at his beaming father. "That's great! I can't wait until they're back."

"Me either." Sirius said cheerfully. "It'll be good to have them home." He took an appreciative sip of his coffee, humming in satisfaction. "I was thinking we might give the Prophet an exclusive interview with the happy couple at the Black estate ahead of the Wizengamot session."

Harry nodded, pleased at the tactic. It wouldn't end the debate but it would give them some positive press before the session.

The door chimed.

Harry looked at his watch and grimaced. "I have to get to class."

"Be good." Sirius said brightly. "And if you can't be good…"

"Don't get caught." Harry chorused with him.

They grinned at each other briefly.

Harry grabbed his bag and hurried over to the door. Bill was waiting patiently on the other side. He nodded a greeting and a goodbye to Sirius as Harry stepped through the doorway and they were on their way.

"So History of Magic first right?" Bill asked.

"That's right." Harry said, looking forward to the class. Professor Memoire made the history class much more interactive and fun. There was no opportunity to sleep as there had been with Binns.

"Charms for the rest of the class after that so Caro and I will be taking you for a duelling session."

Bill recited.

"And then Potions all afternoon." Harry made a face to show his disgust and Bill laughed. Harry adjusted his bag. His relationship with Snape had improved leaps and bounds but Harry still didn't enjoy being taught by the spy. "What about you?"

Bill copied Harry's disgusted face and sighed. "More research."

"Don't you have to do a lot of research as part of your job?" questioned Harry with sincere interest. Curse-breaking sounded like a great job.
"I do," Bill admitted, "but normally I'm not the one going through the dusty books. I usually get the summary from the research team and have to then work out practically what I do with it."

"You miss it." Harry commented feeling a touch guilty.

Bill shrugged. "I've enjoyed my service, Harry, never doubt that; it's been important and it's opened my eyes to a lot of things." He smiled suddenly. "I can't deny though that I'll be glad to get back to my day job for a while," his smile took on a hint of the twins' mischief, "you know going through dusty old tombs with dead bodies and…"

"Yeah, yeah." Harry said, waving him off as he remembered why he'd ruled Bill's job out as a possible career option.

Bill deposited him at the door of History of Magic where the rest of the fourth year Gryffindors were already waiting.

Harry kissed Hermione lightly, sliding his hand into hers and grinning at her a touch.

Hermione's eyebrows rose a touch. "You seem happy."

"Why shouldn't he be?" Ron remarked. "He's staying in the dorm tonight!"

Harry nodded. "And Remus is coming home on Sunday."

"Really?" asked Hermione, lighting up. "Oh, it'll be good to see him and Dora! Andy will be thrilled."

Harry was about to reply when the classroom door opened and the Professor ushered them inside. He shrugged away his reply; he'd tell Hermione about Crouch and the press stuff later.

o-O-o

Barty whistled low under his breath as he whirled his wand in the right sequence. Gilbert Pinner, the plain Seventh Year Ravenclaw he was pretending to be, was a perfect foil for him.

Gilbert was a pureblood orphan of a very Minor house very distantly related to the Crouches. The young boy lived with his Grandfather, an irascible old man who had died a very quick death under Barty's wand. Gilbert was nicely potioned up in the basement and under the guard of an elf he had purchased back during the previous Summer when he'd had freedom to roam.

At Hogwarts Gilbert was an introverted student, shying away from the other students. He was treated courteously by the others in his year but there were no close friendships. He would leave Hogwarts with an unremarkable education. Little Gilbert should be grateful to him, Barty considered. Certainly once it was revealed that Barty had chosen him to impersonate, the Ravenclaw would find himself the sudden centre of attention. Well, perhaps posthumously, but still – fame and infamy were on the cards for Gilbert.

Of course, Barty couldn't wait to be free of the disguise and he was closer than ever to that goal; his mission at Hogwarts was almost over.

His main mission was to set-up the third task to ensure it delivered Harry into the hands of his Father. The Dark Lord was insistent that it had to be Potter and after all the work that Barty had put into getting Potter into the tournament, he was agreed. The parameters of the task had been changed to be more dangerous and while Moody's security was tight, Barty had finally been able to sabotage the maze two nights before.
There was only the switching of Potter's cup for the duplicate one with a portkey. Barty had thought he'd need to stay in Hogwarts to do the spell but while the cups were tightly locked up, the podiums they would be displayed upon were simply stored in an old classroom. Barty had spelled all four with a timed switching spell just to be on the safe side. His first mission then was all but complete.

The second mission the Dark Lord had assigned was easy enough; somewhere to hide the vanishing cabinet so that a group of the Death Eaters they were recruiting would be able to sneak into Hogwarts under the wards. Barty had left the cabinet in Trelawney's teaching room under a timed transfiguration. The small frivolous unicorn ornament would change at the start of the third task back to its original form. Barty couldn't decide whether he wanted to be at his Father's side in the graveyard or taking down Hogwarts. Whatever his Father wanted, Barty reminded himself. He wasn't too eager to earn another punishment.

Carrow's punishment for not using the ward buster had been brutal; his skin had been half-flayed from his body before Pettigrew had been ordered to heal him. Pettigrew was a mediocre wizard so Carrow had been left horrifically scarred. Barty valued his own looks and was keen to avoid that particular punishment. Carrow had at least been useful in helping them have a conduit to Europe to recruit. With so many of their supposedly loyal brethren in England rolling over for Black and the reshaped Wizengamot, the Death Eaters needed new members.

At least the charm that Pettigrew had given him to hide was working. Pettigrew had informed the Dark Lord at the beginning of the school year of a map, an artefact that he had created along with his friends which showed every individual within the wards of the castle. In his Seventh Year, Pettigrew had found a spell in the Restricted Section to hide himself from the map so his friends wouldn't tease him if they spotted he was with a girl. Apparently Pettigrew had used the spell liberally at Hogwarts when he'd play-acted as the Weasleys' rat. It had only been in his horror of being chased across the grounds by Black that he had forgotten to recast it. Barty had been wary but so far the charm had worked like a dream. He cast it every morning and night and so far he had gone unnoticed.

But not unsuspected.

He was aware that the staff were cautious. Moreover, no matter how quiet the students kept the rumour, the whispers that a student might be being impersonated had found its way to most of the student populace. He was certain that he was being watched.

'Constant Vigilance' as Moody would say. Barty repressed the urge to chuckle madly.

Barty looked up as Flitwick approached as though to examine his work and carried on when the diminutive Professor went straight by him to the more charismatic Gerhardt Fulstrum. He was miffed at the Professor's dismissal of his perfect work but he assumed Pinner was used to it.

The other mission was one which Barty had set himself; he wanted to ensure that there was no threat to the Dark Lord from either Winky or the Summers woman. It still smarted that Dumbledore, Black and Potter had located the pair.

Barty grimaced. His family magic still would not come to him despite performing the inheritance ritual. He shook away the thought and focused on the charm he was doing.

He'd located Winky pretty quickly. As her Master it had been easy enough to follow their bond. The little elf was kept in a small room off the infirmary. She was attended daily by another elf but other than that was alone. Her room was barely warded. It would be easy enough to sneak in and end her life. Barty felt no remorse for killing the small elf who had cared for him as a child, remembering only her part in his imprisonment by his father; that Winky had had no choice in following his father's orders didn't occur to Barty. He would be safe with her death; the new elf he had acquired
would mask him from the Black elves and Winky's fate was sealed.

That left only the Summers woman.

It had been clear after careful investigation that the Summers woman was not at Hogwarts despite the understanding that she was. Barty knew she must have been transferred to a Ministry safe house somewhere and it was unlikely that he'd find her. He'd decided to turn his attention instead to destroying the potion that would wake her.

Severus had sent word to Father that the potion for the Summers woman would be done by the beginning of the following week. Oh, the Potions Master had given the Dark Lord platitudes about ensuring the woman would be mute for the rest of her life when she was given it but Barty wasn't taking any chances. He had managed to locate Severus's quarters and the lab within. He had identified the strong wards that Severus had placed. He knew that destroying the potion would need to be his final foray as he would be discovered and, with the vanishing cabinet out of reach, he would have to fight his way out.

What he needed was a distraction and he'd come up with the perfect one.

Barty almost wished he could grin but it would break his cover. He only needed a few more hours, he reminded himself. Only a few more hours and he would be back by his Father's side…
"I SURRENDER!" Caro yelled, breathless with laughter from the strong tickling spell Harry had thrown at her.

It was all Bill could do to avoid Harry's rope spell as he tried not to laugh himself silly at the sight of her writhing on the floor of the Room of Requirement.

He skidded behind a nearby sofa and sent a stunner in Harry's direction. Harry dived over a chair to safety and the stunner impacted the furniture sending it flying.

Harry cast another stunner towards Bill who managed to duck and land a summoning spell on Caro who slid across the floor to him. He immediately cast a 'finite' and she stopped laughing, swiping at her wet face as she gasped for breath.

Bill shot up some sparks. "End! That's enough for today!"

Harry didn't move from his position but he stopped casting. "What's the white flag phrase?"

Bill grinned. In one of their first duels Bill had hit Harry with a hex after he called time. He'd pointed out the Death Eaters weren't going to play fair and Harry was going to need to be cautious if anyone called time or surrendered in a duel.

"Red is my colour." Bill yelled.

Harry stepped out and Bill stood up, offering a hand to Caro.

Caro took it gratefully. She shot Harry a disgruntled look. "You overpowered that tickling spell."

Harry shook his head and grinned at her. "Took you down and out."

"Damn it." Caro swore, brushing down her black pants.

"It was a good tactic." Bill allowed. "You alright, Caro?"

"Just my pride." Caro admitted ruefully. She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes.

Bill was suddenly very aware that Caro was wearing very tight black leggings, a cropped top and nothing else but trainers. She was sweaty and damp and very appealing…

Harry cleared his throat.

Bill flushed and turned back to the now smirking teen. "Alright, Harry, what could you have done diff…"

A loud bang echoed through the school and for a second it seemed as though Hogwarts trembled.
"What the hell was that?" demanded Caro.

Bill caught Harry as he charged for the door. "Stay behind me!" He knew it was useless to argue for the teen to stay in the room. "Sirius will have my head if you just go running out."

Harry nodded briskly.

They opened the door and peeked into the corridor. It all looked normal but the portrait across the corridor was empty.

Bill gripped his wand and marched forward to the window. He gazed out and caught sight of smoke. It was the infirmary!

"All students to their common rooms! All students to their House common rooms!" Dumbledore's voice sounded through the school, concern and worry evident in the amplified tone.

"The infirmary's on fire." Bill informed Harry and Caro in a clipped voice. "We'd better get you back to your rooms, Harry!"

"You go help," Harry said quickly, "Caro can walk me back."

Caro nodded and pushed Bill a touch. "Go!"

Bill gave her a quick glance of gratitude and ran for the infirmary. He made his way down stairs and down corridors until he came to the infirmary doors. Minerva and Filius were already there casting. He swore at the smoke seeping out from under them. He joined them, recognising the wand movements as a charm to hold back fire and one to transfigure the door to glass so they could see inside.

"Where's everyone else?" Bill demanded as he added a charm to dispel the smoke shooting it under the door.

"The Headmaster is outside dealing with the structural damage and holding the wards." Minerva said sharply.

"Helen, Poppy and four students are inside." Filius fretted.

Running feet caused Bill to spin around, wand drawn to deal with the threat. He was pleased to see Sirius and Snape.

"Moody's gone to assist the Headmaster." Snape told the others.

Suddenly the wood became glass and they all peered through and froze.

The left outer wall of the infirmary was just cracked down the centre, light seeping in from the sun outside, and the crack travelled all the way across the floor to the inner sanctum of the infirmary. The inner wall was ablaze; smoke and flames creating a wall of fire.

"There!" Sirius pointed with his wand.

Underneath a bed as far from the blaze as possible were the huddled forms of Poppy and two students.

Bill and Sirius looked at each other and raised their wands in unison. Bill cast Bubbleheads on them both as Sirius vanished the doors in a rush of powerful magic that thrummed through the air.
They dived in, peripherally aware of Snape, Minerva and Filius shifting to cast spells that would hold the heat and smoke back from them.

Sirius banished anything in their path and they soon skidded to a halt, kneeling down to get under the bed.

It was damp to the touch and Bill realised Poppy must have drenched it in water trying to keep it from going up in flames.

"Take the children!" Poppy ordered, pushing the two Second Years at them.

Sirius took the girl who was crying hysterically, and Bill grabbed hold of the lad.

"We'll be back for you in a moment, Poppy." Sirius informed her sternly.

Bill cast a Bubblehead over her and her expression eased with relief. She nodded.

They hurried back across the room and deposited the students with Minerva, who ushered the youngsters away along the corridor.

"Hurry!" Filius shouted. "We can't hold this!"

"Get Poppy!" Sirius ordered immediately, hurrying to Snape's side and helping with the suppression magic.

Bill charged back into the infirmary, running full tilt to reach the end of the ward. Poppy saw him and started inching out from under the bed. He grabbed hold of her and shushed her as he picked her up.

As he made his way back, the crack groaned and the windows shattered in a storm of deadly glass particles.

Bill knew he wouldn't get a shield up in time; knew Sirius, Filius and Snape could not come to his aid…

He moved, placing his back to the windows, covering Poppy as much as he could while she protested weakly…

And nothing hit him.

He looked up astonished.

"GET MOVING, YOU GREAT PILLOCK!" Caro yelled from the doorway. Her wand was out and he knew immediately it had been her who had shielded him.

Bill stood, adjusted his hold on Poppy and hurried through. The three other wizards followed him with alacrity.

"You must go back!" Poppy said urgently, pushing Minerva away when she tried to start a diagnostic charm. "Helen was in the private examination room with two Hufflepuff students!"

Bill set her down on a nearby bench and went back to Sirius who was at the doorway examining the lay of the land. He shook his head. "There's no way through here!"

Poppy gave a cry.
Suddenly, a blue wave of magical energy, singing with the signature of Albus Dumbledore, swept over them and into the infirmary. It smothered the flames and destroyed the smoke leaving only silence and the devastation of the fire behind.

"Thank Merlin!" Minerva muttered, pushing the hair that had escaped her do back. Her hand squeezed Poppy's shoulder comfortingly. "Sirius, Helen…"

Bill checked with Sirius in a silent look and they both headed back in. Bill was aware Snape was following them.

The charred and melted contents were grim to look at with the crumbling inner walls shocking in their destruction. They moved carefully through the half-collapsed doorway into the small corridor with the private rooms.

It was suddenly clear where the fire had originated; a room at the end of the crack was black at the door. A quick peek inside and Bill gagged.

The room had been blown to bits and burned. The shape of something on what had been the bed was a small piled of ash. Cracks spider-webbed across ceiling and floor; one of the inner walls was half-gone.

Sirius gripped his wand tighter. "This was the elf's room." He performed a spell that Bill recognised from the Auror handbook; forensic detection. "The explosive device was in here but there's only elf magic present."

"Crouch." Snape snarled and Bill was reminded how Crouch had used his elf to terrorise Harry the Summer before.

Sirius nodded grimly. "He must have secured another elf and decided he didn't need her anymore."

Snape pointed his wand down the corridor. "Down here."

The first private examination room was empty; the second the same; the third had evidence of being used but was also empty.

Sirius pursed his lips and cast an Auror detection spell. "Portkey was used."

Bill nodded, and wiped his brow. "That means they're safe, right?"

Snape nodded slowly. "I am uncertain how they circumvented the portkey ward though."

Bill sighed in relief.

Two elves popped in and started setting the examination room to rights. They carefully made their way out and found the bedraggled group of Professors in the corridor was bereft of Poppy, Minerva and the students, and had been joined by the Headmaster and Moody.

"We think Doctor Jordan portkeyed out?" asked Sirius quickly.

"The ward was momentarily disrupted around the infirmary due to the explosion. Doctor Jordan carries a portkey to the Valley clinic for emergencies and thus will have arrived there with her two charges." Dumbledore confirmed gravely. "They will return in a week."

"That's something." Sirius said not hiding his relief. "Poppy?"

"Minor injuries." Dumbledore replied. "Along with her two charges. Minerva has taken them to the
secondary infirmary by the Great Hall. She was going to summon a healer from Saint Mungo’s to attend them." He gave a heavy sigh. "The explosion damaged the fire ward but it is now re-established. All the other wards have held and the damage is mostly superficial. The elves will have everything fixed by tomorrow. We will need the potions supply replenished but we can apply to Saint Mungo’s for an emergency source."

"I assume the DMLE is on its way." Sirius turned to Moody who nodded. "You'll want to tell them that there was an explosive device left in the elf’s room by another elf. I know damned well it wasn't Dobby so…"

"So Crouch has procured another to his dirty work." Moody growled.

"And hide his identity." Snape said smoothly.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Posey?"

An elf appeared immediately.

"I believed the wards have restricted all elves but Hogwart elves. Are you aware of any others that have been within the school?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"Many student elves come and go. Elves of students are considered Hogwart elves, Master Dumbleydore." Posey answered immediately, her ears waggling.

"Merlin's bloody balls!" Moody exploded.

"Alastor!" Dumbledore began remonstratively, "there is a lady…"

"You've got that right, Moody." Caro agreed.

"Is there a chance that this isn't just about getting rid of the elf?" Moody asked Snape.

Snape's shoulders moved in an elegant shrug. "He's insane. Anything is possible."

Moody's expression turned even grimmer. "We need to check all the classrooms and common areas. He may have had his elf plant more explosives."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Posey, have the elves check for anything that may explode and report it to Professor Moody at once, and restrict access to Hogwarts to elves of the school and the Black elves only."

Her large head bobbed and she disappeared.

"I'd better go collect my son before he wears the carpet out with his pacing." Sirius said.

"Thank you, Sirius, and you, William." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at them. "Your help was most appreciated."

Bill fell into step beside Sirius and smiled when Caro moved to Sirius's other side. She winked at him and he grinned appreciatively at her. He'd have to think about buying her a thank you for the shield – maybe a night out at that cinema thing she'd introduced him to? The big screen with its enormous photo detailing a story. It was tremendous. Sounded like a plan to him.

"All students will gather in the Great Hall for lunch! There will be announcements! All students…" Dumbledore's voice sounded again.
Bill tuned out Sirius's complaints that the Headmaster had done that on purpose knowing Sirius was on his way to Harry, and turned his mind back to his future plans.

o-O-o

Barty found it hard to cackle wildly as he followed the rest of the Ravenclaws to their table. He settled himself down between the Sixth form and a place from Natalie Warren, certain that no-one would notice him in the shade of the captivating Head Girl.

He ignored the heated whisperings as the table debated what had happened and what it meant. He watched instead as the Gryffindors filed in, Potter among them with his hand clasped to an elf's. Barty controlled his features. It was the elf that had seen to Winky and clearly it was Potter's own elf. Shame his explosion hadn't caught the little vermin.

Black hurried in along with the Weasley Heir and a blonde shapely woman who garnered more than one stare for her skimpy attire. Potter sprang up to greet them and they joined him on the Gryffindor table.

The staff swept in but remained standing in front of their seats; Moody and McGonagall were missing along with the infirmary staff.

Dumbledore waited for quiet before he spoke. "Thank you. It's my grave duty to inform you that the infirmary was attacked today. We believe the perpetrator to be Bartemius Crouch Junior. The DMLE is on site and searching the grounds but we believe Mister Crouch used an elf and thus will not be found easily."

Barty preened. He had done such a good job.

Mutterings broke out across the hall.

"Doctor Jordan and Madame Pomfrey are both safe as are the four students who were in their care. Unfortunately, an elf in the care of the school was killed." Dumbledore announced.

Silence settled again except for a pitiful wail from the elf by Potter.

"The secondary infirmary is located by the Hall through the chamber door behind me." Dumbledore waved and a set of doors identical to the ones that opened up to the infirmary appeared. "It will be used for at least a few days until we can verify the main infirmary has been repaired and properly outfitted."

Barty grimaced. He had once read about the secondary infirmary in *Hogwarts: A History* but had thought it would have fallen out of use. No matter. His explosion had caused damage and it had served its purpose.

"Lunch will now be served and classes will resume this afternoon." Dumbledore intoned before leaving, the food appearing on the tables in his wake.

Barty ducked his head as the rest of the table erupted in a storm of debate. He reached instead for the shepherd's pie by his elbow. The afternoon would be busy and he would need a good meal.

o-O-o

Harry took his place in the Potions lab with a sigh. He actually enjoyed the brewing of potions but he hated Snape's tutelage. Hermione gave him a smile when he turned around to look at her and Harry smiled back. He'd just returned his face to the front when Snape stormed in with his usual swirling
"You may be assured this classroom has been examined and no explosive device found." Snape sneered. He snapped his wand at the board and the ingredients for a simple Calming Draught appeared. "Our infirmary is in need of potions and I expect perfection." He sneered. "Two hours; you may begin."

Harry immediately double checked the instructions with the book he had opened up and confirmed they were the same. He reviewed his potion ingredients and was pleased to find everything at hand. He set out his cauldron, checked its cleanliness and manually wiped it, the stirrer and the knife he would use down with a cloth. Beside him, Neville was following the same steps.

Snape stalked past, his dark eyes glared at them briefly.

Harry and Neville exchanged a rueful look and turned their attention back to the potion.

The act of chopping and measuring was almost soothing. Cooking was something he had almost enjoyed at the Dursleys although he’d hated doing it only for his own portion to be meagre. He carefully peeled his Bay root and added it to his cauldron with enough water to cover.

He was glad the classrooms had been searched because he didn’t believe in his gut that Crouch would stop at killing Winky. It seemed all too coincidental that the very day the potion was going to be ready to wake the Summers lady that Crouch would choose to strike at the elf.

He had asked Sirius if the potion was safe at lunch and Sirius had promised to check with Snape. Presumably that accounted for why the Professor had been late, in a grumpy mood, and made it a point to say the classroom was safe.

Dobby was devastated at the death of Winky.

He’d been crying and wailing and it had taken a good few minutes for Harry to settle him down so he could make any sense of the elf’s words. Harry had reassured Dobby he hadn’t failed in his task to look after Winky. Thankfully Dobby had agreed to join the other elves in the search for more explosives and seemed grateful to be doing something useful.

Harry was actually thankful that Snape had given them something useful to do too; brewing potions to replace those lost was a good idea.

Suddenly Peeves appeared in the classroom just underneath the high ceiling. "Balloons!" The poltergeist cackled and dropped the armful of brightly coloured spheres he held. He disappeared again hooting madly.

"SHEILD YOUR CAULDRONS!" Snape ordered.

While his classmates all responded, hurrying to throw shields around their equipment, Harry instead pointed his wand at the floor and erected the duelling shield.

It travelled up and up…

The balloons drifted down and down…

The ward was almost there…

And the first balloon hit the invisible shield with a squelch.
Lavender screamed; Parvati following as balloon after balloon hit the duelling ward and liquid exploded over the top of the dome.

"POTTER MAKE A HOLE! OUT!" Snape yelled. "EVERYONE OUT!"

Harry concentrated and formed a small hole in the shield at the door. He took a deep breath, maintaining the ward but keeping an opening was hard work even for someone with his power.

Snape hurried people through, including an anxious Hermione, until there was only Snape and Harry left in the classroom. Snape waved his wand and the door slammed shut sealing them inside.

"Get under the lab table and don't let any of the potion touch you." Snape ordered briskly, following his own instructions by gathering his robes around him and beginning to lower himself to the floor. "On the count of three let go of the shield and erect a Bubblehead."

Harry nodded his acquiescence, straining to maintain the shield against the liquid potion.

"One…"

Harry dropped to the floor and crawled under the table.

"Two…"

He focused on his wand on maintaining the shield until…

"Three!"

Harry dropped the shield and attempted the Bubblehead charm only for it to immediately wobble and collapse. He frowned.

The potion fell, splattering over the classroom haphazardly. Where it hit the open cauldrons, it sizzled ominously.

But where it simply landed was worse. It hit the ground and turned into a white vapour.

Harry's eyes widened and he tried to cast another Bubblehead before it reached him. As the second failed, he realised that he didn't have enough room under the table to get his wand movements right, but before he could try a third time, the vapour hit him.

He gave a cry as his body started to change…

"Potter! We need to get moving! The alarm has triggered on my private laboratory and…" Snape stood up and walked towards him.

Harry's writhing threw him clear of the table into the aisle. Snape stopped and Harry squinted up at him.

Snape looked at him aghast, his head sealed into a Bubblehead. "You're…you're…"

Harry looked at his fur covered hands and snarled. "Animagus. Potion…making me!" He managed to get out. "Can't control it…leave!" And suddenly he couldn't stop the transformation any longer.

His body arched and his clothing tore…

He landed on four huge tawny paws, threw back his head and roared.
Snape turned heel and ran; he slammed the door shut behind him and locked it.

Harry hit the door with a thud.

A small part of Harry knew he was a lion; that he'd changed but was still a human underneath the fur, claws and teeth. A larger part of him still under the potions' thrall was simply a huge predatory animal incensed at being trapped. He threw himself at the door again.

What was he doing?

His human brain demanded the answer from the animal.

The animal snarled and went to launch itself for a third time at the door.

Stupid.

Mindless.

Why just throw himself at the door?

What was *that* going to do?

Apart from hurt because throwing himself at the door hurt.

And just like that Harry's mind shook off the thrall just as it had shaken away the compulsion on the ring.

The lion sat back on his haunches and huffed.

Alright, Harry mused, he should have a go at transforming back to a human. He closed his eyes and reached…

Nothing.

He pondered the situation. He remembered that the werewolves had been in their forms for another twenty-four hours after inhaling the potion. Maybe this was a variant? He could only hope. He gave an unhappy huff and sank down to the ground.

He was fairly certain that the potion vapour was no longer potent. The vents in the potion lab were spelled to counter anything harmful within a few minutes; sucking it into a magical space where it would be neutralised before shunting whatever was left into the air outside. There was nothing to do until someone came to let him out.

The lion in him didn't like to wait as his wildly lashing tail gave away.

Harry roared and dropped his head to his paws.

o-O-o

Severus slammed shut the lab door behind him and spelled it locked. A heavy thud against the door proved his intelligence and instinct was sound. He whirled around and found himself facing a horde of worried students.

"You've *left* Harry in there?!!" Granger demanded hotly.

"He's been exposed to a potion to turn him into a mindless beast." Severus snapped out. "Get Black
down here to deal with him! I have something to check elsewhere!"

He left them agape at his terseness and seeming lack of care for a student but it couldn't be helped. The alarm on his private ward meant someone was in his quarters; in his private lab.

It was Crouch.

It had to be.

He was after the antidote potion. It was the only explanation. The mad wizard had already removed one threat in the elf, it made sense that he'd use the chaos of the day to attempt to remove the second.

Severus hurried down the short cut through the dungeons, a curl of guilt wrapping itself around his spine about Potter. Black was best placed to deal with Potter, he assured himself. At least they'd gotten the rest of the students out before they'd turned into animals. He shuddered at the thought of being trapped in a locked lab filled with feral beasts.

He charged down another corridor and saw the door to his quarters was ajar. He was about to take a step toward it when the Headmaster appeared beside him in a rush of flames. Fawkes arrowed up to perch on a rafter leaving Albus behind. The old wizard gestured toward the room.

"Shall we?" Albus asked quietly, low enough that his voice would not carry.

Severus nodded, relieved beyond words that Albus would be with him. He took a deep breath and walked forward.

o-O-o

Sirius stormed down the dungeon corridor. He thanked Merlin Hermione had enough common sense for a dozen teenagers. She had called for Dobby and the elf had immediately informed Sirius of the situation.

He banked the worry he had for Harry behind the anger that was percolating about Snape. The greasy bat just couldn't help himself, Sirius thought angrily. What was Snivellus doing leaving Sirius's potioned son alone in a lab?

He turned the corner and saw the huddle of students in front of the lab. Hermione was trying to unlock the door and Sirius did grudgingly give Snape credit for ensuring the kids were protected from their own curiosity; Hermione definitely lived up to her animagus form at times.

Sirius cleared his throat loudly.

It was almost amusing how their heads snapped up and around to look at him in unison.

"Cousin," Draco greeted him formally, "Professor Snape said he had something to check…"

"He just left Harry in there!" Ron interrupted heatedly.

"That's not important right now," Hermione remonstrated with the boys, "we have to get Harry out!"

"The Professor said he was a mindless beast!" Draco retorted. "He wouldn't lie about that!"

Sirius took a deep breath. Snape probably did have a good reason for leaving and his description of Harry was a tad worrying. What a day! He held up his hand, commanding immediate silence.

"Everyone away from the door." He pointed down the corridor. "I want you all to wait at the end of
the corridor."

Hermione looked mutinous but she moved away and the others followed her. Sirius turned back to
the door and performed a scan that allowed him to assess what was beyond. It was a very useful
Auror spell.

The results almost made him smile.

Harry was in an animal form but he seemed to have settled down, lying on the floor some distance
away from the door. There was no sign of any active potion. Sirius figured that there was no harm in
being cautious and ran another scan. The ventilation system had activated a few minutes before,
drawing out a toxic potion vapour. He frowned but unlocked the door.

Sirius entered carefully. Harry might seem docile but the words 'mindless beast' echoed in his head.
He peeked into the lab.

The young lion lying by the desk looked incredibly sorry for itself. Its head was resting on its paws,
ears flat, black mane a wild mess, and there was a sorrowful look in its bright green eyes.

Sirius shuffled inside the room and closed the door. "Harry?"

Harry growled, glanced down at his paws and back up at Sirius.

"Yes, you're a lion." Sirius confirmed. He did his best to hide his amusement. "I'm assuming since
you're not attacking me you're completely in control of your form?"

Harry huffed.

Sirius gave a sigh of relief. His eyes landed on a shredded balloon, a sticky yellow potion still
clinging to the rubbery inner surface. He waved his wand and an evidence box appeared; a moment
later, the remnants of all the balloons were safely secured.

"Well, we'll have that analysed later," Sirius said. "Come on. We should get you somewhere safer
than a compromised lab."

Harry got to his feet and stretched, his sizeable claws scratching the stone flooring. Sirius winced at
the sound. He was pleased that Harry just padded over to him. The urge to reach out and pat his head
was strong but Sirius resisted. The lion wasn't a form Harry had chosen; it was a form he had been
forced into and even if he had his faculties, there was no point tempting fate.

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Severus looked carefully around the room from his place just inside the doorway.

The living space looked undisturbed. The same book on potions rested on the side table where he
had left it the night before; the wards on his book shelves were intact. The small kitchen area was
clean and tidy. His bedroom door was closed.

The door to the lab was open.

Albus waved him back and strode ahead, marching into the space like the Gryffindor he was.
Severus rolled his eyes and followed him.

They both came to a halt in the doorway, watching as a Ravenclaw student poured acid into the
potion that Severus had readied for the Summers woman.
"Hello, Severus! And the Headmaster! How delightful!" The boy cooed without taking his eyes off the ruined potion. He set the acid down.

"Hello Mister Pinner," Albus responded, "or should I say Mister Crouch?"

Barty giggled. "Ah, I'm afraid you've caught me red-handed." He pouted and looked at Severus. "You will forgive me, Severus, but I just cannot allow you to complete this potion!"

Severus glowered at him. In the presence of Albus, he could free his hatred for the snivelling little wretch, rather than have to pretend a camaraderie because they both served the Dark Lord. "You foolish cretin!" He sneered. "You think the Dark Lord will be happy with you? You're wrong; you're caught!"

"Where is Mister Pinner?" Albus asked, drawing Crouch's attention.

Barty pouted. "Oh he's safe enough." His eyes gleamed with smug triumph. "I'd be willing to tell you where he is if you'd give me the location of the lovely Ms Summers!"

"I'm afraid I won't trade one life for another." Albus said firmly, his blue eyes flinty.

"Perhaps he'll be more cooperative once the Aurors have him back in Azkaban." Severus sneered, his fingers gripped his wand tightly.

"I'll come quietly!" Barty proclaimed, batting his eyes innocently.

"I rather think that's a lie, Mister Crouch." Albus said conversationally.

Barty twirled Pinner's wand. "Of course it's a lie."

And the room behind them exploded.

o-O-o

"Oh isn't he cute!" Lavender cooed.

Harry's ears slapped back on his head, revealing just how pleased he was at that comment.

Sirius coughed, and Harry's superb feline hearing caught the laugh that underscored the sound. He glared at his father.

"I don't think Harry likes being called cute." Ron commented stiffly to his ex-girlfriend.

"He's a lion." Draco commented flatly. "He's about as cute and cuddly as a…"

"He's adorable." Lavender insisted.

"He's an apex predator capable of taking down an entire elephant." Hermione corrected her sharply.

"I hardly think that's possible." Draco argued.

Harry roared his displeasure, effectively silencing them all.

Sirius grinned. "Right, I think that's Harry Lion Speak for I'd like to vacate this corridor and I'm not cute." He ignored Harry's green glare. "I'm taking Harry back to our quarters and he'll stay there until the potion wears off…"
"But he's supposed to be spending the night in the dorm!" Ron protested.

"He can do the next weekend when he's not a lion instead." Sirius countered. "You lot should head to your common rooms."

"Shouldn't someone inform the Headmaster?" asked Hermione, folding her arms and looking mutinous once again.

Sirius waved his hand dismissively. "Snape's probably already got it covered but I'll send word once I get Harry back to…"

BOOM!

The corridor rocked with the explosion.

"Common rooms NOW!" Harry heard Sirius ordering the others, urgency spilling into every word, but Harry was already running. "HARRY!"

Harry gave into the primal urge flooding him; his prey was close and he needed to find him even if that meant running towards the explosion rather than away. He was aware the moment Sirius shifted into Padfoot, the following footsteps turning into bounding, scrabbling paws.

"ALL STUDENTS REMAIN IN YOUR CLASSROOMS!" The harried voice of his Aunt Minerva echoed through the school.

Harry skidded round one corner, then another, running, running…

 Flames brought him to a furious halt and he lurched to a stop, only millimetres from getting his fur singed.

Harry snarled and paced, glowering through the flames. Just as Sirius bounded up, Harry caught a flash of a black cloak flashing through the flames. He roared and…

Sirius became a wizard in a blink…

Harry leaped as the flames were doused hurriedly with magic from his father's wand. Harry was barely aware; he charged after the Ravenclaw who was escaping on a broomstick, flying ahead of him.

The boy glanced behind and saw Harry chasing after him. He gave an insane laugh and pushed the broom harder.

Harry redoubled his efforts, heart pounding as he ran hard to keep up. The broom was a good quality one but it was hampered by the tight corners and narrow corridors in the dungeons. It wasn't a surprise to Harry that the student was heading for the main staircase. He just hoped that the students were staying in the classrooms out of harm's way.

The Ravenclaw suddenly took a left, darting into a side corridor and up a short staircase towards an entrance Harry recognised…it led to the Astronomy tower.

He pushed himself harder to catch up, up the stairs…

…round another corner…

…the broomstick just ahead, a flash of black cloak again…
And Harry launched himself forward, paw stretching…

The twigs of the broomstick snapped under his furious swipe, sending the broomstick spiralling wildly, dumping its rider onto the tower…

Harry landed awkwardly but he was on his feet in a trice.

The student scrambled upright and blurred for a moment as the Polyjuice faded away…leaving a gleeful looking Bartemius Crouch Junior in its wake.

Harry's chest heaved as he fought for breath, his head lowered itself automatically, ears back and tail flicking madly as he stared at his prey…

Crouch twirled his wand. "Well, well, well. Look at the pretty kitty-cat! Here's me with a wand and you without!"

Harry bared his teeth to hide his alarm as he realised Crouch was right. Apart from the teeth and claws, he had no real defences as a lion.

Crouch took a step back toward the edge of the parapet. "I could hogtie you and take you to Father but…" he appeared to ponder the matter for a moment, "…but no. If you're who I think you are – and really that mess of hair is a give-away - you really do have to stick around here for the third task." He grinned madly. "Can't have an ingredient spoiling at this late stage!"

Harry growled low in his throat; a warning.

"I guess I'll just have to settle for some minor maiming." Crouch lifted his wand and snapped off a bright purple spell.

Harry leaped out of the way of it…ending up by the right wall, trapped…

"Crucio!" Crouch yelled.

The spell slammed into a suddenly conjured slab of rock.

Crouch's head snapped around to the door to the tower's roof; his face contorted into hatred. "Black!"

Sirius stalked onto the roof and Crouch took another step back…

"Get away from my son!" Sirius snarled.

"You can't keep him safe, Black!" Crouch smiled nastily. "You never could! The Dark Lord will get him in the end!"
"Your Dark Lord is a craven coward who attacked a baby." Sirius snapped, inching closer to Harry, his wand never wavering from Crouch. "Give up, Crouch! Put your wand down slowly and your hands behind your head!"

Crouch giggled, high and loudly. "You think I'm going to give myself up to you? You'll pay for what you did to Rab! I'm going to destroy you, Black!"

"On the ground, Crouch!" Sirius had reached Harry, and Harry pressed against his legs, reassuring his father, he was fine.

"NEVER!" Crouch shouted. "Reparo! Accio!" He took a step back and jumped from the tower…

The broomstick cracked into pristine condition and zoomed over the edge.

Sirius shot out a red stunner but it missed Crouch who had managed to snag the broom and was flying away.

Harry lifted his head and roared.

"Bugger!" Sirius swore roundly. He sighed and looked down at Harry.

Harry cringed, his ears flattening again, as he waited for the inevitable blistering lecture.

"You're not exactly you right now and you're mostly working off animal instincts," Sirius allowed, "so I'm going to give you a pass on running after a crazed madman alone, the same crazed madman for that matter, for the second time in a year…but so help you if you try it for a third time! You understand me, Harry!"

Harry gave as much of a sheepish nod as he could in his lion form.

"Come on." Sirius said with another sigh. "You need to get safe inside our rooms and I need to go find out what's happened to Snape. His quarters looked like a bomb had hit them."

Harry followed his father down from the tower, glancing behind him one last time at the empty sky – Crouch was long gone.

It took longer than Sirius liked before he'd ushered a rather dejected lion into their quarters and hurried back to the dungeons.

A gaggle of Professors and Aurors stood around the door to Snape's quarters. They were all fiercely arguing about what was to be done.

Sirius was ignored as he edged his way around the group and into the room.

It was bad.

The bookshelves were intact at least; the wards had held. The rest of the furniture was pretty much kindling; side tables consigned to splinters; the sofa was a ruined wreck that had clearly been alight. The blast had originated from a door to the back of the rooms; Snape's bedroom, Sirius surmised.

The bedraggled Potions Professor stood in front of the scorched entry gazing into the ruin of his private room.

"Snape?" Sirius called softly walking up to stand a touch behind. The glimpse of the blackened and
gutted room beyond his old childhood foe had him wincing.

Snape turned to him. He was dripping wet and looked devastated. "He ruined the antidote in the lab."

"And demolished your quarters by the looks of things." Sirius said crisply, careful to keep any hint of pity out of his voice and his expression.

"My books survived." Snape said almost absently, his attention returning to the bedroom.

"Have you been seen by a healer, Snape?" asked Sirius, concerned at Snape's demeanour.

"They had to check the Headmaster first. He saved us." Snape said in an almost confused tone. "They took him away."

Sirius carefully reached out and rested a hand on Snape's shoulder. "Come along then. We need to get you to the infirmary."

Snape let himself be led out almost docilely. It was unnerving.

Dawlish stopped them as Sirius guided Snape into the corridor. "Hey, where are you taking him?"

"Dawlish!" Shacklebolt remonstrated swiftly. "Apologies, Lord Black, but…"

"I asked the Aurors to investigate as they were already on site for the infirmary bombing." Minerva cut in, glaring at them both.

"A wise decision, and I'll be happy to provide a statement regarding Bartemius Crouch Junior's escape." Sirius said formally. "However, Professor Snape is in some shock. I'm taking him to the infirmary."

Alastor gave Sirius an approving nod. "Hogwarts is on lockdown, lad."

Sirius gave an answering nod. That was good. At least they could be certain as they could be that Voldemort's main agent was gone from the castle and couldn't return. They'd start a concerted search for the cabinet. It had to be hidden somewhere.

He led Snape through to the Great Hall and the secondary infirmary. It felt strange for Pomfrey not to be the one bustling in and ordering them into a bed; the young male Healer who approached seemed far too junior.

"Oh good!" The healer said chirpily. "I was going to return to see to the Professor but it's good you've brought him."

"He's in shock." Sirius informed him briskly.

"Of course he is."

Snape and Sirius exchanged an incredulous look which was quickly dropped as they realised they had just looked to each other in silent conversation.

"Drink this!" The healer bundled a blue potion into Snape's hand and Snape drank it down.

Sirius recognised it as a calming potion; it would alleviate the physical symptoms of shock and provide a mild cheering charm.
"Some bruising and scrapes but otherwise fine." The healer tutted, wand weaving in charms that would reduce swelling and heal the surface damage to the skin. "And we need to get you out of these wet clothes!"

In a flash Snape was stripped and redressed in infirmary pyjamas. He was cleaned and dried with another spell before he was ushered into a bed like a recalcitrant student and the healer left through a side door.

"Well, this is mortifying." Snape muttered, plucking at the coverlet.

"Severus! Sirius! Is that you?" Albus called from behind a portable screen.

Sirius moved the screen revealing the Headmaster in striped pyjamas also tucked into bed although he was sitting, propped up by a mountain of fluffy pillows.

Snape shifted, sitting up and putting his own meagre one pillow behind his back. Sirius resisted the urge to find him more.

"How are you, Albus?" asked Sirius, concerned.

"Just some bumps and bruises." Albus replied cheerfully, the drugged glaze of his blue eyes giving away that he was probably under a dose of the same potion as Snape. "Young Mister Crouch should get detention, I think."

Sirius exchanged another fleeting glance of worry with Snape. "I think prison would be a better idea."

"Or death." Snape suggested bitterness dripping from his tone.

Sirius couldn't argue with that. "Did you find out who he was impersonating? When I got to him he was back to his own ugly mug; all I could tell was that he was a Ravenclaw."

"Pinner." Snape said tersely. "Minerva informed Moody. An Auror was dispatched to check on his residence."

"Good." Sirius said and wondered if they'd be too late to save the boy. "What a day." He rubbed his forehead tiredly.

"I assume Potter is still an overgrown feline?" asked Snape briskly.

"Yep, still a lion when I dropped him off at our rooms." Sirius admitted, refusing to get riled at the way Snape had phrased his question. "But he was in control of himself more." He motioned backward. "I have the remnants of the potion secured. You can take a look, uh, when you're up and about and the elves have fixed your lab."

"The lab is intact." Snape said. "He destroyed the potion thoroughly but his aim was petty destruction of my property not wholesale destruction of my work." He folded his arms. "I'm certain he only left it alone in case I had other work for the Dark Lord in motion of which he was unaware."

"Well, I guess that's...good?" Sirius fumbled a reply.

Snape snorted and Sirius couldn't blame him.

"We will replace anything of value." Albus said brightly. "We do have an emergency fund for these situations."
And Sirius could see that it received an additional donation to help.

"I keep everything of real value at my home. There was nothing of particular value here except the books and…." Snape caught himself and stopped, a hint of blush streaking across his sallow face.

"And?" prompted Sirius.

Snape glowered at him. "Nothing you would understand."

Sirius turned away and rolled his eyes. "We need to find the vanishing cabinet he left behind."

"Yes, but the wards will alert me now to anyone entering without due notice. Alastor has assured me of that." Albus said cheerily.

Just how much of that potion had Albus been given, wondered Sirius.

"I'm afraid though between the loss of the house-elf and the ruined potion that Mister Crouch has achieved his objective in keeping us from finding out what Tom does not want us to know." Albus continued in the same bright tone. "It is most vexing."

"Vexing." Sirius agreed, refusing to share another commiserating look with Snape.

"I don't see the issue." Snape argued, pulling Sirius's attention back to him anyway.

"You don't see the issue with what's happened today?" Sirius said disbelievingly. Maybe Snape was more traumatised than the healer had realised.

"I also find myself perplexed by your statement, Severus." Albus said. "The house-elf was admittedly a long shot and we know Tom never gave any explicit instruction to keep her silent. But he has worried about Mary Summers and we now have no way of waking her."

"Yes, we do." Snape argued.

"No," Albus said enunciating slowly and clearly, "we do not. The potion was lost, Severus. Have you forgotten?"

"I have not forgotten but the potion is not lost." Snape shot back.

"An acid was poured into it." Albus pointed out. "It rendered it useless."

"Yes but it is not lost." Snape replied with a sneer.

"Of course!" Albus crowed, brightening as the answer came to him. "You can remake it!"

"Too late for us to learn anything before the Third Task though." Sirius pointed out. But it would revive the woman and it would save her from a living death.

"I don't need to remake it." Snape countered huffily. "There is a portion of it in stasis at my home. I will have a house-elf fetch it. We can still revive the woman."

Sirius and Albus stared at him.

Snape squirmed under their regard. "I did say anything of value was at my home."

"Snape," Sirius said slowly, "don't take this the wrong way but I think I may have to kiss you."
Snape's eyes widened fantastically fast.

O-O-o

Remus paused, his nose wrinkling at the smell of charred wood. The door in front of him looked pristine. He sighed and knocked briefly before entering on the sneered command.

Whatever damage had been done to Severus's quarters had clearly been fixed. Remus couldn't see any of the damage that Sirius had told him about. The sofa was a sumptuous silver and green Paisley upholstery; the small wooden side tables gleamed with polished varnish. Remus followed his nose to the entry of the private lab.

Severus reluctantly rose from the armchair he inhabited, placing his book down and setting aside the fine china cup he held filled with fragrant tea. "Lupin."

"Severus." Remus said evenly, not reacting to the edge of distaste in Severus's voice. "It's good to see you well after yesterday's events."

"The Headmaster shielded me from the worst." Severus allowed almost grudgingly.

Remus nodded. Albus was still in Hogwarts' infirmary after the Healers had diagnosed him with magical exhaustion. It was a reminder that the Headmaster wasn't a young man and wouldn't live for ever.

"I didn't realise you were back in the country." Severus said, folding his arms huffily across his chest.

"I was coming back tomorrow." Remus explained. "When I heard what happened, I brought my travel plans forward."

"I was expecting Black." Severus stated bluntly.

Remus shrugged lightly. "He doesn't want to leave Harry when he's still in lion form."

Severus sniffed. "The potion will wear off before the end of the weekend."

"Sirius thought it might have been something similar to the werewolf potion?" Remus questioned, aiming for a casual tone.

Severus gave a huff and shook his head. "The werewolf potion is completely different." He lectured sternly. "That is a masterful example of how dangerous a potion may be." He paused. "I have started a counter but it will be some months before completion."

Remus gave a sigh of relief. "It's good to know there will be some way to stop or reverse it." He said. "Most of us hate changing; to have someone force us to do that with a potion when we can't even stop ourselves..." he shuddered. "I know my pack and I will happily test the antidotes for you, Severus."

"I will keep you in mind." Severus said.

"So if yesterday's potion wasn't related to the werewolf potion..." Remus let the end of the question trail away.

Severus grimaced. "A prank potion." He glared at Remus. "It was very similar to the one you used on Regulus in our sixth year."

"Ah." Remus remembered that. It had been a retaliatory pranking for Regulus trying to beat up his
They'd spiked his drink and turned him into a chicken for an hour.

"I believe the potion was designed to turn all the Gryffindor students into lions." Severus continued. "It would have left the Slytherin untouched to defend themselves."

It would have been a massacre either way, Remus thought. Either the Slytherins would have hurt and killed their Gryffindor year mates or vice versa.

"Potter did well to get the shield up." Severus said, looking grumpy at having to give Harry credit for anything.

"He's very talented." Remus said mildly.

Severus gave a snort and gestured for Remus to follow him through to the inner lab. "I assume you are here for the antidote potion?"

"Yes," Remus agreed, "I'm surprised you're not coming to the safe house though."

"It would be far too dangerous for me to attend if I am to retain deniability with the Dark Lord." Severus pointed out as he made his way across the lab.

Remus looked around with interest at the well-organised space. He was impressed and he had expected no less from a Potions Master of Severus's skills and reputation. "Sirius said Crouch left your lab intact."

"Just." Severus snapped. He pointed his wand at a cupboard and levitated a vial filled with a vibrant pink potion.

Remus took hold of it and made a face at the colour. It was very lurid. "How do we administer it?"

"Five drops on her tongue should be sufficient. If you find she has not roused, try one more drop every fifteen minutes up to a total of ten drops. If it hasn't worked at that point I will need to reassess my work." Severus instructed. "Do not administer it to Mister Pinner. I will have to do a full review of his blood work before I can verify that the same potion was used to keep him alive but unconscious."

"I understand." Remus had been surprised that the Aurors had managed to find Pinner alive, but he guessed that Crouch had been delayed in his exit by Sirius and Harry enough to reconsider returning to the Pinner house and killing the boy.

"If that is all, I am expected elsewhere." Severus said pointedly.

Remus nodded hurriedly. "Thank you, Severus."

He made his way out of Severus's quarters and through Hogwarts' maze of corridors to Moody's office.

Moody barely looked up from his marking when Remus entered. "How's your new missus?"

"In good spirits." Remus said, fondness at the mention of Dora stealing over him so swiftly he didn't even realise it. "She'll be arriving home tomorrow."

"And the sprog?" Moody asked as though uninterested.

"Doing well." Remus shook his head, thinking of just how much Dora was showing; the rounded curve of her belly filled with their child. "I can't believe how much time's gone by already."
Moody snorted. "Rather you than me." He waved a hand at the sheaf of papers. "This lots a bloody nightmare."

"You don't think you'll be signing on for another year then?" asked Remus curious. Harry raved about Moody's classes; all the kids did.

"Not bloody likely." Moody muttered. "I retired for peace and quiet! What do I get?"

Remus nodded. "I guess with the Tournament and Crouch's recent escapades it hasn't exactly been a quiet time."

Moody harrumphed. "Oh I can handle the Tournament and the hex bombs! It's the bloody kids asking questions and whining about essays I can't stand! 'But, Professor,'" he mimicked in a high voice, "'I accidentally turned my parchment into a dog!'"

Remus laughed.

Moody nodded toward the floo. "You'd best be off. Amelia's waiting for you."

"Thank you." Remus said, giving him a quick salute. He flooed through to the office of the Director of the DMLE and waved the soot away with a flash of his wand.

Amelia rose from her seat and Remus greeted her warmly even as his smile widened at the sight of her companion; Brian.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here!" Remus shook hands with the Black solicitor.

"The firm was appointed to protect Ms Summers' legal rights when she was taken into protective custody." Brian explained.

"Sensible." Remus said approvingly to Amelia.

"I rather thought so." Amelia said. A knock on the door had her breaking into a tense smile. "That will be the other members of our party."

The door swished open to reveal the head of the DOM and a plump old woman with grey hair.

"Bertie, Glenda." Amelia waved them inside and closed the door. She locked it and placed a privacy ward up. "Glenda Croaker, this is Remus Lupin. Remus, this is Glenda Croaker; a DOM Healer and Bertie's sister-in-law."

Remus was pleased when the Healer immediately offered her hand. He shook it warmly.

"Pleased to meet you." She said. "I take it you have the potion?"

Remus withdrew the pink vial from his robes. "This is it."

Amelia picked up a sock on her desk. "Hold onto it carefully. We're going to portkey to the safe house."

A moment later they all laid a finger on the sock and were pulled into the transportation's portal. They landed in a small back garden. It looked overgrown and weedy. Remus smelt salt in the air and a brief turn of his head brought the edge of a cliff and the sea beyond into view.

The cottage Amelia led them into was small. It was all one living space; a small kitchen area with an old fashioned low porcelain sink, a blackened Aga providing the heat, and a tiny seating area.
A young man thundered down the narrow stairs on the far wall and stopped in the centre of the space.

"Glenda! Brian! Directors!" His eyes landed suspiciously on Remus.

Amelia smiled. "Colin, this is Remus Lupin. He's here to represent Lord Black and Lord Potter. Remus, Colin Summers; Mary's brother."

"Nice to meet you." Remus said politely. "I have the potion that will wake your sister."

Colin's shoulders dropped and he pushed a hand through his sandy hair. "Thank you. Uh, what…"

"Mister Lupin and I will head up to your sister's room and administer the potion." Glenda stepped forward. "Once she is awake, I will thoroughly examine her. Only if I believe she is ready will she face questions."

"For which I will be present." Brian confirmed as Colin glanced over at him.

Remus let Glenda show him the way. The stairs were steep and narrow, and he had to duck his head at one point to avoid the ceiling beam. He was able to make out a tiny bathroom with old fixtures, an open door to a bedroom that looked half-lived in, before he entered a small room with a single bed occupied by Mary Summers.

The rounded swell of her belly, the covers not hiding her pregnant condition, brought to mind Dora and Remus shuddered thinking of how close she had come to ending up in Voldemort's hands the same way Summers had done.

He handed the potion to Glenda and gave her Snape's instructions. Five drops on the tongue later, and the comatose patient began to rouse. Remus left, heading back down the stairs. An elf bustled about the kitchen and soon pressed a cup of tea into Remus's hands. He conjured a chair in the absence of a spare one and sat down.

"It's worked." Remus confirmed to the anxious looking group. "She's coming round."

Her brother slumped back in his chair, relief written all over him.

"I meant to ask; how is Albus?" Bertie broke the silence, subtly changing the subject.

"Still confined to a hospital bed." Remus said.

"It's easy to forget how old he is." Brian commented. "Shielding himself and Snape at ground zero couldn't have been easy."

"I doubt many would have managed it." Amelia agreed. "Especially since he'd already expended a great deal of energy earlier that day bringing the infirmary incident under control."

"Do you think you could speak of something else?" blurted out Colin.

They all looked over at the nervous brother and silently acquiesced, turning the conversation to Quidditch and the latest gossip.

A creak on the stair drew their attention.

"She's awake." Glenda said.

Colin was on his feet and running up the stairs in a heartbeat. Amelia cleaned up the spilt tea with a
wave of her wand. She followed more sedately and Remus motioned for Bertie and Brian to head up before him.

When he entered the bedroom for the second time he was pleased to find it had been expanded. A wan looking Mary Summers, blonde hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, sat upright, cushioned by a mound of pillows. Her brother sat beside her, and their hands were tightly clasped together on top of the covers.

"I will state this only once," Glenda said firmly, "should Ms Summers become distressed, I will call this to an end and evict you all. Does everyone understand?"

There was a chorus of agreement.

Amelia took a seat next to the bed and Brian stood behind her. "I'm Director Amelia Bones from the DMLE and this is Brian Cutter who is representing your interests as a solicitor. If you need to confer with him at any point, please request a stop and for the rest of us will leave."

Mary nodded slowly, casting a quick look at Brian.

The rest of the introductions were done swiftly and Amelia brought out the quill and parchment to automatically record Mary's testimony.

"Just begin at the beginning." Amelia encouraged.

Mary nodded uncertainly and looked at her brother who nodded.

"I was at the Market Place." Mary began. "It was…I had a craving for fresh apples; green ones. Colin…" another look to her brother, "he'd taken me in after my Dad threw me out. The baby…" she blushed furiously. "I'd…it was one night at a muggle club and there were drinks and…"

"We are not here to judge you." Amelia assured her.

"Well," Mary sighed, her colour receding, "they'd given us the leaflets in the clinic warning us to be on the look-out but I kind of thought they were just being paranoid. Colin had told me not to go out without him but…I really wanted the apples. I left Colin a note and headed out. There's a lovely fruit stall about half way in…"

"'Bountiful Bounty,'" Amelia nodded, "the stall owner recognised your picture. She said you were approached?"

"A small boy. He asked about the apples; said his Mum had sent him to get some since she was pregnant and tired." Mary shook her head. "He…dropped enough hints that made me worry that she was…I don't know ill or injured. I asked him to take me to her once he'd bought the apples." Her eyes dropped to the coverlet. "I followed him like a sheep."

"Where did he take you?" Amelia asked.

"A flat just off the Market Place but it was empty." Mary sighed and rubbed her nose. "I turned around to demand an explanation and…there was a red light."

"Stunning spell, most likely." Amelia supplied.

Mary nodded jerkily. "I woke up…" her voice broke.

Colin put an arm around her and Mary leaned into his comfort.
"I woke up chained up in the basement of a house." Mary managed to say before her eyes filled with tears. She swiped them away almost angrily and motioned Glenda away. "I'm fine."

Amelia glanced at the Healer and Remus could almost hear the internal debate of whether to continue or not. She turned back to Mary. "What happened in the house?"

"There were two of us chained up. Janice?" Mary turned hopefully to Amelia who shook her head. Her face filled with sadness. "Janice was...she was much braver than me. There was an unconscious man on the cot opposite. I didn't recognise him but Janice said he was Barty Crouch."

"It was." Amelia confirmed.

"Janice had been...they'd tortured her, killed her baby." Mary said bluntly in a rush. "I was so scared they'd do the same to me."

"Who is they, Ms Summers?" Amelia pressed her gently. "Can you tell us?"

Mary shifted awkwardly under the intense scrutiny as they waited for her to speak. "There were four of them. There was that dirty werewolf, Greyback. I recognised him from the wanted posters; a pudgy man they called Pettigrew; a younger man who..." she flushed lightly, "he was attractive, I mean, physically, but he was mad. He'd come down and just stare at the bloke on the cot."

"And the fourth?" prompted Amelia.

"It was...it was a baby." Mary shuddered. "But not. An abomination. Something possessing a child." She grimaced. "They bowed to him and called him Lord. I think they thought it was, well, You-Know-Who."

"We believe it is a wraith of Voldemort." Amelia said gently.

Remus watched as Mary gave a low moan and clutched at her brother. Colin tucked her into his side protectively.

"Did you hear anything that may give us an idea of their whereabouts or their plans?" Amelia said after a long pause.

"Any detail, child, no matter how much you think it irrelevant could be useful." Bertie interjected.

Mary looked at him for a long moment before she gave a nod. "You have to understand that they left us alone for the most part. We were given food once a day and there was water within reach. Otherwise..." she sighed, "it was dark and grim and awful but they left us alone."

"Except?" prompted Bertie, ignoring the glare from his sister-in-law.

"Except one night." Mary allowed reluctantly. Her free fingers plucked uneasily at her coverlet. "They left the door open and their voices drifted down."

They all waited; nobody wanted to rush her despite their need.

"The...the thing was talking about regaining a body. He mentioned Harry...Harry Potter. He said they were going to...going to kidnap him at the end of the Tournament." Mary shook her head and wet her lips.

Glenda reached over and handed her a glass of water.

Mary sipped gratefully for a long moment before she handed the water back and rearranged her
covers a little self-consciously. "They said…they said they needed the blood of an enemy and the…*he* wouldn't accept anyone else."

Remus was a little disappointed. He could see why Voldemort hadn't wanted them to talk to the woman since they'd given away the ritual in what she'd overheard, but ultimately it wasn't anything they didn't already know.

"Thank you, Mary." Amelia said softly. "Now…"

Mary shook her head quickly. "That wasn't everything!" She said, leaning forward. "They were talking about how they were going to kidnap him. They said they'd be able to portkey him to the cemetery."

Remus perked up and so did Bertie.

"A cemetery?" Bertie asked before Remus could speak. "Did they say which cemetery?"

Mary shook her head. "Not…not exactly. They said something about the ritual having to be within a magical circle including where the bone of the father had been taken?" She sighed heavily. "I don't know more than that." She bit her lip and looked directly at Remus. "Please…tell Harry I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

"You've been a wonderful help, and I know both Lord Black and Harry will be appreciative." Remus said truthfully. "You should rest and focus on the baby now."

Glenda stayed behind to do one last final check on her patient, and Brian demurred, wanting to discuss the options the brother and sister had now she was awake once more.

Amelia gave them a spare portkey and led the rest of them back into the garden. They portkeyed directly back to her office. She erected a privacy ward and turned to them with a triumphant smile.

"No wonder the bastard didn't want us talking to her." Amelia commented bluntly.

"Indeed," Bertie said, "but we should verify. Possibly the book Bill and Caro are examining will confirm it."

Remus nodded at his caution. "We'll verify," he said, "but if it holds true, Harry won't have to be alone." His eyes flashed amber. "He won't have to be alone because we'll know exactly where Voldemort is going to be doing the ritual: in the cemetery at Little Hangleton."

And if they knew where the ritual was going to be, they could plan and take him down for good.
Finding Pronglet's Power: 7

The chill of the country air had Severus pulling his cloak tighter around him as he hurried down the pitted driveway to the back entrance of Riddle's house. He was almost certain that Crouch would be present in the lab if only to gloat at the chaos he had evoked at Hogwarts the day before.

The tradesman's entrance yielded to Severus easily and he darted through the dusty shelves to the lab door. He quickly made his way inside and checked the time. He gave a relieved sigh and began to divest himself of his outer clothing, carefully hanging it up and pulling on a potions robe he had left specifically for his work there.

A few moments later and he had recovered the potion from its stasis and set out adding the next key ingredient to it – the skin – until it was all dissolved. He let it bubble up, forming a thin membrane on the top of the liquid which morphed and twisted into an almost handsome face before sinking down again. He carefully covered the cauldron, casting a ward around it that would prevent any harm coming to it. He levitated it back to its dark cupboard and locked it away again.

The silence as he caught his breath made him suddenly aware of his solitude. Crouch had not shown up.

Severus frowned but decided not to dwell on the matter. The potion would need to steep another four days before he could add the next ingredient. He began to clean down the surface he'd used, taking care to meticulously set the sparkling instruments back into their places with a wave of his wand.

He was pulling on his cloak to leave when the inner door of the lab began to open.

Severus grimaced. It had been too much to hope for that Crouch had chosen to stay away.

It wasn't Crouch who entered though.

Severus's dark eyes widened and he immediately fell to the ground and prostrated himself, lowering his head almost to the floor and keeping his eyes on the hard tile. "My Lord."

"Rise, Severus."

The voice sent a shudder down his spine; it brought back too many memories. He swallowed his panic, strengthened his occlumency shield and slowly got to his feet.

Pettigrew was situating the…husk of what had once been a child on a cushion on top of a deep chair.

Severus took note of the Dark Lord's condition. He was already in need a new vessel, Severus mused, dispassionately ticking off the waxy grey skin mottled with dark lesions, the few remaining tufts of hair that gleamed white and fragile like spun sugar. The wraith would definitely need to move onto a new body by solstice.

The Dark Lord was dressed in a child's robe; black and velvet. He held his wand in a chubby hand and his red eyes raked over Severus with cold admiration. "A boy no longer, Severus, you have grown into fine man."

Severus bowed his head. "My Lord."

"Leave us," the Dark Lord waved Pettigrew away, "Severus and I have much to catch up on. Nagini will tell you when to fetch me."
Pettigrew nodded smartly and made a hasty departure.

Severus heard the hiss of a snake behind him but refused to look. If the Dark Lord chose to have his familiar attack him, Severus would be dead before he could raise his wand.

"Severus, attend me." The Dark Lord pointed his wand and a small footstool appeared by the chair. Severus gathered his robe and sank to sit gracefully on the stool. It forced him into a position of looking up to the Dark Lord and he knew that was the point. "I had not expected to see you before the ritual, my Lord."

The Dark Lord smiled; a frightening expression on the young child's face. "Bartemius's recent actions have meant that my plans required a change of venue. While Bartemius is convinced the vanishing cabinet will not be accessible until the solstice eve, I would rather not stay in the same place as its counterpart just in case."

Severus kept silent. It was good to get confirmation of the cabinet's presence in Hogwarts; better to know that there was a plan to make use of it and when.

"You always did have very good self-control, Severus. You never leap before you look; never speak when you can be silent." The Dark Lord cooed. "How I wish more of my followers had your attributes."

Severus bowed his head in supplication. He knew his younger self would have been delighted at the praise; bowled over to be held in such high regard. His younger self had been an idiot.

"Bartemius is currently residing in the basement cell. He will be released tomorrow and sent abroad to assist dear devoted Dennis." The Dark Lord continued. "I fear Bartemius can sometimes get above his station; I blame his parents. He was meant to remain at Hogwarts."

There was enough disgruntlement in the tone that Severus spared a thought of pity for Crouch. He had no doubt that the Dark Lord had punished Crouch for his initiative.

"No matter." The Dark Lord murmured. "You are still there, after all."

"I am your obedient servant." Severus confirmed in a quiet voice.

"Bartemius informs me that he has set all in motion for Potter to be portkeyed to the site of the ritual at the end of the tournament as planned." The Dark Lord said. "However, I will need your eyes to ensure that there are no further deviations."

"As you wish, my Lord." Severus confirmed. He kept his mind battened down and resisted the temptation to think what it meant for the plans to defeat the Dark Lord.

"I would apologise for Bartemius's attempt to injure you but you seem in remarkable health." The Dark Lord commented.

Severus didn't raise his head. "The Headmaster protected me with a powerful shield. He took the brunt of the explosion himself."

"His condition?" asked the Dark Lord casually as though the answer was of no importance to him.

Severus knew better. "He remains in the infirmary, my Lord. The Healer is concerned that he has overstretched himself; a wizard of his advanced years does not recover as quickly as others."
"Hmmm." The Dark Lord said. "Perhaps Bartemius was not completely misguided in his actions then."

Severus said nothing again and waited.

"I assume Albus is aware of your habit of keeping potions at various stages to ensure they were not required to be restarted from scratch?" The Dark Lord's question came out in a quiet silky tone that masked its angry undertone.

"He is aware, my Lord." Severus confirmed. "However I was able to convince him that Bartemius was successful in delaying the inevitable finishing of the potion."

"So his attempt was not in vain?" The Dark Lord queried.

Severus fought to keep the distaste for helping Crouch from his tone. "I will not be able to complete a potion to revive the Summers woman between now and the solstice."

Because it was already completed and hopefully the woman was already revived and providing them with useful information.

"Excellent." The Dark Lord said. "You have done well, Severus. You will take your place at my side when I rise."

"My Lord." Severus bowed low despite the awkward position.

"You may leave now, Severus. I do not wish to delay your return to Hogwarts further and we will have plenty of opportunity to speak when you attend the potion in the coming days."

"My Lord." Severus rose, bent to kiss the knuckles of the small outstretched hand and quickly made his way out, trying not to throw up or give into the urge to wipe his lips of the putrid taste of rotting flesh.

He hurried out of the house and through to the outside where he took a deep breath.

Pettigrew wandered into view, his hands in his pockets, ambling around the corner of the house as though he was simply taking a stroll. Pettigrew, Severus reminded himself, was the wizard responsible for betraying Lily. Severus might have whispered the prophecy in the ears of the Dark Lord and unwittingly made her a target but the fat balding rat in front of him had been responsible for leading the Dark Lord to Lily's door; who was complicit in her death. The urge to simply release his wand and hex the little bastard filled him…

The rat stopped at the sight of Severus. "Snape."

"Pettigrew." Severus said evenly, masking the signs of his inner fury. At least the anger had burned away his remaining physical discomfort at being close to the corpse possessed with the Dark Lord's wraith. "I should congratulate you; nobody would ever suspect that you would be the one to bring about the resurrection of the Dark Lord."

"You never did rate me, did you?" Pettigrew said. "You hated James, loathed Sirius, and feared poor old Remus. But me? I was never worth your attention." His eyes glittered with a smug superiority. "Nobody pays any attention to me except, of course, for our Master."

"All the better for your spying I suppose." Severus replied tersely. "Although that is now out of the question given your status as the Most Wanted Wizard in Britain."
"All that will change when our Master regains his rightful place in the world." Pettigrew replied breezily, but his beady eyes had hardened.

Severus so badly wanted to hex the balding fat arse his fingers were beginning to twitch; he reined himself and just in time as a dark shape slithered through the entrance behind him and up to Pettigrew.

Severus remained still; he had no wish to incur the attention of the snake.

Pettigrew froze as Nagini hissed at him. "I must attend our Master." He hurried past Severus and the snake followed as though herding him.

The door banged shut and Severus waited a moment more before continuing on his way. He had much to report.

o-O-o

Harry adjusted his omniculars and watched the broom riders zoom for the finish line. "C'mon, c'mon." He muttered under his breath.

"A galleon says Baxter has it." Sirius said cheerfully beside him.

"Rampert's going to get it." Harry countered confidently. The blonde witch had been winning races all day. The final was a relay with the three teams competing. Rampert had the last leg of the race and was already gaining ground on Baxter.

Sirius gave a soft harrumph. "She's got good form."

The broom racers rounded the corner and hit the back straight.

"Woah! Look at them go!" Sirius exclaimed.

Harry's lips twitched at Sirius's excitement. It felt good to see his father simply enjoying life.

The last couple of days had been exhausting; between Crouch’s assault on Hogwarts, Harry's lion time, and the news from Remus and Snape, it felt like they'd barely had time to breathe. Sirius had hustled them out of the school that morning, determined to continue with his plan for them to spend the day together at the races. It had been a good day and a great idea.

Sirius slung an arm around Harry's shoulders and hugged him as Rampert crossed the finish line just ahead of Baxter. "I guess I owe you a galleon."

"She's very good." Harry commented, dodging Sirius's attempt to muss his hair.

"Want to meet her?" Sirius asked. "If we drop the disguises, I'm sure I can sweet talk us into the players' changing rooms."

Harry shook his head. "I'd rather stay anonymous."

Their disguises were simple glamours, turning their distinctive hair colourings into a more non-descript brown; their eyes into the same. Average every-day wizarding robes in equally dull colours had them fading into the background, but at the same time looking like the average wizard and his son. It had been great to simply be part of the crowd for a day, Harry considered, and when Sirius didn't try to argue for losing the glamours, Harry figured Sirius was probably of the same mind.

The stadium was beginning to empty and they fell in, following the crowd as everyone made their
way to the exits.

They soon found themselves on a sunny Cardiff street. Sirius tugged Harry in the direction of an Apparation point, and a few moments later they reappeared in a small Blackpool shop, hidden away near to the pier. A quick wave of Sirius's wand restored their own looks, and another had their clothing changed to be completely muggle; jeans, a light sweater and a comfortable denim jacket for Harry; jeans, a shirt and a blazer for Sirius.

They bought fish and chips from a nearby shop and wandered down to the end of the pier to eat them. Harry chose an old worn bench with a good view of the sea. Seagulls swirled above them, crying out harshly into the still blue sky, hopeful of leftovers and scraps from the visiting humans below.

Harry took a deep breath; the scent of brine, old wood and warm sand washed over him and left behind a feeling of peace.

"Alright, Harry?" Sirius asked quietly.

"Just...happy to be here." Harry replied. "It's been nice to get away; have a day to us, you know?" It really had been a crazy week.

"I know." Sirius said softly. He nudged Harry's shoulder with his and the two of them settled for leaning against each other. After a long moment, Sirius, his voice slightly rough around the edges, began a story about the Marauders, Lily, and a day at the beach just after they finished school.

Harry settled in and listened to his father, pushing all thoughts of Voldemort and the battles to come to the back of his mind.

The story was a tale of fun; of a warm sunny day and a packed beach; of a black dog playing fetch with a stick in the waves; of sandwiches with added sand; of laughter and love. Harry could picture them; four young men just finished with school, ducking each other in the sea; his mother and father holding hands, stealing kisses, and cuddling as the day turned colder; the bonfire as it grew dark; the cider bottle passed from hand to hand. A day of escape together before the war had started in earnest for them.

And every word Sirius spoke was filled with warm affection; love for the brothers he'd chosen, even for Peter although the words seemed tinged with pain and sadness; love for the girl who'd become the sister of his heart; for the family they'd been that day before they'd disappeared into jobs and the war; before betrayals and loss.

Harry thought of Ron and Neville; of Hermione; of the Weasleys; even of Malfoy, Nott and Zabini; of everyone who stood beside him in the alliance. He thought of how alone he'd been when he'd left them after Christmas, grief-stricken at losing Sirius. He thought of Sirius, of Padfoot, of how he'd changed Harry's life so completely, changed the world for Harry, and filled it with family; filled it with so much love and hope…

Love surged up within him for Padfoot. He wished he could take away the weight of worry from Sirius's shoulders; to remove the shadow from their lives that hung over them. He wanted to give Sirius a world where they could spend their own day at the beach without a care; burying Remus in sand with a pregnant Dora watching on, and playing in the waves and…

And Harry suddenly just knew his power; the power Tom knew not.

Harry huddled closer into Sirius; the knowledge creating a warm fuzzy ache in his heart.
They stayed on the pier talking of Harry's parents and watching the sunset, only returning to Hogwarts in time for Harry to head to bed.

The graveyard seemed warmer, friendlier somehow. There was still a chill in the air but it never seemed to reach Harry.

The graves of his parents were before him and he stooped to trace his fingers over the quote Sirius had chosen; Where there is love there is life.

"The one you call father chose well."

Harry turned to greet his ancestor. Antioch Peverell stood behind him; feet planted apart, hands behind his back. He looked like a soldier; the General and Lord he had been in life. The leader of the brothers; the eldest. His long hair was tied back and he was dressed in battle robes, a sword in a scabbard hung by his side, and there was a dagger strapped to one thigh; his empty wand holster to another.

"Antioch." Harry greeted him with a small polite nod.

Antioch regarded him evenly. "You wished to speak to me, nephew?"

Had he wanted to speak to Antioch? He'd vaguely thought about how it would be nice to speak to someone who knew what it was like to lead people they loved into battle before he'd drifted off to sleep. He guessed the stone had brought him Antioch.

"I guess." Harry said, straightening. "In four weeks I'll face my enemy. The people I love…"

"They'll fight by your side." Antioch's stern expression softened. "It is not easy."

"How did you deal with it?" Harry asked.

"Poorly." Antioch said baldly. He shifted weight under Harry's stare. "I loved my brothers. We argued before the battle because I wanted them to stay out of the fight." He shook his head. "We made so many mistakes."

"Would you have used the Hallows by yourself?" Harry asked, curious.

Antioch shook his head. "I didn't see how the stone could help, and I wanted them to use the cloak to stay hidden."

"So you argued." Harry murmured.

"We went to battle angry with each other." Antioch sighed heavily. "I don't know if it would have made a difference if we'd been in concert. After…I was grateful for the stone; for the chance to assure Iggy that we loved him."

There was a tone of reprimand in his voice and Harry felt a prickle of irritation.

"Yes, I yelled at him." Harry said tersely. "His actions and choices impacted my whole life. He had no right to decide that it would be OK to sacrifice me."

"He did the best he could under the circumstances."

Harry understood Antioch's defensiveness; Ignotus was his brother after all. He took a deep breath. "And I kind of understand that too."
Antioch acknowledged that with a faint nod of his head, but there was a very familiar stubborn gleam in his eyes.

"Do you have any advice for me?" Harry asked changing the subject.

Antioch tilted his head. "You have discovered your power?"

Harry nodded slowly. "I think so." He glanced down at the gravestone and back up to Antioch. "It's Sirius. Well, not just Sirius but Remus and Hermione and...everyone. It's the people who love me and who I love; the people who'd change the world for me, who I'd change the world for. They're my power."

"You think your enemy has no-one?" Antioch questioned.

Harry shook his head. "He has followers and servants. He doesn't have family or friends." He paused. "Tom Riddle will never want to change the world for someone else and people don't want to change the world for him. They follow because they're scared and because they think he has the power to give them what they want."

He was right about his power; he could feel it deep down in his soul.

"I'm Death's Champion and he sent a Grim to protect me. That's the story. But what if it was more than that? What if he knew that the Grim...that Sirius was the key to my finding my power?" Harry continued.

Antioch frowned.

"Morgana Le Fey once said to me that I had spirit to arm myself with and heart to spur me; the reason I want to fight is for them; to make the world safe for them. They're...they're my spirit and my heart." Harry said passionately. "And my shield. My mother and father gave their lives to protect me; Sirius would lay down his for me and so would Remus; as I would lay down my life for them. The likes of Pettigrew and Riddle; they'd never lay down theirs for another soul; they'll never know what this feels like." He tapped his chest with his fist.

Antioch reached across the space between them and placed his hand over Harry's heart. "It is a horrible, terrible need, is it not? This want to do everything you can to make someone else happy...this...love for someone else that makes them more important than anything else...that you would tear down a world and build it again for them." He sighed sadly. "My brothers and I took so much for granted."

Harry nodded, choking back emotion. "This is the power Tom knows not."

"And this is why you are Death's Champion." Antioch said softly.

Harry blinked at his ancestor. "I'm right?"

"Love is a great and powerful thing." Antioch said. "It can defeat all enemies including Death itself." He smiled sadly. "For where there is love..."

"There is life." Harry completed.

The graveyard was silent.

A faint wind swept through and sent the leaves swirling; the grass rustling. Antioch's cloak billowed out around him for a long moment.
"You asked for my advice; you have power he knows not and power to vanquish him; they may not be the same. Remember that all magic including the Hallows, it is but a tool; one that demands a price." Antioch said. "Use your advantages wisely, learn from the mistakes of the past, yours and ours, and remember your greatest power is also your greatest weakness."

Harry nodded and turned away...the graveyard faded into darkness.

o-O-o

Sirius woke up with a start, his heart beating fast. He stared up at the ceiling, uncertain what had roused him. He shoved the covers back and slid out of bed, picking up his wand. He wandered out into the shadowed landing and frowned at the sight of Harry's bedroom door, wide open.

He really hoped Harry hadn't decided to break the rules again and sneak out of their rooms. They'd had such a brilliant day, it would be a shame to end it with punishment and discipline.

Sirius summoned the map silently and quickly pinpointed that his son was still in their quarters. A sigh of relief escaped him. He sent the map back to his room and padded down the stairs to the study.

He found Harry, still dressed in pyjamas, sat perched on the arm of a chair staring at the blackboard with Sirius's original plan. Dobby had obviously been alerted to his master's need because there was a fire crackling away in the study hearth and Harry held a mug of hot chocolate. Hedwig gave Sirius a reproachful look as though questioning why he hadn't appeared the moment Harry had gotten up; he felt suitably chastised. Maybe he should look at putting some kind of charm on Harry's room; Lily had created some kind of an alert when Harry was a baby…

"Harry?" Sirius prompted gently.

Harry wrenched his gaze away from the blackboard and flushed at the sight of Sirius. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Sirius nudged him along the arm and sat down on the end. "You didn't. I woke up and realised you were out of bed." He glanced back at the plan. "What's up?"

"I had a dream and talked to Antioch." Harry said matter-of-factly as though talking to a long dead ancestor was something he did every day which come to think of it…

Sirius yanked his thoughts back to the present. "Antioch?"

"He led the battle against the Seven and...and he led people he loved into war." Harry nudged his glasses up his nose. "I guess I was thinking it would be good to talk to him and so he, uh, kind of appeared in my dream."

Sirius shivered and tried to shake the uneasiness he had with Harry's ability to talk with the dead in dreams. He wondered briefly if Harry had always had the ability or whether it came with being the Master of the Deathly Hallows.

"What did he say?" asked Sirius, focusing on the immediate question.

"Take advantage of our advantages. Remember magic has a price." Harry recited, setting aside his mug on the nearby table. "And something about my power also being my greatest weakness."

"Power?" Sirius said with a frown.

"Power." Harry took a deep breath and turned to him. He held his gaze with a Gryffindor courage.
that reminded Sirius sharply of James and Lily. "My…family. They're my power. You, Remus and everyone." He fidgeted a little with the edge of his pyjama top. "I worked it out when we were at the pier."

"Well." Sirius had no idea what to say to his son.

"Death gave me you. He gave me everything I needed." Harry said – and it sounded again like he was repeating words he had once heard.

Sirius felt his throat close up on a rush of emotion.

"You changed the world for me." Harry gestured at the blackboard. "You've given me everything."

"Harry…"

"And you don't even know how much I…"

Harry turned and Sirius opened his arms; his son hugged him and he hugged his son back, so fiercely.

"I love you, Padfoot." Harry whispered.

Sirius couldn't speak for a moment and he tightened his hold. "I love you too, Pronglet."

They held each other for a long time.

Hedwig hooted.

Sirius glanced at the clock and hummed, smoothing a hand over Harry's back once more and dropping a kiss on the top of his head. "It's late."

"I think…I think I have a plan." Harry said.

Sirius looked again at the clock and sighed. He gestured at the blackboard and it spun around and offered up a clean empty version. He conjured up a piece of chalk and shifted back to offer it to his son.

Harry grasped it with a shy grin.

"Go ahead." Sirius smiled at him. "Let's see your plan, Pronglet."

o-O-o

Harry stifled another yawn and straightened the strap on his shoulder bag. He'd told Sirius he was fine for classes despite the fact that both of them had been almost falling asleep in their porridge at breakfast.

Bill sent him a concerned glance and Harry shrugged it away with a sheepish smile. Physical weariness aside, he felt energised after the late night – or was that early morning? – planning session he and Sirius had done. Sirius was arranging a meeting with the War Council and the alliance and Harry would do the same with the alliance kids in school.

It was all coming together.

The loud hustle and bustle of the main staircase ended Harry's inner peace and he sighed heavily, catching another concerned glance from Bill. He shrugged off the silent question and smiled at the
sight of Hermione waiting for him in the corridor outside the DADA classroom, Daphne at her side.

Bill grinned as Harry greeted Hermione with a kiss and slipped a hand into Hermione's waiting palm. The eldest Weasley sketched a salute goodbye.

Daphne frowned. "I take it Lord Black isn't easing up on security just because Crouch did a runner?"

Harry shook his head and smiled. "Constant Vigilance."

Neville and Ron walked up and greeted them all cheerfully.

"Has Sirius said you can come to the dorm now?" asked Ron eagerly.

"Next weekend." Harry said.

"You should have come as a lion." Ron argued.

"You did look awesome." Lavender piped up as she and Parvati joined them.

"Yes," Draco said dryly, "because it's all fun and games until someone gets eaten." He nodded a hello to Harry who was laughing. Theo, beside him, did the same.

"Hey," Harry said, changing the subject, "meeting after classes in the Room for everyone."

Neville nodded solemnly. "We'll get the word passed."

The morning passed quickly; a blur of classes and normality that rubbed under Harry's skin like a pebble in his shoe rubbing the underside of his foot.

He sat down for lunch feeling restless. He couldn't shake the feeling he was losing time.

Neville nudged him. "You alright?"

Harry paused, causing Hermione and Neville to exchange a brief look of concern over the top of his head. "Yeah, just…I feel like I need to be doing something more than sit in class, you know?"

Neville nodded. "We've got the meeting later. Everyone's coming."

"Well!" Ron sat down opposite them with a thump. He immediately reached for a large slab of pork pie. "How were the races? You never said this morning and the wireless reception was appalling."

Harry stopped Hermione from chastising their friend and smiled back at Ron, grateful for the distraction.

The discussion about the broom racing took them to the end of lunch. The afternoon dragged but as the final class finished Harry led the way to the Room, grateful that the day was over.

The Room opened up to its usual formation for task planning and Harry quickly made his way to the small stage. He waited impatiently as everyone filed in.

Hermione, the Weasleys, and Neville took up a position on the stage to his left; Draco, Theo and Christopher Wenlock stood to the right. The rest of the alliance gathered in front of the stage, settling into their usual groups of friendship. Natalie Warren stood arm in arm with Viktor Krum; Fleur and Cedric hovered protectively by Sue and Hannah. Connor Sapworthy nodded a greeting at Harry before settling in beside the Inglebees. Jeremy, Blaise, Daphne and Tracey took positions close to the stage, near to Draco and Theo.
"Thank you all for coming." Harry began. He paused and took a breath, letting his nerves steady. "In just under four weeks on the eve of the solstice, I and the other Champions will face the third task of the Tournament."

Viktor, Fleur and Cedric all gave a small nod of acknowledgement.

"We've all been preparing for it. I wish my fellow Champions well, and I know my own performance in the maze will be thanks to the efforts of everyone who has helped me this year."

He waited another moment gathering his thoughts.

"When the heirs of the Potter alliance first met I told them that if we stood together, we could defeat Voldemort." Harry looked around the assembly and caught Connor Sapworthy's beaming smile of pride. It brought a small smile to his own lips. "On the solstice eve, we're going to do just that."

A murmur broke out and rippled through the crowd before Harry raised a hand and caught their attention again.

"You know Voldemort is still out there; you know he and his followers entered me into this tournament. It's almost certain that at the end of the task, something will be used as a portkey to deliver me into the hands of Voldemort's most faithful, so they can use me in a ritual which will restore Voldemort's wraith to a body."

There were a few horrified glances exchanged, but they were mostly looks of confirmation rather than shock.

Cedric cleared his throat. "You think the task will be sabotaged again to make sure that happens?"

Harry nodded. "It's likely."

Viktor lifted his chin. "Forewarned isforearmed."

Harry nodded again. "Which brings me onto the reason why I've asked you to come today." He could see the realisation begin to dawn on Hermione's face; the way Theo turned contemplative, and knew that they knew.

"You can't be serious!" Hermione blurted out, horrified.

Everyone looked at her surprised at her outburst.

Hermione swallowed hard under the attention of so many but caught Harry's reproachful gaze defiantly. "You can't just let him kidnap you!"

"Don't be daft, Hermione!" Ron said. "He's not just going to let You-Know-Who grab him!" His friend turned to Harry and went pale under his freckles as he read the truth in Harry's eyes. "Blimey! Hermione's right?"

"She's right…"

A babble of noise broke out as people began to protest and complain; shout their opinions and decry the idea…

A sharp whistle broke through the chatter and silenced everyone.

Neville glared everyone into submission. "I'm sure Harry has more to say."
"Thanks, Neville." Harry said. He avoided looking at his girlfriend and turned back to the grouping in front of him. "Every effort is being made to finish this before the task but the likelihood is that it won't, can't be finished. And Viktor said it best; forewarned is forearmed."

"You have a plan to ambush him just like Lupin ambushed Greyback at the wedding." Theo said, derailing any other commentary.

Harry turned to nod at the Slytherin. "We do."

Hermione stepped forward, capturing his attention. "I don't agree with this." She said clearly. "You shouldn't have to face him at all."

Harry bit his lip, considering what he could and couldn't say. He reached out a hand and she took it, confusion in her brown eyes even though he could see she was waiting for him to explain. Harry glanced back at Neville who knew and the other boy inclined his head in recognition of what Harry would reveal.

"There was a prophecy." Harry said. He looked at Hermione, partly to plead with her for understanding and partly to hide from the reactions of the rest of the room. "Months before I was born, there was a prophecy made that said a baby born at the end of the seventh month would have the power to defeat the Dark Lord."

"Bloody hell." Ron muttered.

"Someone overheard and told Voldemort." Harry continued. "It was why he came after my family back then; it's why he's after me now."

"It might not be you." Hermione began to argue.

But Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore…my Dad…everyone's checked the wording." He repressed the urge to look at Neville. "It might have been someone else back then, but..." he raised a finger and traced his scar, "and the Dark Lord shall mark him as an equal..."

Hermione's eyes glistened with tears.

"It's me." Harry said simply.

Hermione squeezed his hand tightly.

"What do you need from us, Harry?" Neville asked, taking a step forward himself, confident and stalwart.

Harry gave him a grateful smile. "Someone gave me some great advice; we need to use every advantage we have and we need to learn from the mistakes of the past." He paused, scanning the faces of his friends. "But most importantly, we need to do this together. I might have to face him..."

"But you won't do it alone." Neville completed.

"No," Hermione agreed, "not alone."

"You've got me, mate." Ron said, moving to stand beside Neville.

"And me, Cousin." Draco took a step forward.

Theo and Wenlock both moved together; the rest of the Weasleys matched them...and there was a cacophony of sound as the room voiced the same; cheers and whistles and pandemonium reigned for
a long moment.

Neville called for order again. He turned with a smile to Harry. "Some of us here have sworn fealty to you, Lord Potter; some of us are simply friends. But we're all with you."

Harry nodded sharply; emotion clawing at the back of his throat, tightening his chest till he could hardly breathe.

"Thank you," he said finding his voice, appreciative beyond words at their support; honoured by their trust and faith in him. "I swear this: come solstice, Tom Riddle will be gone and we're going to defeat him together."

Cheers erupted again.

Hermione was the one who whistled sharply for order. "Right," she said sternly, "if we're doing this..." her eyes met Harry's with warm understanding, "if we're doing this, we're doing this right." She nodded at him. "Let's go over the plan."

o-O-o

His son looked like he needed a good night's sleep; something he hadn't gotten the night before due to his little chat with Antioch. It had also been a long day. Harry had insisted on going ahead with his classes – something Sirius was quite proud about – and then he'd held a meeting with the students in the alliance, whether they were formally sworn like Neville or simply a friend like Luna. He'd insisted on meeting the adult side of the alliance after dinner.

Sirius knew it made sense; Harry couldn't brief the kids and wait a whole day to brief their parents. It wasn't good protocol. In many respects, most of the adults would have probably preferred for the briefing of their children not to have happened at all. Sirius shrugged that thought off; if someone complained, he and Harry would deal with it.

They'd chosen the Black Estate for the meeting. The wards were second to none and there was a large meeting room on the second floor which was purpose built for hosting large gatherings. Sirius had spent his own day ensuring the delivery of the invitations which included a special one-time only portkey to the estate.

Sirius and Harry had simply flooed in. Remus met them both with a manly hug before being usurped by a bubbly Dora.

"The alliance have all arrived." Remus confirmed. "The family are waiting in the drawing room."

Sirius put a hand on Harry's shoulder and they made their way to see the family first.

Lucius stood by the mantelpiece, a crystal glass of whiskey in his hand. He tossed it back and set it on the mantel as Sirius and Harry greeted Narcissa, the Tonks' and the Grangers.

"I suppose there is a reason for this summons." Lucius drawled.

"Yes," Sirius said sharply, "and you'll find out in a moment when we join the rest of the alliance." He gestured for them to follow him. He noticed Narcissa sent her husband a glacial chiding look before she took Lucius's arm. The Malfoys fell in behind the Tonks', the Grangers assumed the next position with Remus and Dora last. Sirius and Harry led the family from the drawing room to the meeting room.

It was a stunning space; a beautiful high ceiling patterned in intricate coving that told the story of
Arthur; a pale sky blue covered the walls; a polished oak floor softened with woven rugs embroidered with the Black crest. The room had been arranged with small tables, set with linen tablecloths and a lit candle; the ceiling's chandelier was lit up with tiny fairy lights. Their guests were enjoying after dinner cocktails and a selection of sweet and savoury petits four.

The room was noisy with excited chatter but the alliance quickly settled down as the Black family entered, Sirius and Harry remaining at the front. The rest took the waiting empty table next to the one where the War Council sat. Just behind them, Bill and Caro sat with the Weasleys and Augusta Longbottom, and to the side Minnie had taken a seat with Severus and Alastor.

Sirius moved forward to a position where they could be seen and heard by everyone.

"Thank you all for coming." Sirius said, drawing everyone's attention. He and Harry wore matching battle robes and he could see the atmosphere turn to a tense seriousness as the assembly appreciated fully that this wasn't just a social gathering. "Harry?"

Sirius stepped back and to the side, as Harry took pole position. Sirius was close enough to emphasise that he was still providing Harry with protection and support, but far enough away that the truth that this was Harry's show was made without a word being spoken.

Harry gave Sirius a nod of acknowledgement and straightened. It was as though his tiredness sloughed away, leaving behind a young man, a young mage.

"Everyone in this room knows that Voldemort remains a threat to the peace of our world." Harry began confidently. "Everyone also knows that before I was born I was prophesised to defeat him." He gazed around the room, letting the truth of it settle in their minds. "The moment of our final battle has been years in the making and it will take place on the eve of the solstice."

It didn't escape his notice that the Headmaster was trying to catch his eye but Harry avoided Dumbledore's gaze knowing he was about to be much more open about events than the Headmaster probably would want anyone to be.

"Voldemort seeks a new body. There is a ritual he's been preparing for all year which will give him what he wants." Harry said. "He needs an enemy's blood for the ritual and I'm sure it's not a surprise to anyone that he's chosen mine."

"Bastard." Griselda Marchbanks said succinctly.

Sirius sent her an appreciative look for lightening the tension.

"The ritual…it was the reason he had me entered into the tournament. He intends to kidnap me at the end of the third task." Harry paused and Sirius could see that the dawning realisation of what next on the faces of Augusta and Daniel Greengrass. "We intend to let him."

"An ambush." Daniel said, his voice carrying over the small outbreak of murmurs that had followed Harry's announcement. "You intend to turn the tables on him."

Richard Bones started smiling. "Of course, he thinks he has you but in fact you're trapping him!"

"Yes," Harry agreed, "that's the plan." He looked around again. "It's time to finish it."

"Is it necessary for you to be involved?" Augusta asked. "I know all of us here have been working to ensure that you wouldn't have to face him again."

Harry smiled at her and looked to Sirius silently for him to answer.
Sirius stepped forward. "I think you all know my feelings about Harry facing Voldemort. I told you all when we first began discussions in the Summer that I refused to believe or consider that this fight was Harry's and Harry's alone. Why should my fourteen year old son have to fight a Dark Lord? The idea was…is still preposterous to me."

There were nods around the room, of agreement; of acknowledgement.

"So I haven't changed my mind," Sirius assured them, "but…" he sighed heavily, "I can admit that events since…the knowledge we've gained since those early days has taught me that I didn't give enough weight to the obsession that Voldemort has for my son; an obsession which was seeded with a prophecy and which Voldemort has nurtured and fed with his anger and fear every day since the All Hallows Eve when he went to kill Harry and ended up a wraith instead."

He swallowed to shake the lump in his throat at the idea of that. Harry shifted closer to him as though to comfort him with his presence.

"I haven't altered my opinion; I don't want my son anywhere near Voldemort. I can tell you that we're working on making any reason for Harry to face him obsolete. Suffice to say, it's not straightforward nor without risk of spooking Voldemort entirely."

Sirius gazed around the room, for everyone to meet his gaze and know he was serious and believed every word he said.

"The truth is that the probability of us finding and corralling Voldemort before the solstice is remote. He's under a Fidelius." Sirius held up his hand for quiet as there was an outbreak of mutters.

Bertie got to his feet, radiating quiet power. "The charm means that magic will not allow anyone who does not know the secret to breech it. We know the general location but cannot step foot onto the property; cannot even see what's there. We are even repelled against entry or notice. As soon as we turn our attention to something else, the secret begins to dull in our minds and memories until if it was not a constant focus we would forget altogether. The magic is arcane and it would be foolish of us to believe that this is the only protection Voldemort has in place. We know he is a building an army; we know he has access to at least one Dementor that escaped the forest at Yule." The Head of DOM regarded the crowd with a heavy frown. "An assault would be fraught with danger and as Lord Black has indicated, the possibility of an assault simply resulting in forcing Voldemort to run and hide somewhere else…is high."

"You could thwart the kidnap attempt though." Molly countered shakily. She was pale under her freckles and Sirius knew she was genuinely concerned for Harry's safety.

"It would be my preference." Sirius admitted. "But even I have to concede that the night before the solstice presents us with an opportunity like no other."

Alastor nodded his agreement.

Amelia rose to her feet. "We will know exactly where and when we can find the wizard known as Tom Riddle who calls himself Voldemort. He is raising an army and he'll find an army waiting for him." She lifted her chin. "I don't want to use a fourteen year old to find him. I don't want to place Lord Potter in harm's way. If we can get to him without Lord Potter ending up anywhere near him, we should take advantage of that."

"You just don't think he'll make it that easy for you." Her brother called out softly, just loud enough for his voice to carry.
"I don't." Amelia agreed. She glanced over at Harry. "Lord Black is not the only one who underestimated the strength of Voldemort's obsession with Lord Potter. Riddle will do everything he can to get what he wants on the eve of the solstice and while we will work to – how did you put it, Molly? – thwart him? – the truth is that we may fail."

Alastor snorted. "The truth is that he's a clever bastard. Voldemort has had years to plan this out. He's not going to let the chance to get a new body and kill the kid who destroyed the old one get away from him." He shifted, rising to his feet to regard the room with a hard stare. "Tactically, taking him down when we know where he is makes sense. But do I believe we're going to be able to do it without involving Lord Potter?" He sighed and looked over at Harry. "I think we're going to need him."

"We also need to consider that there is more at work here than simply the tactical decisions of mortals," Bertie said, "there is a prophecy and Fate seems determined in ensuring it is realised."

"You can't tell me that you believe in something as flimsy as a prophecy, Sirius!" Griselda remarked. "I don't." Sirius confirmed.

Before he could say anything else, Albus stood and gained the attention of everyone in the room. "Whether one gives weight to the prophecy or not, the other truth is that Tom believes in it and will not stand for Harry's existence." He glanced around. "I know of Lord Black's preference in this matter and I know he will fight to the last to prevent his son from falling into Tom's hands. But we have to acknowledge that there is more at stake here than the fate of one boy. If Tom regains his body, we will all be at risk. We must use this opportunity for it may not come again."

"I cannot believe you can stand there and be so blasé about endangering a child!" Andy leaped to her feet.

Narcissa placed a hand on her sister's arm but her eyes glinted coldly at the Headmaster. "I would caution you to be careful; the House of Black now stands in the stead of Lily of the House of Potter. No mother would see her child sacrificed." Her gaze met Sirius's. "And no father."

Sirius held his hand and silenced the room before the babble that erupted could take over.

"Enough." Sirius said loudly, silencing the outbreak of babble before it could grow in any volume. "My cousin speaks truly: I will not sacrifice my son. Frankly, if I could wrap him in cotton wool and hide him away from all this, I would." He darted a look at Harry who smiled back at him. "That actually was my plan A."

A tentative ripple of reluctant chuckles broke the tension in the room. There were nods from the parents in the room.

"Please be seated." Sirius said formally to those standing.

Bertie and the others resumed their seats.

Sirius placed his hands behind his back. "The truth is that Voldemort is coming for my son. We know this time when and where he'll strike. If I can prevent Harry from having to face him…that would be preferable and I will make every effort to find a way to take Voldemort down without Harry being there; I will make every effort to thwart his attempt to kidnap Harry. Harry and I are agreed on this and we hope for the best outcome."

He paused and took a deep breath.
"But Harry has to compete in the tournament; that's a fact. Voldemort has a plan to kidnap him and there will be an opportunity; that's a fact. We know when; we know where he intends to do this ritual; that's also fact. We know taking him down before then will be difficult and likely will not succeed; another fact. And as much as no-one wants to admit it, taking him down on the solstice eve is a duty we have to the wider wizarding world for all of our safety, whether Harry is part of it or not; fact."

Sirius could see that everyone was beginning to understand the reality in a way that they had only ever skirted around before.

"So, if we hope for the best, we should plan for the worst." Sirius turned to Harry. "My son has this plan."

Harry nodded his thanks. "I can't tell you how grateful I am for your friendship and for your efforts to keep me safe. I thank you for your concern," he nodded at Augusta, "and for your defence of me," he turned towards Andy and Narcissa, "and I think everyone in this room knows my father will be doing everything he can so I don't have to face Tom Riddle again."

There were nods and murmurs of agreement and Sirius felt some of his tension ease at the visible sign that the alliance knew he was sincere in his efforts.

Harry cleared his throat. "But we do need to plan for the worst and I need your help once again. I know that you've worked long hours to build a world in support of my agenda; a world that isn't friendly to Voldemort. We have the majority now both politically and financially. Our efforts in the Wizengamot have been successful and we have to continue to build upon this next month. We can't let him win any ground right now."

"Hear, hear." Tiberius said loudly.

There was a chorus of agreements and Harry had to gesture for quiet.

"So we own the political ground and Voldemort has some finances but we've made it difficult for him." Harry continued. "But he successfully got me into this tournament and I have no choice magically but to compete. He knows that. We know his agent has placed a trap for me but not what the trap is. So, on the night of the third task, we have to prepare for the possibility that I'll be captured and we've called you here not only to brief you but to seek your support and help in ensuring his defeat."

He held the attention of the room.

"Because I can promise you; if Tom Riddle and I meet on the eve of the solstice, I will take the opportunity to end this." Harry declared bluntly. "The House of Potter will go to war, and I will defeat him."

"Do you honestly believe you can?" asked Albert, leaning forward as though eager to hear the answer.

"I know I can." Harry said simply. "I once told your heirs that as long as we stood together we could defeat him. I believed it then and I believe it now." His eyes flickered to Sirius, to their family, and back to the alliance. "I know I can defeat him because even if I'm on my own when I face him on the battlefield, I'm never truly alone. I carry each and every one of the people I love, who love me, with me; spirit, heart and shield."

There was total silence for a long moment.
Sirius could hear his own pounding heartbeat; he held his breath…

Magic stirred.

Augusta stood up and looked around the room. "Do I speak for the Houses?"

Daniel started to smile and gave a nod as he exchanged knowing and accepting looks with those around him. "You do."

The others called out their acceptance. Minnie and Alastor got to their feet. Amelia, Bertie, Cornelius and Albus exchanged a long look and they also stood. Bill and Caro got to their feet. Andy stood; Narcissa followed. The Grangers got to their feet at the same time as Remus.

Magic stirred.

Augusta stepped away from the table and walked to join Sirius and Harry; she paused just in front of them.

Sirius fought to keep his expression calm and collected as the rest of the Heads of the Houses in the alliance stood and drew their wands, clasping them in a fist and placing that fist against their heart. Arthur glanced once at Molly and followed.

Sirius shivered as the forms of the House totems shimmered into view.

Magic stirred.

Augusta held out a hand to Sirius imperiously and stared at him forcefully. He grasped her hand with one of his, and with his free hand drew his wand and fisted it over his heart.

Augusta sank to one knee, her gaze locked with Harry's.

"I, Augusta Beatrice Longbottom, Regent of the House of Longbottom, speak for all those who have sworn or will swear oath today with the House of Potter." Augusta declared in a strong voice. "We swear fealty to the House of Potter, our magic is your magic; our wands are your wands; our lives are yours to command in battle and in peacetime. We stand together with you."

Harry's eyes went wide.

"I, Harry James Potter, Head of the House of Potter, Heir of the House of Black accept your oath of fealty. I offer to you the protection and sanctuary of the House of Potter, my wand and my magic in your defence, to lead you with fairness and honour." Gold and silver tendrils of magic swirled around him. "We stand together. So have I sworn; so mote it be."

"So mote it be." Everyone said in response.

The totems roared and disappeared in a rush of magic.

Sirius helped Augusta to her feet, dropping a kiss on her knuckles before he released her hand. He looked around the room, at the vibrant hum of satisfaction, of pride that shone from every face. He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and Harry turned to him with a soft knowing smile.

This was the power.
Harry wasn't wrong.

Sirius smiled back at his son.

They were going to so utterly crush Tom Riddle into dust.
Part 12: Pronglet Goes to War (The Final Battle Prank)

18th June 1995

It wasn't the cemetery.

Harry stood in the remains of his nursery. It was still cold and he shivered. He wandered over to the mural and stroked a hand over the stag. There were lilies all around the sides of the main picture, he realised. He hadn't noticed the detail on his visit to Godric's Hollow.

"Your godfather drew it." His mother's voice had him turning sharply. She wasn't who he had expected.

"Mum." He whispered, drinking in the sight of her; a pretty twenty-one year old woman with flowing red hair, dressed in a simple witch's day robe. Her form was limed with gold and silver magic tendrils.

She didn't hesitate. She just pulled him into an embrace. The warm rush of her love through him had him shuddering but he clung tighter.

"My baby." His mother whispered in his ear.

Harry knew if Molly had said it to Ron, his best friend would have blushed and been embarrassed. But it was the first time his mother had said it to Harry when he knew and understood just how precious a comment it was to her, to them both. It was all her love for him wrapped up in two small words.

Her arms were safe; home and family. He could have stayed there forever.

"I don't have much time." His mother eased away a touch, just enough that she could look him in the eyes. She smoothed his hair back and traced his scar. "I wish you didn't have to do this, Harry."

"Padfoot's still working on making sure I don't have to." Harry pointed out. There was only a week before he would face Voldemort but his father had never stopped searching for a way for Harry not to be involved. Harry figured it was in vain – events had been set in motion for his showdown with Tom Riddle centuries before his birth – but he appreciated the effort.

"He loves you very much." His mother said fondly.

"I love him." Harry said, confident in his words more so because he had spoken them out loud to Padfoot too.

"Your Dad's smug about it; he always wanted Sirius to be your godfather." She smiled sadly. "Alice and I had it all worked out and I wanted Frank; that was the plan. It had a nice logical symmetry you know."

Because she and his father had been Neville's godparents.

"Neville's awesome." Harry said, nodding.

"Then I went into labour," his mother sighed but her eyes were shining with humour, "and Sirius
stayed with me the whole time. He... held my hand and fed me ice chips. He told me stories about James; about how much James loved me. He was my rock."

"Harry beamed with pride. "He's good like that."

"You were his whole world the moment you were born." His mother said.

Harry nodded slowly. "Sometimes it scares me how much he loves me." He confessed.

"Yes," his mother agreed, "it can be overwhelming to be loved so much. To know the lengths someone would go to in order to ensure you lived and were happy." Her gaze drifted back to the doorway to the landing. "I knew your father would lay down his life for us; kill for us. We were his world."

Harry nodded again. He'd never doubted James Potter's sacrifice had been based on his love for his wife and child.

"You laid down your life for me." He whispered. Because his mother had loved him.

"Yes," his mother turned back to him and clasped his hands in hers, "but I need you to remember this, Harry, because it's very important."

She waited until he met her eyes.

"As much as I loved you enough to die for you," his mother stated fiercely, "I loved you enough that I wanted to live for you too. I tried to run that night just as your Dad said. I tried to apparate with you but I couldn't because the ward was still in place; I tried the emergency portkey and it didn't work. I was in the process of trying to open the window to levitate the two of us out of it when I heard James die and I heard a monster coming up the stairs to kill you and knew there was no more time."

Harry stared at her shocked. He had never remembered the specifics, just the voices and the light...

"I stood between you and Tom Riddle because there was no other choice. I wanted to live for you; to raise you, to take you to your first day at school, for your wand, to wave you goodbye on the train, to hear about the first girl you fell for and your first date, to cry on your wedding day and to hold your children in my arms as their grandmother." His mother searched his expression intently. "Do you understand me?"

Harry nodded. She wanted him to fight to live; to only sacrifice his life if there was no other choice.

"Tell me, Harry," his mother said firmly, "tell me about your future."

"I, uh, there's..." Harry stumbled over his words and she smiled at him amused while he took a breath and gathered his thoughts. "Hermione. I'm hoping..."

"You're hoping she's your future?" She smiled, her eyes twinkling. "She's a good girl; smart and loyal. Your Dad thinks she's great but I think that was because she set fire to Severus's robes."

Harry gave a startled laugh.

"I think she's great too." His mother brushed his hair back from his face.

Harry warmed at her approval.

Something about the house wavered and Harry tightened his grip on his mother.
"My time is short," she said again with regret, "I have things to say and was only granted a short moment through the Veil in which to say it."

Harry frowned.

"You are the Master of the Hallows." His mother said quickly. "We can reach you through the Veil."

"We?" asked Harry, slightly nervous at the idea.

"You may speak with the Dead in dreams." His mother whispered. "Each night this week you will receive a visit in your sleep."

Well, that was very…Charles Dickenish, Harry mused. "You're the first." He murmured.

"Nobody dared to challenge my right as your mother to tell you." She informed him with a smirk.

"Dad?" asked Harry tentatively.

"He'll be your last." His mother shrugged with a light smile. "Nobody dared challenge his right to be the last to speak with you before the battle, not even your Grandpa Black."

Harry chuckled.

"Listen to them, Harry." His mother said urgently. "Listen to them because they will help you."

"I'll listen." He promised.

His mother took one last look around the nursery. "I never regretted my decision, Harry, never think that. I just…"

"I would have preferred it if you'd lived too." Harry said, understanding.

"I am always with you." She placed a hand on his heart and disappeared in a shimmer of gold.

He turned back to the mural trying to blink the tears out of his eyes.

'Where there is love there is life.' The gold lettering appeared across the shattered mural and…

Harry woke up.

His heart pounded as the dream came back to him. He rubbed his fingers together lightly; it was as though he could still feel his mother's touch.

There were moments where he hated being Death's Champion; hated Ignotus still for the choice he'd made and the fate he'd condemned Harry to living, but…but there were moments when he was grateful. Moments where Padfoot looked at him or did something, and Harry would be so thankful that Death had sent him a Grim. Moments like the one he'd just had; a moment with his mother…

"As much as I loved you enough to die for you, I loved you enough that I wanted to live for you too."

Her lesson echoed in his ears. He squinted at the faint edges around the curtain trying to make out the time. It was still dark so it was early.

Too early.

He sighed and stretched under the covers even as he blinked back sleep. Hedwig barked from her
perch, her wings flaring outward before settling again. He pushed back his covers and went to pet her. She nuzzled into his palm, giving him comfort.

He scratched her one final time and moved to the window. He opened the curtain and stared out at the dismal Summer morning. The sun was just beginning to emerge; thin streams of yellow sunlight peeked through the still dark sky. There was rain on the glass and beyond, Harry could see the fall of more.

He settled in.

Watching the sunrise wasn't a bad way to start the morning.

He ignored the churn of his stomach.

It was strange to think that in another week, he would face Voldemort. Weird to know it was coming. All his other encounters hadn't exactly been planned. Quirrell had been a surprise inasmuch as it had been Quirrell, never mind Quirrell also possessed by Voldemort. Same with the diary. It has been a surprise to find that the Heir to Slytherin was Tom Marvolo Riddle aka Lord Voldemort possessing Ginny Weasley. He'd known Sirius Black was stalking him the previous year, but truly wouldn't have gone anywhere near the Shrieking Shack if Sirius hadn't dragged Ron there.

Unplanned.

Unprepared.

It was a wonder he hadn't died already.

It was the first mistake Harry had insisted they wouldn't make again. Hermione and Remus were so giddy with the decision that they'd made more plans than Harry could ever fathom. Plans and plans; mitigation plans, contingency plans, containment plans.

The Little Hangleton cemetery had been confirmed as the most likely location for Voldemort's ritual. It met the needed criteria in the book Nott had provided. The difficulty was placing wizards into the area without Voldemort getting spooked. A young werewolf couple had been sent to rent a flat over one of Little Hangleton's small shops. They were both muggleborn and had been able to pass as just another young muggle couple. The flat had been warded to the hilt and put under Fidelius. It acted as a base of operations.

Caro had gone alone to do reconnaissance in her animagus form at the cemetery; something Bill hadn't been happy about as he had been able to provide cover for his partner, but had reluctantly accepted was necessary. Her efforts had been rewarded; they had a good map of the graveyard and had started to plan where the cavalry would fight from. If Harry did end up in the graveyard, he wouldn't be alone for long. Having any kind of adult back-up was weird but Harry was incredibly grateful for it.

But it wasn't just the cemetery they were planning for. They'd learned from the previous skirmishes with the Dark Lord. No-one had considered that Voldemort would send a second group to attack Black Farm just as years before no-one had considered that the Longbottoms would be in danger once Voldemort was gone. Plans were afoot to ensure Hogwarts was defended because it was pretty clear that Voldemort would likely attack the school at the same time as he was resurrected. It was a perfect distraction to keep any kind of sizable force away from his ritual and it would herald his return in the most bloody way possible; the slaughter of children.

The War Council would raise the security on Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and Saint Mungo's but they
all agreed Hogwarts was the most likely target given Snape's reports from his contact with Voldemort. They still hadn't found the vanishing cabinet Crouch had left behind and there were rumours filtering through Lucius of an army of creatures being amassed. Albus had confirmed that Hogwarts didn't explicitly ward against dark creatures. It was the reason why the Dementors had been able to roam the grounds the year before; why Moony had been able to attend school. Some were barred unless by invitation but as a public event like the tournament threw open Hogwarts' grounds to the public, the ward was effectively negated the night of the third task. It was frustrating.

A very detailed evacuation plan had been devised and the heirs to the Potter alliance were working with the Professors to ensure it would be followed. They'd managed to have one practice run already under the pretence that the explosions had required the school to come up with such a procedure. Albus had been tickled to realise muggle schools had practice fire drills at least annually.

The evacuation plan had been the only way of ensuring the heirs would be safe from the fight. Even then Harry knew that many of them would prefer to stay with the school and defend it. He had insisted that unless they were trapped, they shouldn't fight.

They were planning for both eventualities.

Harry frowned heavily.

They were also planning for the prospect of betrayal from within.

Antioch hadn't seen the knife at his back; his parents and Sirius had trusted Peter. It was very likely that someone would betray them. The obvious target was Hogwarts although neither Harry nor Sirius had discounted the cemetery, especially as it was expected Voldemort would call his Death Eaters to him once he was reborn to a body.

Sirius had lists detailing the probabilities of each of their allies turning on them. It was depressing but Harry wouldn't let the hard task of examining the possibility stop them from potentially identifying someone meaning to do them harm.

They were learning from their mistakes.

The sun was almost up.

Harry gazed out into the sky.

His mother's message resonated with him. Harry was prepared to die in the battle with Voldemort but he didn't want to die; he wanted to live. He figured his mother wanted him to know that was OK too. He might have to sacrifice his life but it would be a last resort.

His brow furrowed. If his mother was worried about that, it was probable that Padfoot was worried. Harry sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. There was an easy way to fix that.

A couple of hours later, Harry dug into the fluffy golden eggs Dobby had served along with hot buttered toast. After breakfast he had duelling class and then he had sessions planned with the alliance to go over defensive transfiguration and charms.

Sirius slid into the seat at the top of the table. "Morning. You're up early."

Harry noted the dark circles under his father's eyes; the faint lines of stress that bracketed his mouth and eyes. "Had a weird dream about Mum."

"Oh?" Sirius paused in reaching for the paper.
"We were…we were in the nursery. She told me that she wished she could have lived for me."
Harry said bluntly.

Sirius blinked but nodded slowly. "She adored you, Harry. She had all these plans for you. The only thing that could have prevented her from seeing them in person was that in dying she protected you."

"Yeah," Harry murmured thinking of the list of things she'd reeled off, "I kind of got that." He sipped his orange juice. "I think she wanted to make sure that I knew sacrificing myself is the last resort."

Sirius's grey eyes met his over the breakfast table. "It absolutely is the last resort."

"For both of us." Harry commented firmly, holding Padfoot's gaze for a long beat.

"Agreed," Sirius said with a huffy laugh, "for both of us."

"Good,'cause I kind of have plans." Harry said breezily, satisfied and happy with Sirius's answer.

"Plans?" asked Sirius digging into his own plate finally.

"I was thinking we should take that trip next Summer we talked about." Harry said. "Visit Simeon? Especially now Anna's pregnant."

Sirius's face lit up and a sparkle entered his eyes that had been missing for days. "We could probably do that."

"I mean, I want to be here for Reggie's birth but after." Harry said casually dousing his remaining eggs in ketchup. "And before Dora has baby Lupin."

Sirius coughed, almost choked on his eggs and coughed again. He reached for his coffee and took a long gulp. He set the coffee cup aside. "Right then." He looked over at Harry. "Any other plans?"

Harry shook his head. "Spending time with Hermione? And my other friends? I liked what we did last Summer with the lessons and the trips so…"

"We'll plan it out." Sirius promised with a smile.

Harry smiled back. He had a future with Padfoot. That's all he'd ever wanted.

○○○

Peter carefully closed the bedroom door and tiptoed away, across the landing and down the creaky stairs.

The Dark Lord was bedded down for the night, his insane snake guarding the end of his bed. Peter finally had some time for himself. The past week had been taken up with negotiations between the Dark Lord and his allies as the Dark Lord prepared for the coming weekend and his resurrection.

The Dark Lord was furious at the loss of the werewolves; all Packs had sworn to stand with Lupin's; Travers had barely escaped with his life in Italy. As a result the Dark Lord had gone to the vampire clans in earnest. The Dementors and Giants had also been approached; the former had accepted and the latter had refused.

Peter went to the kitchen and started to make another sandwich. He had eaten dinner with the Dark Lord but his Master's insistence on always feeding the snake at the same time rather hindered his appetite. The rabbit had still been alive when she'd swallowed it. Peter was certain he'd seen the hind
leg kicking out around the snake's middle for moments after.

He shook the thought away and focused on making himself a simple cheese and tomato sandwich. There were more than a few groceries in the pantry. The Dark Lord had tasked Snape with grocery shopping and if the Potions Master thought the task beneath him, he was keeping it to himself.

Snape arrived on time for his potion-making every few days. Truthfully Peter was glad Snape was preparing the ritual potion – he had no doubt that he'd bollocks the thing up if it were left to him, but it did mean that he had to put up with running into the sly, cruel Slytherin. It felt like Hogwarts all over again.

At least Carrow had been left behind in the London flat to maintain the link with the vampire army the Dark Lord was amassing. They were already arriving into Britain in preparation for the solstice eve when they would travel through the vanishing cabinet into the one Crouch had left in Hogwarts.

Crouch was an idiot, Peter mused as he sat down at the simple pine table in the corner to eat his meal. Out of all of them Crouch had been placed in the cushiest of positions; within Hogwarts as a student. His food and comfort were assured. All he'd had to do was remain on hand to ensure Potter would touch the planted portkey, and ensure the cabinet was placed in a prime location. But Crouch had initiated his own plan which meant he'd had to leave Hogwarts and he'd been punished by the Dark Lord, sent abroad to travel with Travers recruiting in Europe. It left the role of Favoured One to Snape.

The problem, Peter mused as he hungrily devoured the food, was that Crouch was too focused on his own plans and not enough on their Master's. Crouch wanted Sirius dead; he wanted revenge for his lover. And he wanted to be favoured in his Master's eyes. It led him to foolish thinking that independent action would be welcomed.

Peter snorted quietly. Independent action was the last thing that the Dark Lord wanted.

It was nice, he thought, to finally be alone. Carrow's latest visit had been taxing because his entire presence irked the Dark Lord. Carrow was a visible reminder that the plan to attack Black Farm and take the metamorphmagus and her unborn child had failed. The Dark Lord had been furious. The only silver lining was that in the fury at Carrow running away from the Farm because Sirius had taunted him, the Dark Lord had allowed the death of Greyback to go almost unmentioned. Peter was relieved the werewolf was dead.

He remembered all too clearly one night in the dorm with a purloined bottle of firewhiskey, soon after the truth about Remus had been shared, and Remus telling him the story of being bitten. He'd had nightmares for weeks. If he hadn't already taken the vow to become an animagus and help Remus…he would never have set foot in the forest with Moony.

Regret flickered briefly through him.

He remembered those nights of his school years fondly. The Marauders had truly been as close as brothers. He remembered Sirius's fierce protection; Remus's kind instruction; James's steady friendship. He remembered how they'd stood shoulder to shoulder in a fight against the Slytherins; the pranks they'd played…

Peter glanced across the room to the open door. Even thinking such a thing could be dangerous in the same house as the Dark Lord.

He was a faithful servant, Peter reminded himself. He would take part in the ritual to deliver the Dark Lord into a body once more. His memories of the Potters and the Marauders were simply that;
memories.

Peter shook himself. Why was he dwelling on memories? James and Lily were gone, and Sirius and Remus would kill him rather than save him.

He finished his sandwich and made a cup of tea.

The old drawing room had been cleaned up and it made a cosy place to spend the rest of the evening. There was a banked fire in the hearth and Peter sat down in the old leather sofa. He stared at the flames and remembered being with the Marauders on the beach, the Summer after their graduation from Hogwarts. They’d had a week together before each of them had gone their separate ways and they’d gone to Blackpool. They’d built a bonfire and toasted marshmallows…

It had been special.

As special as James's wedding to Lily.

He could remember every moment of the wedding day. He had been a groomsman along with Remus; Sirius being awarded the prized position as best man. The bride and groom had danced under a charmed ceiling of stars at Potter Manor so in love with each other. Harry was the best of both of them – Peter had spent enough time in his company in his guise as a rat to know that.

The wedding had almost been the last time the Marauders had been together before Peter had been formally Marked, before he'd accepted Travers's offer and had been given the role as the Dark Lord's hidden spy in the Order.

Those days of family, hearth and home were long gone in his life, Peter reflected. The Dark Lord allowed nobody else to matter. To be a Death Eater was to declare allegiance to him first and foremost. There was no room for sentiment.

Followers were allowed families and spouses only to ensure the future; to ensure the next generation of Death Eaters and followers. Friendships were not encouraged, only alliances, and even then the Dark Lord sought to set his followers against each other. He made them compete for his attention and favour; made them compete to avoid his wrath.

Tiredness washed over him. It was almost over. Another week and the Dark Lord would kill Harry and take control of the wizarding world…it was too late for anything else…

Peter hovered in the doorway of Godric's Hollow. Remus was in the kitchen making some kind of basic stew for them all. The growl of the motorcycle coming down the country lane was loud and Peter wondered again at just how Sirius had convinced Lily to use the thing to bring home the baby.

It drew up in front of the cottage and Peter smiled at the sight of his four friends. The Mark on his arm tingled as though remonstrating him and he once again wondered if he'd done the right thing. He had, he told himself sternly; hadn't he been able to protect James the week before by diverting the Dark Lord's attention to the McKinnons?

"Oi, Wormy!" Sirius called out. "Stop dawdling on the doorstep and come and help us!"

Peter felt a flicker of resentment but a quick look at Sirius had it melting away; Sirius looked in pain. It was a miracle Sirius had survived being captured by Death Eaters. Peter had heard the rumours of the tortures his friend had endured. He shivered; thankful that the Mark and his position as the Dark Lord's spy protected him from that. He hurried forward.

James was already dismounted; he'd been riding behind Sirius on the bike. Lily was safely still
ensconced in the side-car, the glow of a protective shield still around it. James tapped it with his wand and it disappeared.

Lily beamed up at him. Her red hair was covered by a cumbersome helmet and her entire front was covered by a woolly blue blanket. James helped his wife out of the helmet. Her hair immediately began to stir with the faint wind.

Peter hurried to assist her. He carefully took the blanket she handed him and gazed at the sleeping baby it revealed. Harry was tiny. He was bundled up and strapped to Lily's front in some kind of weird papoose thing.

Lily smiled as Peter offered his hand in addition to the one James already had outstretched. "Thank you, Peter."

A moment later she was standing on the pavement, carefully checking on her sleeping son. "Peter, meet our son; Harry James."

"He's so small." Peter commented, almost awe-struck at the sight of the baby with his rosy cheeks and mess of fine black hair.

"He's perfect." Sirius responded before either parent could reply. He'd limped around the bike and was peering over Lily's shoulder. "Absolutely perfect."

James slapped Sirius's back. "Meet the proud godfather, Peter."

Peter felt a twinge of jealousy that he hadn't been considered but then James and Sirius were cousins, and he knew as the Heir to an Ancient and Noble House there were other considerations for James than simply friendship.

"Let's get this little one inside." Lily said, smoothing a hand over her baby's head.

Peter nodded. "Luggage?"

"Shrunk and in James's pocket." Lily explained. Her sharp gaze darted to Sirius as she started walking up the garden path. "Cane, Black. Don't make me punish you."

Sirius huffed but summoned the cane from where he'd strapped it onto the side of the bike. Peter smirked at him.

"Don't smirk at Sirius, Peter." Lily remonstrated without looking back at him.

Peter's smirk dropped from his face and he sighed. "How does she do that?"

James wore a familiar besotted smile; familiar because he'd been wearing it pretty much every time he'd talked about Lily since they'd met at eleven years of age. "Because she's brilliant."

Peter and Sirius who had mouthed the words along with their friend, grinned at each other as James caught on and shot them both an irritated look.

"Yes, yes, Prongs." Sirius waved away James's ire. "She's brilliant. She's also very scary."

"That's my wife." James said cheerily, leading them into the house but at a slow pace which Peter knew was for Sirius.

"You have a baby now." Sirius complained. "You'd think you'd be over saying that."
"You're right, Pads." James agreed grinning cheekily. "I should go with 'that's the mother of my son' from now on."

Sirius and Peter exchanged identical looks of horror.

"How's your mother, Wormy?" Sirius asked in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

"Good, good." Peter replied, closing the door behind him, and suddenly remembering that he'd used the excuse of her being ill to avoid the hospital. "I mean, better."

Sirius frowned but before anything else could be said. The coat rack reached out for their outerwear and they all focused on shedding clothing before it ripped it from them.

Lily had dismantled the papoose and had placed Harry on the rug in front of the fire. He'd woken up. He was on his back, legs and arms waving; his eyes were focused on the woman tending him. Lily looked beautiful; soft and maternal. Peter had no doubt she'd turn into a complete tiger if anyone dared to threaten her child.

The three men stood in in hushed silence.

Remus barrelled in through the door to the dining room, wiping his hands on a tea towel. "Sorry, sorry, but I have to add the mushrooms at the right time or they'll shrink into nothingness and...oh." He stopped abruptly.

Lily glanced over her shoulder, tossed her hair back and in a smooth move, picked up the baby and got to her feet. She crossed the few steps between her and Remus and before he could protest handed him the child.

Moony looked stunned but quickly adjusted his hold, cradling the child as though it was the most precious thing in the world. "Cub." He whispered.

"That's right, Remus." Lily said retreating a couple of steps to James, who slid an arm around her shoulders as she slid hers around his waist.

Peter and Sirius smiled at each other. It was rare to see Moony so disconcerted.

James dropped a kiss on Lily’s head as Harry gurgled up at Remus.

Sirius sprang forward suddenly. "Alright, enough hogging of the Pronglet, Moony! Gimme, gimme!" He limped over and held out his hands.

Remus rolled his eyes but Harry was already cooing and stretching out towards his godfather. They shuffled until Sirius held the baby.

"There’s my Pronglet." Sirius murmured gently, a finger tapping Harry’s nose softly. Harry gurgled up at his godfather happily, blowing bubbles.

Peter and Remus exchanged a curious look at just how comfortable Sirius looked with the baby. They looked at James and Lily questioningly.

"Don't ask us." Lily said dryly. "It was love at first sight with them both."

"We were going to make Frank godfather," James commented, "since Alice is godmother and we've both been asked to stand for his son, Neville, you know? Only..." He waved a hand at where Sirius stood rocking slightly and murmuring nonsense to Harry. "So Frank gets the next one."
Lily poked her husband in his stomach. "Let's get this one walking before we start talking about another, Potter."

"When are your folks due?" Remus asked. "The stew'll be ready in…"

Lily was shaking her head. "All the family saw him at the hospital. They're leaving us alone tonight. Charlus said he'll come by tomorrow night for dinner. I suspect Mum'll nag Dad into driving her here first thing in the morning."

Peter brightened. He was always slightly intimidated by Lord Potter and Lily's muggle parents were sometimes baffling to him.

"Do I have time for a bath?" Lily asked, plucking at her blouse. "I think I still smell like hospital." She grimaced.

Remus nodded. "It'll be about an hour."

"Then I'm going for a long soak in the tub." Lily declared, already turning to the stairs. "James, put Harry in his crib. He needs a nap before his next feed."

Sirius's face drooped with disappointment but he handed over the baby to James without arguing. Harry seemed disgruntled at leaving Sirius but settled quickly in his father's arms.

"Come and see the nursery." James said as he led the way upstairs.

The bathroom door was already shut, the sound of running water drifting out to the landing. Peter hurried after James into the small bedroom next to the master. He looked over at the mural and smiled.

"You and Moony should think about taking up as professional artists after the war, Padfoot." Peter said. "This is brilliant."

"It's all Padfoot." Remus argued. "He drew it. I just painted where he told me."

Sirius shrugged. "It's not like I've had anything else to do."

"You've been recovering, Pads." James said, placing his baby down into the crib gently. He set the magical mobile above the bed on and it glowed a gentle white.

Each of the men had taken a position on the corner of the crib and they all simply gazed at the first born of the Marauders.

"Well." James said gruffly.

"He looks like you, James." Peter commented. There was no mistaking the Potter features.

"He has his mother's eyes." James said softly. "He's beautiful."

"He is." Sirius agreed. His gaze hadn't left the baby.

James sighed heavily. "I just never imagined...he's my world now. Mine and Lily's. We'd kill for him, to keep him safe in this world."

"I'll be right beside you." Sirius promised.

"And me." Remus added.
Peter nodded, knowing it was expected. "You'll be a good Dad, Prongs."

James looked up at them all suddenly. "You have to promise me you'll be there for him if..." he pushed his glasses up his nose. "I mean, Alice and Frank will raise him. He goes there if the worst happens to Lils and me, but...he'll need you all too."

"You're not going anywhere, Prongs, but we promise; we'll keep Harry safe as houses, won't we, lads?" Sirius promised fervently.

"We promise." Remus said gently, holding James's gaze for a moment.

James's stare came to rest on him and Peter fought the urge to squirm. He thought about the Dark Mark on his arm. In his opinion, it was very likely that James and Lily would fall to the Dark Lord's wand sooner rather than later. They'd made a sport of defying him. But the baby...well, once the Dark Lord won, Harry would need a safe home and Peter could provide that. "Promise."

James nodded and grinned. "Thanks." He slapped Remus's shoulder. "Come on. We should head downstairs and start unshrinking all the stuff we brought."

Peter glanced back down at the sleeping baby one last time and followed after his friends...

Peter jerked awake and frowned. He must have fallen asleep. Why had he dreamed of that memory? He frowned as Sirius's words in the old crypt came rattling back to him...

"It's not too late." Sirius said. "You don't have to do this, Peter! Do you...do you remember when Harry was born? Do you remember what we promised James, Peter? All of us standing around the crib the night they brought him home?"

Not for the first time, Peter allowed himself a moment to dream; if he hadn't joined the Death Eaters...if James and Lily had still survived...if they had not...

Would he be with Sirius and Remus now plotting how to kill the Dark Lord and save Harry? Would he be standing shoulder to shoulder with his fellow Marauders protecting Harry as they had all promised to James that night?

He thought wistfully of the camaraderie, the brotherhood he'd left behind. He wondered

"You know Harry, Peter! You know him because you watched him for almost three years as Ron Weasley's rat! You know he's good and kind and brilliant! He's defeated your Dark Lord three times in the time you've known him! He defeated him at eleven and he defeated a shade of him at twelve. Your Dark Lord fears him!"

Sirius had argued in the crypt and Peter hadn't denied it.

"You know Harry can defeat him if you stop bloody helping him then!"

And maybe that was true too. Peter shook his head. He was committed to the Dark Lord. He would take his place in the ritual and ensure the Dark Lord's body was restored. He'd have to break his promise to James but it wouldn't be the first promise he'd broken...

Telling the Dark Lord of the Potters' location had been the worst of his oath breaking. Peter shivered. He owed Harry a life debt. He had no doubt that Sirius and Remus both would have killed him that night at Hogwarts.

He'd done what he could, Peter assured himself. He'd warned Moony about Greyback and the Dark
Lord's plans; hinted at the ritual to Sirius. There was nothing more he could do. Perhaps his life would be bleak when the Dark Lord won; empty of the love and friendship he'd enjoyed as a Marauder. But he'd be alive.

And even if...even if Harry prevailed there would be no happy ending for Peter, no future. There would be Azkaban and life imprisonment.

Peter got to his feet and banked the fire. As his mother had once said to him; he'd made his bed, Peter mused, now he had to lie in it.

-o-O-o-

18th/19th June 1995

Harry was surprised to find himself in what looked like the girls' dorm at Hogwarts. He felt a frisson of fear just remembering how furious his honorary Aunt had been at finding him there. He glanced around and frowned at he recognised Hermione's bed; the globe he had given her for the ball proudly displayed on the bookshelf along with a photo of them.

He wondered why he was there. He wandered over to the photo. Both he and Hermione stood smiling self-consciously out but then, as though they had thought the photo done, they glanced at each other and their smiles eased into something fond and affectionate that made Harry's heart ache with the knowledge of how much he felt for her, and his stomach churn with nerves and excitement at the thought that she felt the same for him.

"Why here?" he murmured to himself.

"I think you know, Harry."

The cultured tones of a strange female voice had him turning around. He froze at the sight of three mature women standing beside Hermione's bed. One of the women was clearly a Black; she looked so like Andromeda that he had almost thought it was her. Dressed in a green witch's robe, her hair was Sirius's black, her eyes grey and warm. He placed her immediately from the photos that Sirius had shared with him of the Black family; it was his grandmother, Dorea Potter.

Once the family photos came to mind, he also knew immediately who was in the middle; his grandmother Marigold Evans. Her warm green eyes shone with emotion; her red hair, greying at the temples was tied back in a smooth chignon. She wore muggle clothes unlike the other two women; a simple floral dress in sunshine yellow. Her hand was tightly clasped in Dorea's.

The woman on her other side was imposing; she reminded him of Augusta. Her features were autocratic; her eyes were pale blue, her hair was blonde and styled in an intricate up-do that Harry had once seen on Narcissa. She wore an expensive silk robe in blue and Harry could see they were edged with silver embroidery in the emblems of the House of the Black and McMillan. It was Sirius's paternal grandmother; Melania Black. It had been her book on witches' magic which had given his mother the spell to save him.

Harry immediately bowed to his grandmothers; etiquette that Andromeda had schooled into him coming to the fore.

"Oh, poppycock to that!" Marigold remarked even as Melania gave an approving nod at his manners. His maternal grandmother moved forward and swept him into a tight hug. Love suffused him. It felt so like his mother's hug and Harry hugged her back.

A moment later, Marigold was nudged aside and Dorea took her place. She moved back and
Melania sniffed.

She didn't move to hug him but instead held out a hand. Harry clasped it. Her fingers tightened around his as he bent and kissed her knuckles.

"You are a very acceptable Heir." Melania said crisply. She squeezed his fingers again and let him go.

Marigold immediately linked their arms together, smiling happily at him.

"Can you tell why we're your next visitors?" Dorea asked sitting on the bed in front of him, Melania following her example.

Harry looked at three women, glanced again at the photo behind of him of Hermione, and cleared his throat. "My mother's blessing; you represent her protection."

"Yes." Dorea nodded. "Your mother's blessing protects you still because of the blessing four daughters of the House of Black made to renew it with our blood."

"Witch's magic is a powerful thing." Melania commented. "Already three of our House now bear children because of the protection."

Harry blinked. It hadn't occurred to him to wonder at the number of pregnancies and he was suddenly considering Narcissa's, Dora's and Anna's pregnancies with new eyes.

Melania nodded at him. "The blessing was strong in maternal energy; the blood and spirit of a mother was sacrificed to save her child; blood was given freely to honour that protection, and a gift rewarded in return for the price of their blood."

"Hermione's gift will come when she is ready." Dorea said with a smile. "Andy and Minerva have been rewarded with children of their heart in other ways."

Andy was very close to Hermione and his Aunt Minerva…well, she was part of Harry's family.

"Voldemort doesn't respect women." Marigold said. "He disregarded your mother as a threat."

"He doesn't understand witches' magic." Dorea said. "He has never respected the memory of his mother. Merope was a poor witch; an abused girl who dreamed of being a princess and who had poor judgement in how she went about gaining the attention of the boy she'd made into her prince. But she loved her son and he has never acknowledged that."

"He disregards her." Melania said. "Even now in this ritual." She smiled at him. "Where is his mother?"

Nowhere, Harry realised. Tom was using his father's bone but he had killed a pregnant woman with no connection to him to provide the amniotic fluid required for the bones in which to steep.

"It's a weakness." Harry murmured.

"One that also ignores that it was his mother's blood which gifted him with his magic." Melania's smile was razor sharp.

"Your blood carries with it the protection of every daughter of the House of Black." Dorea commented fiercely. "And we will destroy those who threaten our family."

He'd figured that out for himself; Narcissa, Andy and Dora had made short work of Alecto Carrow.
"They stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter; in my place." Marigold murmured. She placed a hand on the talisman Hermione had gifted to him at Christmas. "We will always fight for you. Remember that."

Harry frowned. Narcissa and Dora were pregnant. They would spend the third task sequestered on the Black estate, protected by the heavy wards there.

"You look to protect the women of the House from the fight." Dorea said, picking up on his thoughts. "But not all fights need take place on the battlefield."

"There is a fight for spirit, heart and blood." Melania rose from the bed and crossed to the bookshelf. She pulled a thin volume from the books and handed it to Harry. "Lily's spell was but one; a witch's magic can do than you can imagine."

"Look to your women." Marigold counselled. She smiled at him. "And always remember, Harry; where there is love..." she tapped the book he held.

He looked down and saw the quote appear on the cover in gold lettering; Where there is love there is life.

He looked up and they were gone...

Harry spread his wings and rode the breeze, aware Hedwig flew beside him, keeping a watchful eye on the young raven Harry was currently embodying. He wondered whether his owl had been included when his grandmother had told him to 'look to his women'; he rather thought Hedwig would be insulted if she wasn't included.

The dream he'd had the night before lingered with him. He'd never met his grandmothers before and to even have the few moments he'd spent with them...it was a precious experience that he was going to treasure.

He'd told Sirius about the dream at breakfast, finally confiding that it was likely he was going to be getting more visits from the dead in his sleep that week when Sirius pointed out that it was two nights in a row to have weird dream visitations. He knew it hadn't gone down well with his father, but the value of the dreams couldn't be denied.

Sirius had immediately called Bertie, Remus and Minerva and they'd agreed to take another look at the book where they'd found the blessing and to consider what it meant that Voldemort had nothing of his mother in the ritual. They'd informed the War Council and called a family meeting to discuss it – which reminded Harry...he was going to be late!

He flew over the lake and angled back towards his bedroom window. The Headmaster had altered the ward to accept Harry in his animagus form and he sailed in through the open window, Hedwig following behind him. He almost missed his perch at the sight of Hermione sitting on his bed, reading a book.

He hurriedly changed back to his human form, casual clothes of jeans and a t-shirt reforming with him. "Hey."

Hermione placed the book down carefully and scrambled off his bed to greet him with a chaste kiss. Harry glanced at the open bedroom door anyway.

"Sirius knows I'm up here." Hermione confirmed. "He said I could wait for you."

Harry smiled at her. "Did you get your revision done?" Hermione had been working all weekend on
revision for the charms exam that would take place the next day.

The exams had been carefully negotiated between Sirius and the Hogwarts Professors. Harry was theoretically exempt because of the tournament, his individualised learning plan and the fact that he wasn't currently a Hogwarts' student. But it had been agreed that he'd take exams during the Summer to assess his knowledge and skills for entry back into Hogwarts for his fifth year. It was a reasonable compromise and left Harry able to focus on the tournament and his showdown with Voldemort.

"All done." Hermione agreed as she slipped her hand into his. "We're all very strong with the practical because of helping you; just needed to brush up on the theory."

The chime went for the door.

"We should head down." Hermione commented, tugging on his hand a touch.

Harry led the way out of the room and down the stairs. The next few minutes were a rush of greetings; hugs, kisses, and handshakes. They settled into the living room with additional seats levitated across from the dining table.

Narcissa sat in one armchair; Draco perched on the arm. Harry knew his former school boy rival had really warmed up to the idea of a younger sibling and was very solicitous of his mother. Lucius stood away from his family by the far left of the mantelpiece.

The Grangers sat on the sofa with Hermione beside them. Dora had been ushered into the remaining seat by her parents and Remus. Remus sat on the arm beside his wife; the Tonks on dining chairs to the side.

His Aunt Minerva had taken the remaining comfortable seat. Bertie had conjured his own chair beside her. Harry chose to stand next to Sirius in front of the hearth.

"Thank you for coming." Sirius said formally. "For the most part this is family business but Bertie is here to provide some expertise on magical theory." Harry knew Dumbledore had been disgruntled to be left out but Bertie was the expert and Sirius had full control of who should attend a family meeting.

Sirius looked over to Harry and Harry nodded briskly, taking up the silent baton Sirius had handed him. "I've been talking with my ancestors in dreams; not often but sometimes." He felt his cheeks heat and tried to will away the embarrassment. "Yesterday morning, I dreamed of talking with my mother and she said I'd be visited every night this week."

"Like Scrooge in A Christmas Carol?" asked Miriam, her arm sliding around Hermione's shoulders.

Harry gave a smile of acknowledgement. "Although less of the Past, Present and Future thing." He shrugged. "Just…lessons for me ahead of the battle."

"Fascinating." Lucius drawled.

Harry frowned at him. He wished he could exclude Lucius completely. On the list of 'Those Likely to Stab Them in the Back', Lucius Malfoy would have been at the top, except for the knowledge that he'd not risk his magic in breaking his oath.

"This morning I was visited by my grandmothers." Harry said bluntly. "They pointed out that there is a weakness in Tom's ritual; there's nothing of his mother."

The assembled family exchanged a few concerned and questioning looks.
"If I may?" Bertie said quietly.

Harry nodded, conceding the floor to the Director of the DOM.

"The ritual on the eve of the solstice involves three primary ingredients to facilitate rebirth; blood, flesh and bone." Bertie frowned. "The book supplied by Lord Nott indicates that the potion is best when the bones of the father are seeped with the womb of the mother. The former can be replaced by another male ancestor although the closer the relationship the better; the latter replacement is genetic material from the mother but in the absence of this, amniotic fluid from a pregnant woman." He paused. "The book mentions a number of possible weaknesses with this approach and we should assume that Voldemort has countered most of them."

Harry figured the genetics gifts was one; Bertie had explained earlier to him and Sirius that by using Nagini to sustain his wraith and the addition of a snake to the potion, Voldemort was ensuring his parseltongue would carry into his new body.

"However, there is one he cannot counter." Bertie glanced over at Harry. "Without his own mother's essence within the potion, it makes him particularly vulnerable to witch magic."

"Witch magic like the blessing of protection we did for Harry?" asked Hermione, her eyes wide.

"Yes," Minerva sat forward, "we've been examining Melania's books on the subject most of the day and we believe there is an opportunity to harness that protection and reinforce it we have previously ignored."

"Voldemort seeks Harry's blood in part because he thinks it will negate Lily's sacrifice, remove the protection from Harry." Bertie continued. "He's almost right that in most cases it would do so except…"

"Except the House of Black has already assumed Lily's place in the blessing; we would only need to restate the adoption blessing to bring it back into being, and without a link to his own mother, the force of the protection should do more than just blast him out of his body!" Minerva finished triumphantly.

"It's the exact same adoption blessing?" Miriam asked, frowning.

"With a few differences," Minerva allowed, "such as Harry and Sirius would not be physically present."

"But there is a place where Harry's and my blood reside," Sirius chipped in, "so we would be present in that respect."

Harry noted there were a few sharp looks exchanged at Sirius's confession.

Minerva nodded her head rapidly. "It would mean that all of us would need to be at that place to enact the blessing."

"So I couldn't attend the third task?" Hermione asked immediately.

"We could stay for the task but as soon as we have word that Harry is taken we would need to depart." Minerva confirmed.

"Is it safe?" asked Dora, one hand pressing lightly on her swelling belly.

"Yes." Remus answered, placing a hand on her arm. "We wouldn't be suggesting it otherwise."
"Count me in then." Dora said brightly. "It beats staying home and feeling useless."

Hermione looked pleadingly at her mother. "I want to help."

Miriam and Wallace exchanged a parental look before Miriam nodded her agreement.

Hermione gave a cry and hugged her mother. "Thank you."

Andromeda nodded slowly, her eyes on her daughter. "I'll do it."

"And so shall I." Narcissa said without conferring with Lucius.

"Mother…" Draco began to protest.

Narcissa stopped him with a single look and Draco pouted. "I appreciate your concern, Draco, but I shall be fine." Her gaze landed on Minerva. "You will stand as you did before?"

Minerva nodded. "We five should get together to go over the details of the ritual and perhaps consider how we can improve it." She motioned at Miriam. "You are more than welcome to join us."

"Thank you." Miriam said gratefully, smoothing Hermione's hair back over her shoulder. "I'll feel better about this if we know all the details."

"Excellent." Sirius said, shifting to sling an arm around Harry's shoulder. "And now that's agreed, let's have dinner!"

Harry grinned and let Sirius lead him to the dining table. He watched as the women subtly manoeuvred the men and directed the conversation. Hermione caught his eye and smiled warmly. He smiled back, his hand creeping to the talisman he wore.

Tom was a misogynistic idiot, Harry mused. The witches of the House of Black were going to totally kick his arse.

o-O-o

Remus shifted position in the bed for the umpteenth time and finally came to rest on his back staring up at the ceiling with a heavy sigh.

"I thought I was the one who was supposed to be unable to find a comfortable position." Dora grumbled lightly beside him.

"Sorry," Remus said quietly, "I just…"

"Can't get your brain to shut up." Dora concluded with a hint of a grin in her voice. She snuggled closer into his side, wrapping an arm around his middle and pushing at his arm until he shifted to place it around her shoulders. "Better."

"Hmmm." Remus stroked her shoulder absently with his thumb.

"You want to talk about what's bothering you?" asked Dora. Her voice was clear of sleep and he felt a moment of guilt that he was keeping her from her rest.

"I was thinking about the ritual you're going to do." Remus admitted.

Dora gave a small grunt. "You're not going to try and talk me out of it, are you? Because I have to tell you…"
"No." Remus interrupted her quickly. "No. It's safe and if it can do what we think…"

"Harry will be like uber-protected." Dora finished. Her fingers played with a button on his pyjama top. "So what's the problem?"

"I'm just wondering if there's anything else we've missed." Remus admitted. "It's worrying that Harry had to have a visit from the dead before we thought about this."

"You've been really close to this for a long time and I know you have a ton of plans already." Dora commented after a moment's silence. "You can't beat yourself up for not seeing every detail."

"We can't afford to fail." Remus rejoined. "If we do…"

"Fate of the wizarding world," sighed Dora, "I know."

"No," Remus said sharply, "Harry will be dead and so no doubt will Sirius." He felt his heart begin to pound just at the thought of it. "I can't lose them again."

Dora immediately tightened her grip. "You won't lose them."

Remus felt his throat close up and he hugged her to him rather than say the words that threatened to escape any way; that she couldn't promise that he wouldn't lose them.

"Are you still intending to be with Sirius?" Dora asked softly.

Remus nodded. "I can't be anywhere else."

Even though the rest of his werewolf pack and their allies would be helping; would be standing up to defend Hogwarts.

Severus hadn't found an antidote for the potion but he had found that a single dose of Wolfsbane before being hit with the potion allowed the werewolf to retain their mind. It was a compromise. Remus had been very clear that no werewolf would be allowed to participate in the battle without taking the Wolfsbane. He was proud that many of his pack had stepped forward to volunteer. They all loved Harry and their wolves definitely considered him pack.

Cub.

Remus's mind slipped to the moment Lily had handed him Harry as a baby. He hadn't been allowed near the inside of the maternity ward due to his lycanthropy so he'd had to wait for them to return home. It had been one of the most magical moments of his life. He figured holding his own child would be similar and he was pleased that Dora had opted for an at-home water-birth that would allow him to be near.

He hadn't told her how Harry had explained the fertility of the Black women had been enhanced by their participation in the blessing.

There was always a consequence.

He wondered what price magic would exact for the coming ritual. Perhaps it would be more children down the line; he could live with that. Both he and Dora were already agreed that they didn't want their baby to be an only child.

"Patrick respects Gregor." Dora commented. "They'll be fine." She sighed and fiddled with his button again. "I don't mind telling you that I'm glad we have this ritual to do. It'll make a difference. I
was a dreading staying here twiddling my thumbs while you and Sirius and Remus were all fighting."

Remus hugged her closer. "You'll be in the safest place in Britain now."

Dora raised her head to look at him. "You know where this secret place is?" Her voice was rich with amusement.

"It's the bolthole Sirius gave to Harry." Remus said confidently. "I'd place money on it."

"Yeah," Dora grinned at him, "how much money, Wolfie?"

"Let's call it a galleon."

"Hmmm." Dora lay her head down again. "A galleon it is then."

Remus dropped a kiss on her head. "Sleep, Dora."

"You too." Dora said quietly.

It took a few minutes but eventually her breathing evened out. Remus let his free hand stray to the curve of her belly pressed against him.

Mothers.

Why had no-one ever considered how important a mother would be in Voldemort's ritual? Especially a ritual about rebirth…

Remus entered his small bedsit with a sigh, shaking his damp hair with a grimace. He'd left his last umbrella on the Tube and he didn't have enough funds to replace it. He knew he'd only have to say as much to his mother and she'd probably just give him hers but he would be fine, he told himself briskly. A little damp wouldn't hurt his constitution; the wolf was good at least for combating coughs, colds and sniffles.

A tap on the raindrop smeared window drew his attention and he shrugged out of his wet coat and toed off his shoes to hurry over. He opened the latch and the owl hopped inside, sticking out its leg imperiously.

Remus smiled at the sight of James's small owl. "Hello, Godric." He ushered the owl inside the room, closed the window against a harsh October wind and the continuing driving rain. He fed the owl and took the letter from him instantly recognising Lily's handwriting.

He set it on the table and hurried to switch on the small two-bar electric fire next to his sofa-bed. The small kitchenette area had a basic electric kettle and a small gas stove and grill. He lit the grill, opened up the shop-bought crumpets he'd bought the day before and toasted them while he made a pot of tea. He took his meagre supper back to the sofa bed and tucked in, wiping his buttery fingers on a tissue.

He opened up the letter and smiled at the sight of a new photo of Harry. He hadn't seen Harry or Harry's parents since the beginning of the Summer. He'd spent months abroad and with the packs for Albus before he'd finally managed to convince the leader of the Order of the Phoenix that he needed a break.

He'd come home only to find himself immediately sent out again to raise support in the British pack. He snorted; like Greyback would allow dissent in his pack. Not that it stopped some of them. Sian
was the most vocal. He'd had to silence her at the last meeting she'd been so loud and if Greyback caught wind of what she had been proposing…

Remus sighed. Possibly he should tell Professor Dumbledore to send him abroad again if only to escape Sian's fanaticism with getting rid of Greyback. It would probably suit his former Headmaster; he'd been hinting about Eastern Europe at the last Order meeting.

Sirius hadn't attended again.

But then again, neither had James and Lily; they had gone into hiding to escape being targeted. Remus couldn't blame them given what had happened to Lily's parents earlier that year.

Baby Harry giggled cutely from the safe harbour of his mother's arms in the photo and Remus smiled. He missed his cub.

He missed all of them.

He hadn't seen Peter for months either.

He and Sirius had crossed paths in an Order raid a few months before and managed to get a drink together, but it had been fleeting and Sirius had been distracted. They'd run into an Auror who had drunkenly accused Sirius of mis-firing a spell meant for his cousin Bella. Remus hadn't believed them but...but he'd rumours abroad of a Death Eater who looked like Sirius, and Sirius had been missing for a long time the previous year until he'd come back supposedly from a mission almost fatally injured. Then there were the missed Order meetings...

Remus grimaced at the nagging suspicion that had wormed its way inside of him. He couldn't quite help remembering Sirius's ruthless Black side even as he felt guilty. Sirius would never support You-Know-Who, Remus thought determinedly. Apart from anything Sirius's friendship and love for the Potters – all three of them – would keep him on the side of the Light.

Remus set the photo aside and picked up the letter; there were several other pieces of scroll attached to it. All of them were blank.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good." Remus said out loud and tapped his wand on the paper.

Words immediately filled up the blank space.

"Dear Remus,

I need your help. I've found this spell to help protect Harry. It's from an old Runes book on Witch magic. Why they don't teach it in school is a mystery because it is the most fascinating spell-work I've read about.

The spell involves a protection ceremony where I'd use my blood and Harry's to draw protective symbols all over his body. It has to be done at dawn, ideally in a grove of elder trees surrounded by a coven of seven witches. It does say a circle of flowers grown by me and candles to stand for the witches is fine, although the spell's power will be weaker, and is more likely given James and I are hiding away to protect our son.

Please could you take a look at the spell? I need another pair of eyes and there's no-one else I trust more on magical theory.

Godric will stay with you until you have a reply."
I hope Albus isn't talking you into taking too many risks. Harry misses his Uncle Mooey.

All my love, Lily"

Remus frowned heavily and began to read the rest of the spell…

Remus's eyes flew open.

How had he forgotten? The original spell called for a coven of witches. He had to…

Dora stirred restlessly beside him and Remus forced himself to settle back into the pillow, to breathe and slow his heart rate down. There was nothing he could do until morning but in the morning…he and Sirius had seven more witches to charm into taking part in the ritual…

o-O-o

19 th/20 th June 1995

The shift into the dream was something he was getting used to, Harry mused as he took stock of his surroundings. He was in a classroom in Hogwarts. He vaguely recognised the shape and size, and froze as his gaze landed on a familiar shape hidden behind a cloth.

The Mirror of Erised.

Harry shivered.

The last time he'd seen the mirror he'd been fighting for his life against Voldemort.

"The more things change…” muttered Harry thoughtfully.

He glanced around the room again and frowned. It wasn't the chamber where he'd fought Voldemort, he realised. The classroom was the one where he'd originally found the mirror. The room where he'd looked into the glass and seen his parents. He frowned.

He'd been so naïve about the wizarding world back then; still so much in awe of the wonders he saw, the strange weird reality of magic. The mirror had been a blessing and the most painful experience of his life. To see his parents so close and yet to not be with him…

Yet he wouldn't change it. He had looked into the mirror and seen himself with his parents; seen the family they would have been.

Still, he now had a family; he had Padfoot. He wasn't certain that he needed to look at the mirror again.

But there had to be some reason why the mirror was there. No ghost so far, Harry thought. His gaze strayed to the mirror. He bit his lip and sighed. It didn't take a genius to work out maybe he needed to reveal the large elephant in the room.

He crossed the room and reached out. He hesitated for another moment but then with a sharp tug, he removed the cloth and revealed the glass.

A young girl looked back at him; no older than sixteen. She had red hair, blue eyes, a slightly too long nose and bow-shaped lips; a tall slim figure dressed in a simple witch's robe. A silver charm bracelet glinted on one wrist. She vaguely reminded him of someone but he had no real idea who she was, and even with the hair colour he figured she wasn't a relation.
Harry stared at her.

"Well met, Harry James Potter." The young girl sank into a curtsy. "I am Ariana Dumbledore."

Harry automatically bowed to her. He stared at her again. "I'm sorry," he said, confusion colouring every word, "I, um, I guess I was expecting…"

"Someone related to you." Ariana smiled prettily. "You have a lot of relatives but it's very important that I speak with you so I was granted one of your visits." She pouted. "It's more difficult visiting you though. I had to find something which connected me, Albie and you."

Hence the mirror, Harry realised.

"He sees you in the mirror." Harry frowned. "He told me he saw socks."

Ariana held up a pair of knitted bright gold and red socks. "I always gave him socks for Christmas. It was our tradition."

Harry nodded slowly. The Headmaster had answered his question back then truthfully but not wholly. It was very like him.

"I'm here to talk to you about Albie." Ariana said solemnly.

Harry gestured at her to continue and sat down in front of the mirror, grimacing at the all-too accurate detail of the dusty floor. Ariana smiled back at him and dropped down to sit at the bottom of the mirror. She arranged her skirts neatly and pinned him with a serious gaze.

"Once upon a time there was a family; a wizard, a muggleborn witch and their three children; the oldest Albus, the middle sibling Aberforth, and the youngest, Ariana." She began. "Ariana was only a small child of six, playing one day in a field by their house when her accidental magic of a twinkling bright set of coloured lights attracted the attention of a group of muggle boys. They surrounded her, called her a witch and demanded she bring the lights back."

Harry could picture the scene only too well. "They bullied her."

"They didn't stop at words." Ariana said softly. "When they couldn't make her produce the lights again, they began to push and shove her; when she ended up on the ground they set about her, throwing stones at her for being unnatural. Ariana's magic was left twisted and chaotic by the attack; she would never be normal."

Harry felt angry at the boys for the trauma they'd put Ariana through; had Ariana died in the encounter, he wondered.

"Her father came searching for her and when he found her and the boys, he attacked them badly, killing one of the ringleaders." Ariana sighed. "He refused to tell the Aurors why he'd attacked the boys to protect his daughter from being committed to an institution. Instead he was sent to Azkaban. Alone with her family to raise, the witch took her children back to her home village of Godric's Hollow. She bought a small cottage and set about raising her children. She was so proud of Albus who was so clever and powerful, and Aberforth who was quite the dueller. She was protective of her daughter, shielding her from harm. For a time all was well with the family although they missed their father immensely."

Harry watched as Ariana's expression saddened.

"Albus had just graduated from Hogwarts when his mother was killed by Ariana in a burst of
accidental magic caused by the news of the death of their father in the prison. Albus and Aberforth covered up the incident to protect their sister and buried their mother." Ariana smiled suddenly. "Aberforth loved his sister and he wanted to drop out of Hogwarts to be with her but Albus insisted on his younger brother finishing school. And so, Albus stayed home and looked after his sister instead of setting out to achieve great and wonderful things."

That had to have been hard on the Headmaster, Harry thought. It was quite a responsibility for a young man to take on. And yet he knew the Headmaster wouldn't have made any other decision.

"I will do what is right not what is easy." Ariana quoted with twinkling blue eyes. "It was the last thing father said to us." She sighed. "Albus tried, he really did, but then...he was a young man trapped in a small backwater village with all his hopes and dreams placed on hold. He resented it badly although he was always careful never to show just how much to his sister."

"Only something happened." Harry surmised.

"A young German wizard, a great-nephew of their neighbour, came to visit. Gellert was handsome and dashing; clever and just as magically powerful as Albus. He rather swept Albus off his feet." Ariana said in a rush. "They would debate and talk for hours on all kinds of magical theory; made wild and wonderful plans to conquer the world together. Albus fell hopelessly in love and when Gellert suggested an old-fashioned world tour, he couldn't help but agree."

"He left you?" demanded Harry hotly, unable to believe the Headmaster had shirked such a duty to his family.

"Oh no." Ariana shook her head vehemently. "Albus wouldn't consider that. No, he would have taken Ariana with him, although neither he nor Gellert had considered the practicalities of that, but...it was suddenly Summer and Aberforth came home."

"So he left his sister with Aberforth?" questioned Harry.

Ariana shook her head. "Aberforth wasn't impressed by Gellert. He didn't see the passionate German through the eyes of young love. Where Albus saw vision, Abe saw greed and ambition; where Albus saw rebellious determination against what others thought, Abe saw a ruthlessly cold arrogance. Albus argued that he and Gellert were two peas in the same pod but Abe knew they were more like opposites of the same coin; powerful, intellectual and ambitious but where Albus was rooted in the Light, Gellert Grindelwald was rooted in the Dark."

Harry's eyes widened. The Headmaster had been in love with Gellert Grindelwald? The same Dark Lord Grindelwald who he'd duelled and defeated?

"Aberforth walked in one morning on a planning session and, hot-tempered, began arguing about their plans for Ariana, for the world." She sighed heavily. "Aberforth foolishly pulled his wand and demanded a duel and Gellert was cruel and fast. He soon had the young Aberforth on the floor and then he cast the Cruciatus curse. Albus defended his brother and there was a horrible, horrible fight between the three." She paused and waited until he was looking fully at her. "And into the midst of the spell-fire walked Ariana."

Harry winced.

"Gellert fled, and the authorities blamed him in absentia for Ariana's tragic death, but in truth, not one of the three knew which of their spells had caused her heart to stop." Ariana murmured.

"That's...awful." Harry said.
"Albie and Abe...my brothers have rarely spoken since that day." Ariana grimaced. "They're both stubborn fools. Each of them wallowed in guilt and anger; self-recrimination and regret."

Harry could understand that. Aberforth had to bear the truth that his temper had caused the fight; Albus that his dreams and plans had seeded the discontent; both that their spells may have been the one to end their sister's life.

"Abe forgave himself long ago." Ariana said, breaking into Harry's thoughts. "He grieved but he healed."

"And the Headmaster?" asked Harry.

"Albus has never forgiven himself." Ariana confirmed. "He grieves still for the loss of me. It is his greatest desire to see me, speak to me; to seek my forgiveness and provide him with his redemption, his salvation." She sighed heavily. "He would not have fought the ring, his need of the Resurrection stone would have been too much." Her gaze pinned him once more. "He would have held onto the shade of me until his magic was gone."

Harry knew the temptation of the stone. It had been wrenching to say goodbye to his parents but then he had Padfoot with him to help him; to give him the strength to lock the stone away again.

"My brother bleeds every day," Ariana said softly, "and it's long past time that he should heal. You need him."

Harry nodded gravely. The Headmaster was a powerful wizard and in the upcoming battle, he was needed to protect and hold Hogwarts. "What can I do?"

"I need you to give him a gift." Ariana murmured. "Something that will make him remember that where there is love there is life."

Harry frowned. "What gift?"

Ariana held up the socks.

He stared at her.

"He'll understand." Ariana said confidently.

Harry sighed. "How do I...I mean, you've got the socks in the mirror. How am I supposed to get them out of there?"

Ariana raised one eyebrow. "You've retrieved things from the mirror before, Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes as he understood her reference. "I don't want to wear the socks." He said clearly and almost immediately felt the wool in his hands...

He woke abruptly, startled at the solid scratchy material against the tips of his fingers. He stared down at the brightly coloured socks.

His heart beat fast in his chest as he scrambled upright, startling Hedwig.

How...?

Magic, thought Harry wearily. He silently cast a lumos and examined the socks again. Something was telling him not to wait for the morning. He needed to give the socks to the Headmaster without delay.
He pushed back the covers on his bed and got up. He shrugged into his dressing gown and put the socks into one of the deep pockets. He opened his bedroom door and wasn't surprised when Sirius's door opened almost immediately too.

"You alright?" asked Sirius gruffly. He looked as though he hadn't slept despite his own bed-wear of pyjamas and dressing gown, his dark hair loose around his shoulders.

"I need to see the Headmaster." Harry admitted.

Sirius blinked but he nodded slowly. He cast a messenger patronus to alert the Headmaster to their imminent arrival. He ushered Harry down the stairs and out of their rooms, casting his own lumos to light the way. Harry was immensely grateful at the lack of questions; the faith that Padfoot displayed in just accepting his answer.

Harry followed Sirius past the usual entrance to the Headmaster's study and down the corridor. A door appeared at the end of the corridor, opening up to them as they approached. Harry swallowed hard as he entered into a comfortable living area; comfortable squishy armchairs around a banked fire with bookcases lining the walls. Harry was barely aware of the door closing behind him.

Dumbledore hurried into the room from an entry way to the far left. He carried an old-fashioned candle-stick holder, and dressed in a long white nightgown, fluffy slippers and a matching blue fluffy sleeping cap and shawl, he reminded Harry of historical pictures from the turn of the century.

"Harry, my boy!" Dumbledore said urgently, placing the candle on a side table. "Have you had another dream?" Concern coated every word. "Is everything alright?"

Harry simply reached into his pocket and pulled out the socks. "Ariana wanted me to give these to you."

Dumbledore paled; still as a statue as his rheumy blue eyes fell to the socks and stayed there. He reached out with trembling hands and, ignoring the outstretched hand holding the socks, took hold of Harry's shoulders – the strength of his grip almost had Harry wincing and he waved off Sirius when his father took a step forward in concern.

"You saw Ariana?" Dumbledore's blue eyes were intent on his; his voice hoarse.

Harry nodded.

Dumbledore swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down prominently. He dropped his gaze to the socks. He released one of Harry's shoulders and almost reverently took hold of the woollen gift.

"Your sister wants you to forgive yourself." Harry murmured in a low voice. "Because we need you."

Dumbledore clutched the socks close to his heart and made a small wounded sound. He swayed and suddenly crumpled, falling to his knees, pressing his head into Harry's stomach as he sobbed wretchedly, with one hand still holding onto Harry's shoulder, the other gripping the socks.

Harry flailed before his settled his hands on Dumbledore's shaking shoulders, patting them awkwardly. He looked over at Sirius desperately.

Sirius gave a sympathetic grimace. He moved forward and wrapped an arm around Harry, his hand coming to rest over Dumbledore's and squeezing the older man's gently.
They waited until Dumbledore's storm of weeping had subsided before they moved again. Sirius deftly helped the old wizard to his feet, and firmly but compassionately led him over to a chair. Dobby was called and a moment later, a strong cup of tea liberally laced with lemon was handed over to the Headmaster.

Harry hovered to one side until Sirius took a seat on a small couch opposite Dumbledore and patted the cushion next to him in a silent invitation for Harry to join him.

Dumbledore stroked the socks he'd placed on his lap with a sigh. He looked up, a red blush stealing across his cheeks. "My sincere apologies for falling apart on you, Harry. I just..." he swallowed and shook his head, tears glinting again in his eyes. "I've thought...all these years."

Sirius cleared his throat. "I remember you told me once that you were tempted by the stone because you wanted so much to speak with your sister again after the tragedy of her death."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief that his father already knew the detail. It meant he didn't have to worry about giving away details the Headmaster might not have wanted someone else to know.

"Yes." Dumbledore said, replying to Sirius. "To beg her forgiveness..." his fingers stroked the woolen socks again. "Aberforth was her favourite but she always knitted a pair of socks for me for Yule and my birthday, just as I always gave her a charm for her bracelet. It was just a small tradition she and I had as sister and brother."

"You saw her in the Mirror of Erised." Harry said quietly.

"Yes," Dumbledore gave an apologetic smile, "along with the many pairs of socks she never had the chance to give to me." Regret was written in every line drawn on his elderly face. "I was a young fool."

"You couldn't know the argument between you all would end with so badly." Harry pointed out.

"No," Dumbledore agreed reluctantly. He sighed, looking up at Harry. "But it was my choice to bring Gellert into our lives."

"Gellert?" Sirius's eyebrows shot up as he made the connection.

Dumbledore flushed and avoided Sirius's gaze. "Yes."

"You still couldn't know what would happen." Harry insisted, his hands clasped loosely on his lap. "You didn't know your brother would challenge him or that he would be so cruel in response."

Dumbledore's smile was sad and regretful. "I knew Gellert's faults; I simply chose to ignore them because I loved him. I chose to assume the best about his vision and his motives. I chose to disregard the dark arts he spoke about as being experimentation and youthful indiscretion rather than an already chosen path. I invited a poisonous snake into the bosom of my family; Aberforth was right about that."

"You were young and in love." Sirius said quietly. "We've all made foolish choices for worse reasons. You aren't to blame for your sister's death just because you fell in love with the wrong boy."

"Perhaps not fully," Dumbledore acknowledged, "but I took the first step in events that led to her death and I will always bear the responsibility for that error in judgement." He patted the socks.

"What did she say?"

"That it was past time for you to forgive yourself." Harry said bluntly, not sure there was a way to
dress up Ariana's message. "She says we're going to need you to hold Hogwarts."

"Then, I shall make every endeavour to do so." Dumbledore said in a firm decisive tone. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry didn't need Sirius's nudge to know it was time to leave. He got to his feet, grateful when Sirius slung an arm around his shoulders.

"We'll leave you to get some more sleep, Albus." Sirius said kindly. "G'night."

"Goodnight, boys." Dumbledore replied.

They made their way to the door which opened automatically to let them out. Harry glanced back over his shoulder...

Dumbledore sat in his chair, attention completely focused on the socks.

Harry shook his head. He had delivered Ariana's message. It was time to leave the Headmaster to his memories; to begin the healing he needed to do.

Sirius waited until they were back into their own quarters before he cleared his throat. "You alright?"

Harry shrugged and rubbed his gritty eyes. "Just tired."

"I'm not sure these nightly visitations are a good idea." Sirius murmured as they took the stairs back to the bedrooms.

Harry shrugged again. "If it helps..."

"As long as it helps." Sirius stopped Harry before he turned away to his room. He pulled him into a gentle hug and dropped a soft kiss on the top of his head. "Sleep well, Pronglet."

Harry pulled away a touch reluctantly and padded back into his bedroom. He closed the door softly, wrestled his way out of his dressing gown, and clambered back under the covers hurriedly. He closed his eyes and between one thought about the events that had just transpired and the next he fell asleep.

o-O-o

Sirius glared out of the window at the sight of the maze. It was partially masked by an obfuscation field but he knew it was there.

He sighed wearily.

It wasn't so much the maze that was the object of his ire but rather what it symbolised. The end of the tournament; the third task and the battle Harry might face beyond it.

Might.

Sirius was clinging onto the idea that they still could find Voldemort and end it all before Harry faced the third task. But it was becoming more and more evident with each passing day that it was almost a certainty that all of Sirius's efforts to keep his son safe would be in vain.

Not all his efforts, Sirius told himself sternly. He didn't discount his own role in Harry finding his power; the strength of family and friends; of allies. He had been given a boon from Death, and even if Sirius wanted to argue with how the nightly dreams were havoc on Harry's sleep, he couldn't deny
that they were providing real help.

Minerva was gleeful. The coven of seven women had been established and were helping with the final preparations for the re-blessing ritual. It comforted Sirius to know that regardless of any victory Voldemort would gain in stealing it away, Harry would have Lily's protection back a short time later.

It also comforted Sirius to know that Lily had schooled Harry on sacrifice; on only doing so as a last resort. Harry simply giving his life to save everyone had been a worry that Sirius had tried not to dwell upon and he was glad Lily had faced Harry with it and gotten a guarantee that he would look to the future.

Sirius crossed his arms and continued to glare out at the maze.

He was less thrilled about the night before or rather that morning. He'd placed a charm around Harry's bed to let him know the instant Harry woke. Sirius hadn't been asleep when it had softly chimed. When he'd heard the muted creaks along the joints in the flooring he'd known Harry was up. Finding out that Harry had been visited by Dumbledore's sister of all people…

Not that he begrudged Albus the message of forgiveness. Having heard Albus speak of the events that had led to Ariana's death when they had discussed the stone, it was hard not to be moved by just how much Albus had needed to hear from his sister.

And Sirius could empathise – hadn't he needed the same benediction from James and Lily? Hadn't he needed to hear from their lips that his idea to use Peter, misguided and misjudged as it had been, was forgiven? He was certain the socks had provided Albus with the same soul-deep salvation that Sirius had found in the cemetery at New Year. Maybe it would make a difference to Albus in the battle; maybe it would make a difference to holding Hogwarts or seeing it crumble…

All of which brought Sirius back to the real focus of his rumination and the underlying cause for his ire; Severus Snape.

The problem was that the discussion with Albus had hit uncomfortably close to Snape's situation. Snape had been the one to tell Voldemort about the prophecy. He'd set things in motion just as Albus had given into the temptation to bring Gellert – and Merlin, Albus and Gellert Grindelwald! – into his life. If Ariana who had suffered the ultimate consequence of Albus's action could forgive her brother, did it mean that Snape should also be forgiven for his transgression?

It was different, Sirius told himself stubbornly. Snape had willingly told a wizard, who was known to kill and torture, about a potential unborn nemesis. He had signed the death warrant of that child, whoever that child was, at that moment. He had done so without hesitation or thought of the consequences.

Albus had been young and stupid in love. He had simply fallen for the wrong type and ignored any inner voice cautioning him about the object of his affections. He had never intentionally led Gellert into an inevitable showdown with Aberforth; had never had foresight that a fight where someone would be killed would happen.

It was different.

And it was the same.

Hadn't Snape been seduced by words of flattery and admiration? Hadn't Snape been young and foolish? Perhaps he'd known his information would paint a target on someone but he'd had no way of knowing for certain whether Voldemort would take the prophecy seriously. In the end, was
Snape's culpability any worse than Sirius's own?

And if Sirius had wanted so badly to be forgiven… if Albus had wanted to badly to be forgiven… Snape's want had to be just as large and just as edged with sharp razors that kept the wound bleeding.

Sirius grimaced.

He didn't want to forgive Snape. But he couldn't deny that there were events in motion larger than the small role Snape had played; Fate and Death and a Champion's role decided long before Snape had ever overheard part of a prophecy.

He'd never forgive Snape for how he'd treated Harry in the years before Sirius had taken him into his care. Snape had no excuse for that at all.

It wasn't like it was Sirius's forgiveness that Snape probably needed, Sirius argued internally. Snape wanted Lily's forgiveness more than any other. But that didn't mean that Sirius couldn't make a gesture…

He sighed heavily and lurched from the window, snapping up the waiting brown-paper wrapped package from where he'd placed it hours before. He veritably stormed out of his and Harry's quarters, out of Gryffindor tower and down to the dungeons.

He rapped impatiently on Snape's door.

Snape yanked the door open and glared at him. "Am I to have no peace today?!" He sneered before whirling around in a billow of robes, stalking back into his room.

Sirius raised his eyebrows and went after him. A quick glance at the open bottle of whiskey on the side table and a discarded tea pot with the Headmaster's lemon biscuits told another story. "Albus been by, has he?"

"Aren't you here to do the same?" Snape snatched up the whiskey and poured himself a large measure. "Lecture me about the benefits of forgiving oneself’s for transgressions that get others brutally killed?" He waved the bottle at Sirius wildly. "As if he understands anything."

"He lost his sister." Sirius said mildly.

"And I lost…" Snape cut his yell short, holding the bottle against himself almost like a shield.

"You lost someone you loved." Sirius said evenly. He sighed, sat down on the arm of the Paisley sofa, and gestured at the bottle. "You have another of those?"

Snape looked at him wild-eyed and bewildered, but he conjured up another glass and a moment later, thrust it into Sirius's waiting hand. Snape retreated to an armchair across from Sirius.

They both took a sip, grimaced and settled.

"I hate these fucking dreams." Sirius confessed baldly.

Snape grunted his agreement.

"Harry got maybe three hours actual sleep last night." Sirius continued. "Like that's enough when he's preparing for the fight of his life." He tossed back the rest of the whiskey.

Snape raised his own glass. "He seems to be handling it better than the rest of us."
"If he didn't have strength he would never have survived this far." Sirius held out his glass.

Snape levitated the bottle over to him.

Sirius chucked the package across the space as he took hold of the bottle and poured himself another drink.

Snape set his own drink down and examined the package suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Lily had things from her childhood stored in the attic at Godric's Hollow. Bill and Caro packed them up when they cleared the house." Sirius motioned with his glass. "I duplicated the photos of you and Lily." He glanced toward the bedroom. "You might keep everything of value at your own home, Snape, but even you probably had a treasured photo tucked away."

Snape's hands clutched around the wrapped package almost as tightly as Dumbledore had held the socks the night before.

"Why?" Snape asked, almost as wide-eyed as he had been at the start of their conversation.

"Because we were all young and foolish." Sirius drank back the second whiskey and got to his feet. "I won't forgive you what you did any more than you can forgive me for daring you to face a werewolf." He raised a hand. "And whether you forgive yourself or not is your decision; not mine, not Albus's," he paused, "and not even Lily's." His grey eyes met Snape's dark brooding gaze. "What's true is that Ariana came because we need Albus and what is equally true is that we need you in this fight. Your forgiveness is your own business, Severus, but you should know that just because Lily has never given Harry a pair of socks for you, it doesn't mean you aren't needed."

Sirius set his glass down with a small thud on the side table and made for the door.

"Black."

Sirius stopped and turned around.

Snape raised the package a touch. "Thank you. For the photos."

Sirius gave a sharp nod and left before he was tempted to grab the remainder of the bottle.
20th/21st June 1995

It was Hogwarts, the Great Hall to be exact with the tables gone and only the four banners of the Houses hanging from the enchanted ceiling which showed a night sky, moon high and round, stars twinkling.

Given the dream the night before Harry was unsure if his being at Hogwarts was a good thing or a bad thing. He really didn't want to end up having someone else blubber all over him.

He glanced down at his school uniform. He hadn't worn Hogwarts' robes since Halloween but his Gryffindor tie and crest were prominent. He fingered them nervously.

"They should have been green and silver." A dark silky tone came out of the darkness.

"Salazar Slytherin." Harry said, his mouth suddenly dry as the Sahara.

"He wears the colours of where he is supposed to be." A booming voice had Harry swinging to his left.

A tall red-haired burly man stood under the Gryffindor banner. He wore similar clothing to Slytherin but his tunic was a bright red that clashed badly with his hair. He wore the Gryffindor sword.

"He should have worn my colours and would have, had he demonstrated at the Sorting a modicum of the intelligence he was gifted with." A haughty feminine tone sounded from his right and Harry's head snapped back around. Rowena Ravenclaw was a tall regal figure dressed in the finest blue silk robes, high necked with a stiff bodice flaring into wide skirts. She stood under the Ravenclaw banner; a familiar tiara adorned her brow, holding her caramel hair in place, but Harry knew the original had been burned to sludge by Bertie.

"He could have worn any of our colours." Harry wasn't surprised to find Helga Hufflepuff, a small diminutive blonde under remaining Hufflepuff banter. She wore a simple witch's day robe in a bright sunny yellow. "Should we not focus on the reason why we are here?"

"Wow." Harry muttered. He was standing in the Great Hall talking with the Founders! It was incredible; unbelievable. Hermione was going to be so jealous.

"Time is of the essence." Slytherin agreed silkily.

Ravenclaw sniffed. "Agreed."

"Lad, Hogwarts holds many secrets." Gryffindor said. "She's a castle and not without her defences."
"Never tickle a sleeping dragon." Hufflepuff said clearly.

"The school's motto." Harry frowned.

"Much more than that." Slytherin demurred, fingering his wand.

"Defences we placed into the school to come to her aid if they were ever needed." Gryffindor explained.

"But not without assistance." Ravenclaw said. "The school must act in concert."

"The night of Halloween, four Houses stood with one student." Hufflepuff smiled warmly at Harry, her green eyes shining at him. "They rose in support of one of their own. It renewed Hogwarts' spirit and magic like no other event since we raised the walls."

"Four in unison, teachers all, enchanted Hogwarts to sleep..." Slytherin chimed in.

"Four in unison, students still, will tickle Hogwarts awake." Gryffindor added.

"Four in unison, teachers all, made a sacrifice to magic." Ravenclaw instructed.

"Four in unison, students still, will each be their Heirs." Hufflepuff completed.

"Choose those who would be cunning." Slytherin said, fading from view.

"Choose those who would be brave." Gryffindor's grin was the last of him to fade.

"Choose those with learned wisdom." Ravenclaw curtseyed deep and left.

"Choose those who would stand beside you. Choose from your heart." Hufflepuff smiled brightly. "For always remember, where there is love there is life."

And they were gone.

"Incredible." The Headmaster murmured, stirring his breakfast tea absently. "I had no idea such defences were part of Hogwarts."

A chorus of agreement sounded from the portraits around him. The Heads of Houses who were also present, frowned.

Harry leaned closer to Sirius. The Headmaster had quickly agreed to the early morning meeting realising it was related to Harry's ongoing dreams. He and Sirius had the seats directly in front of the Headmaster's desk, Minerva sat to Harry's left with the Ravenclaw Head on her other side. Professor Sprout had ended up on the other side of Sirius while Snape had eschewed a seat and lurked at the back of the office.

"Presumably the knowledge of the spell was not passed on at some point in Hogwarts' history leading to it fading from memory." Sprout thought out loud.

Harry pointed at the parchment on Dumbledore's desk. He'd written down everything about the spell as soon as he had woken up. "We should probably try and check if it's right."

It wasn't too complicated but it did involve four students standing in the Headmaster's office and invoking the defences together.

Professor Flitwick nodded. "Some research in the school archives would be a good idea."
Dumbledore inclined his head. "We'll leave that with you, Filius."

Snape cleared his throat. "Are you certain the Professors cannot invoke the spell?"

"No, the Founders were clear it had to be students." Harry confirmed firmly, repressing the urge to squirm in his seat.

Flitwick stared at him agog again at the reminder that Harry had spent his dream with the Founders. "Fascinating."

"And idiotic!" Minerva proclaimed sharply. "If there is danger why would they place students at risk in such a way?"

Harry had to agree with her. The plan of evacuation was a good one as far as he was concerned. The idea that some students would have to remain to invoke the defences was bizarre.

"It was a different time." Filius pointed out sagely. "The students would have been considered as adults at a much younger age than now. We baulk at placing young people into war but they had different cultural mores about such things."

Minerva sniffed in disgust but she didn't repudiate Flitwick's argument.

"Are we seriously going to consider asking students to put themselves at risk?" Sprout frowned at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore glanced across at Harry. "What is your feeling on this, Harry?"

Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder in silent support.

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm getting these dream visitations for a reason. The Founders gave me this spell because they think we need it. I think we'd be foolish to disregard it."

"Unfortunately I don't have a counter-argument against that." Flitwick admitted. "As much as I would like to argue to keep our students safe and out of it."

Sprout gave an unhappy hnmpf and glowered at the parchment on the desk.

"That's the crux of it, isn't it?" Minerva's Scottish brogue was heavy, giving away her own unease with involving students.

"So if we accept the children must be involved it brings us to who we choose." Dumbledore said brightly.

Harry started frowning but as he went to protest Sirius spoke up.

"You mean who Harry will choose." Sirius motioned at the parchment. "The Founders gave Harry the task of choosing in his dream."

Dumbledore looked abashed. "Ah, of course. I had forgotten that."

"With respect to Mister Potter," Sprout said hurriedly, "is that sensible? Surely we as the Heads know who would best embody the spirit of our Houses best?"

"But can you guarantee that they won't waver against the Dark Lord?" Sirius countered. "Can you guarantee that they'll stand completely in concert with the others and work to ensure Harry's victory?"
"I would rather choose rather than leave it with Potter," Snape admitted caustically, "but clearly the Founders had a different view."

"I feel the same." Flitwick commented solemnly. "As much as I feel I know my students, I cannot deny that choosing which should take part was not given to me as a task."

Sprout gave a heavy sigh and subsided back into her chair with a shake of her head.

"So, then we're agreed." Dumbledore proclaimed brightly. "The choice falls to Harry."

The proclamation weighed heavily on Harry as he considered the thorny problem of who through the rest of the day. In some ways he would have infinitely preferred for the Heads of Houses to have chosen themselves rather than the choice falling to him.

His mind was still whirling as he ate his dinner quietly and contemplated the problem again.

"So who are you going to ask?" Sirius asked without preamble as Harry pushed his empty plate aside.

Harry grimaced. It was a good question. He picked up his hot chocolate. "I don't know."

"Candidates then?" cajoled Sirius lightly.

"Well," Harry bit his lip, "I was thinking that it would be good to have two wizards and two witches."

"Keep it balanced like the Founders." Sirius nodded again.

"And in the same formation?" Harry mused. "If the Founders sent the defences to sleep, perhaps it needs the same to wake them."

"If I didn't know any better I'd say you'd taken up Arithmancy." Sirius teased.

"Remus suggested it." Harry admitted. "I talked with him at lunchtime on the mirror."

"So that would mean you need a female from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, male from Gryffindor and Slytherin." Sirius mused out loud.

Harry sighed. "And that's where the problem starts because who do I choose without upsetting someone else? Do I choose someone who's sworn fealty or who is allied to me or do I just choose who I think really is Slytherin or Hufflepuff?"

"Yes," Sirius nodded, "that's a tricky one."

"And I don't really want to place anyone who's very young in any kind of danger." Harry said plaintively.

"It is the reason why we all agreed the students were to be evacuated." Sirius agreed.

Harry blew on his hot chocolate disconsolately. "Now, I have to choose four who'll stay and activate the defences."

"Take it House by House." Sirius suggested. "Who most embodies the qualities of Slytherin House?"

"Honestly, it'd be between Theo and Daphne." Harry said after only a moment's consideration. "But
Draco's another possibility. Nobody considers themselves more Slytherin or has more pride about it than Draco."

"So, if you stay with Slytherin having to be male, it's between Theo and Draco." Sirius nodded slowly. "Either would be a good choice. Draco's grown-up a lot since the Summer."

Harry nodded. "And I think Draco would expect if it was a choice between him and Theo, it would be him because of the family connection."

Sirius nodded slowly.

"Gryffindor is difficult." Harry commented. "I mean, there's Ron – well, all the Weasleys, and then Neville."

"You want Ron." Sirius pointed at him. "You just don't want to upset Neville."

Harry heaved a sigh and nodded. "Neville...the alliance are used to him being my second and he has the evacuation plans down. And Ron is...he's bound by his oath of friendship but he's never needed an oath to fight beside me so..."

"So, that leaves Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw." Sirius pointed out.

"I guess Natalie potentially for Ravenclaw." Harry said hesitantly. "She's also the Head Girl so..."

"She stands for all of Hogwarts." Sirius nodded slowly.

"It's Hufflepuff I have the most difficulty with." Harry sighed. "I'm not sure about asking Sue after everything she's been through enough with the second task, but I don't think I can ask Hannah after the way she treated Neville." Hannah might have been loyal to her friend but she'd been unfair to Neville.

"Why don't you discuss it with Sue?" Sirius said. "See what she says. If she doesn't want to do it, you can reconsider but if she says yes...she's your first choice and I think given what you've said about how the Founders laid this all out, that's important."

"Maybe."

Sirius's grey eyes narrowed in speculation and Harry resisted the urge to squirm under his regard. "If you weren't keeping it to those under oath or trying to maintain the same balance in male to female in the same Houses as the Founders, who would actually be your first choice?"

"For Hufflepuff?" Harry sighed, realising that Sirius had gotten to the heart of his discontent. "Cedric." He motioned abruptly as Sirius opened his mouth to speak. "I know there was the whole thing with his father, but he was trying to be loyal to his family and he did come round in the end; he's been great ever since he apologised. He was right there on the night of Halloween and he's been a great Hogwarts Champion. He took that crazy charm in the second task without complaint."

"And Ravenclaw?" asked Sirius mildly.

"Natalie's great but..." Harry sighed. "I know there's no oath but Luna's been a good friend. She's smart and powerful and...she sees out of the box and I think they'll need that."

"Which leaves Slytherin and Gryffindor." Sirius prompted.

"I'd always choose Ron for Gryffindor." Harry said immediately. "He is Gryffindor for me. Same
with Draco for Slytherin."

"So, you'd end up with three boys and a girl." Sirius concluded. He sipped his coffee. He tilted his head. "It's a good balance in some ways. Luna and Ron bring chaos and action; Cedric and Draco bring stability and consideration."

"So…" Harry began uncertainly.

"I think you should choose who you want." Sirius advised.

"Luna's a year below us." Harry murmured worriedly.

Sirius nodded gravely.

"And there's a chance that Cedric would be injured in the maze." Harry continued. He tapped his fingers restlessly against his mug. "You know I really think we need reserves."

"That isn't a bad suggestion." Sirius agreed. "So your reserves would be?"

"Fred and George for Gryffindor." Harry said. "I still need Neville on evacuation." And because he had something else in mind for his godbrother.


Harry nodded. "I think Sue for Hufflepuff. I think she'll be fine being the reserve for Cedric." He sighed. "And Natalie for Ravenclaw. She's a good choice just not, well, Luna."

Sirius nodded. "Sounds like a good group."

"The primary choices need protecting while they wake the defences so maybe the reserves can do that too." Harry rubbed his head. "I'm going to need to speak to the Headmaster." And the people he'd chosen.

Sirius set his cup down. "For what it's worth, I think you're doing the right thing."

Harry let Sirius's praise warm him.

He hoped he was doing the right thing.

He didn't know if he'd chosen the right people, but he knew he'd chosen from his heart.

o-O-o

Barty prostrated himself in front of the small form of his Lord, of his new Father. He ached with tiredness. He had hardly slept on the vampire barge which had brought him back to England. His stomach had churned with the motion of the rough sea; the quarters had been cramped and the cot threadbare.

Travers had snored the entire time. His travelling companion had seemingly been immune to the disgusting conditions of their journey, but then he'd been the same during the entire trip round Europe. Dennis Travers wore his devotion to the Dark Lord like a cloak of protection that made him invulnerable to trivial mundane matters such as what they ate and where they slept. Travers acted like his time abroad drumming up support was some kind of fantastic religious experience.

Barty knew better.
He wasn't stupid.

He knew he was being punished.

He'd killed Winky. He'd destroyed Severus's damn potion only to find out from the Dark Lord that the Potions Master had a regular habit of saving potion samples at different stages of development. He'd wrecked havoc at Hogwarts only for his efforts to be disregarded.

His new Father had been just as unimpressed with his achievements as the old.

Just as disappointed.

Nothing Barty ever did was right.

Nothing Barty did was ever enough.

It was Severus Snape who was the Golden Child.

Severus who, Barty would bet his life upon it, had no loyalty to anyone let alone the man Barty had adopted as his new Father.

Not that he let any of it show on his face or play in his head as he was greeted and welcomed home. He knew better. His face was smoothed into a charming mask of adoration. He had fooled his own flesh and blood for years with the picture of the loving son; he could do it again to the wraith of Rab's Dark Lord.

Rab.

His dead love was the only thing that kept Barty moving forward; kept him on plan. Because Barty had one thing left to do in his life.

Vengeance.

Sirius Black had killed his lover.

Barty owed Black for that.

Black.

The memory of the Black Lord on the top of the Astronomy tower played over in Barty's head. Black had looked good; the Blacks always had. Barty couldn't help the frisson of attraction that had flickered through him at the sight of Black. But it had been the way that Black had been ferociously protective of Potter which had snagged Barty's attention.

Barty sneered internally at the image in his head. Black hadn't made any move to duel him as Barty had been sure he would have; no, Black had been too focused on protecting his precious son. He'd been right to because if Black had wavered for a moment, Barty had planned just the perfect spell to maim the lion a little.

Maim, because the Dark Lord had plans for Potter and Barty might want some recognition for his initiative but he wasn't an idiot; he wouldn't have his life if he'd spoiled the Dark Lord's plans for the boy; the third task would make Potter fight for his life and he'd end it in the hands of the Dark Lord.

Black would die knowing he'd failed to save his treasured child.

The son he loved.
Envy stampeded through Barty. Potter was loved. One father had died to save him; the other had changed the world for him.

Nobody had ever loved Barty like that.

Nobody except Rab.

Barty nodded as the Dark Lord talked and talked about the eve of the solstice; of blood; of power and proof that he was the best.

None of it mattered.

Barty would be back at Hogwarts when the Dark Lord rose again. The Dark Lord had already charged him with leading the invading force into Hogwarts; to cause chaos and destruction while the Dark Lord rose. He'd announced it as though Barty should be grateful.

But that was fine.

Barty had left behind a spy in the enemy's camp; someone they would not suspect. A spy even the Dark Lord was clueless about. A secret Barty had kept; his ace in the hole. His spy would ensure the path would be clear when they invaded. And while Potter was being tortured, Barty would be killing Black slowly and painfully. He'd get his vengeance and then he'd join Rab.

There was no Father to love him.

No lover to succour him.

He had nothing left.

But not for long.

*I'm coming, Rab*, Barty thought viciously, as he kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robe and simpered in simulated awe of the plans and machinations to create a world Barty didn't care about. He'd be with Rab again; he'd be loved again.

Who needed a Father anyway?

o-O-o

21st/22nd June 1995

*It was easy to recognise the hallway of Grimmauld Place. Harry sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. He'd wondered if he'd end up here once he'd sat and reviewed the list of the dead who might show up.*

*He walked down the corridor and up the stairs. The décor was very different; older, austere, and Gothic. Silver snakes acted as door handles and motifs; green Slytherin colours accented everything. Harry shuddered. He could appreciated why Sirius wouldn't have been comfortable in the house and was suddenly glad Sirius had taken the time to completely change the look and feel of the place.*

*His feet took him along a corridor to a familiar door; his own. Only it wasn't. The door was open and revealed a much different bedroom. The colours of Slytherin House dominated; the furniture was dark and heavy.*

*A young man sat on the bed; long dark wavy hair fell about his shoulders. His silver eyes looked up from his book and pinned Harry with a calculating gaze. He slapped the book shut. “Good you're*
here at last."

"Cousin Regulus." Harry gave a small bow.

Regulus returned the bow with a nod of his head. "I'm glad you know who I am."

"Sirius talks about you a lot." Harry said truthfully. Sirius had initially been reticent about his brother, but more and more, Sirius would tell him stories from his childhood, and more often than not they always included Sirius's younger brother.

Regulus pointed at a nearby chair. "Take a seat. This could take some time."

Harry pulled up the chair to the side of the bed. "I'm guessing you're not here to pass on a message to your brother?" Regulus seemed far too focused on Harry for that.

"Kreacher already passed on my last words for Sirius." Regulus confirmed.

"Thank you for that, by the way." Harry said. "Without your note we might have been floundering around for a long time wondering why Voldemort was still alive."

Regulus shrugged elegantly. "I only wish I had decided to act sooner against Riddle."

"Sirius is very proud of you." Harry informed him warmly, and wasn't surprised at how the young man in front of him seemed to puff up in response. Sirius's approval was clearly something Regulus had yearned for and Harry could relate; he always wanted Sirius to be proud of him.

"You and I," Regulus began, "we are Sirius's sons, both of us."

He made a gesture for Harry to wait and Harry subsided, questions brimming on the tip of his tongue.

"Sirius raised me." Regulus stated simply. "We had a nanny, of course, when we were very young, but my first memory is Sirius taking my hand and helping me back to my feet when I was learning to walk." He smiled sadly. "We were inseparable. He taught me to read; to write; to tell the time. He took my mother's anger when I was at fault; stepped between my father and I when he would try to discipline me for being too soft, too weak." He sighed and met Harry's eyes. "Nobody did that for Sirius when we were children."

Harry frowned. He'd known from some of Sirius's stories that Sirius's own childhood held a lot of similarity to his own at the Dursleys; lacking in love with enough neglect to leave lasting scars.

"Grandfather tried, I think. He made Sirius Heir and ensured that he was protected from the worst of it that way but..." Regulus shook his head. "He still let us live in this house with them; with her." He shifted as though to dislodge the thought. "Then Sirius went to Hogwarts."

"He met my Dad." Harry realised where Regulus was going with the story.

"And James Potter did what I never could; he stood up for Sirius; stood by Sirius." Regulus grimaced, the twisting of his features distorting his sharply handsome features briefly. "I was so jealous of your father and I never forgave him for it."

"Because he took your brother away from you." Harry surmised.

"Sirius loved him." Regulus said simply.

"Sirius loved you too." Harry pointed out, a touch defensively.
"Yes, and I realised that too late." Regulus waved away the words. "I'm here because I'm standing up for Sirius now; standing by him now."

Harry frowned. "I don't think I understand."

"Sirius loves you." Regulus explained. "You hold his heart and his life in your hands. He will live for you and die for you." His grey eyes seared into Harry's. "You have the power to hurt him beyond measure."

"I'm not going to hurt him." Harry shot back. He glared at Regulus angrily. "I already promised I'm not going to sacrifice myself unless I absolutely need to and I got him to promise the same!"

"Good." Regulus said. "Just keep in mind that you are his world."

Harry wanted to be affronted but he couldn't berate Regulus for looking out for Sirius. "I love him too." He assured Regulus.

Regulus nodded. "Then do everything you can to live for him." His expression grew grave. "There is a challenge that you must face and your choice will determine both your fates."

Harry shivered reflexively.

"Just..." Regulus sighed. "Death sees all, every moment, every possibility. This is your boon as Death's Champion. Don't forget my words; promise me."

"I promise." Harry said fiercely. Because Regulus was protecting Sirius and Harry would do his best to keep his word because he loved Sirius too.

Regulus smiled. "Remember: where there is love there is life."

Harry sighed as he heard the footsteps on the stairs. He had hoped Padfoot would have slept through Harry leaving his bedroom. He had hoped sneaking down to the living area would go unnoticed. "You have my room charmed, don't you?"

"Yep." Sirius sat down beside Harry on the den sofa and nudged his shoulder with his own. "Want to talk about it?"

Harry glanced over at his father, dimly lit only by the light of the slumbering fire in the hearth. Padfoot looked tired. His heart ached a little. Maybe Regulus had been right to be so protective. Harry knew there was no easy way to break who had been in the dream to his father.

"I met Regulus."

Sirius paled. "Ah."

Harry leaned against Sirius offering silent support. "He loves you. Says you raised him."

Sirius hummed under his breath. "We were all each other had for a long time." He sighed. "I have a lot of regrets about how we ended up but...I don't need a pair of socks."

Harry chuckled. "Don't worry; no socks."

"Well, that's a relief." Sirius said, nudging Harry again.

"He gave me a warning, I guess." Harry said, staring into the fire and remembering the sense of foreboding that had filled him with Regulus's words. "That I have a challenge to face and a choice to
"Didn't we already know that?" asked Sirius sounding genuinely confused.

"Maybe this is something more?" Harry shook his head. "He gave me the warning because he was protecting you."

"Hmmm." Sirius frowned.

"He said no-one stood up for you really until my Dad." Harry continued.

"He's right about that." Sirius agreed. "Well, in hindsight, I think Grandfather tried but…I don't think he knew how bad it was really for me with my parents. I didn't want people to know."

"I get that." Harry said softly.

Sirius winced and nodded. "I wish you didn't, but at least we have each other now."

Harry snuggled in closer and Sirius shifted to place an arm around his shoulders. Harry closed his eyes, safety and warmth stealing over him. I promise, Regulus, Harry thought muzzily as sleep tugged him into darkness, I promise to do my best and live for him.

Neville put his quill down and blew on the ink. He glanced around the classroom and wasn't surprised at the still bent heads and scribbling that was going on around him. There were only a few minutes left of the exam. Neville knew he was done.

Beside him Ron seemed frantically trying to answer one last question; Hermione was frowning as she checked through her answers; Blaise was done, a picture of relaxed contentment as he slouched in his chair, his eyes forward.

"That's it. Quills down." The Professor intoned sternly. "Leave your scrolls to the left of your desk. Tidy away your belongings and leave in an orderly fashion."

The groan of chairs being pushed back, the rustle of papers being tidied into position, and the rush as the entire year began to make their way from the room created a chaos of sound and movement.

Neville hung back in the corridor just outside the room until he was joined by Hermione and Ron. The Slytherin contingent fell in behind them as they started to make their way to the shared Common Room. It was becoming a regular thing after each exam and Neville was only disappointed that Harry didn't get to be part of it as he was excluded from the exams.

They all collapsed into the cushy sofas and smiled when mugs of hot chocolate appeared alongside a jug of pumpkin juice and a plate of biscuits. Neville dived for a mug and a biscuit, happily dunking the chocolate digestive into his drink before hurriedly eating it before it disintegrated.

Hermione had settled for a mug only and seemed to be staring into the chocolate depths despondently.

Neville hurriedly swallowed. "You can't have done that badly."

Hermione looked up as though startled and shook her head as she processed Neville's question. "I wasn't thinking about the exam."

"WHAT?!" Ron exclaimed loudly. "Blimey! Is the world ending?"
Hermione glared at him.

Neville coughed. "You have to admit you're usually pretty focused on debating the answers after an exam."

Hermione gave a huff but she stopped glaring. "I think we all have other things to worry about."

Neville did a quick check of the room. The only people there were in the alliance and a quick look to Blaise had the door locked and a privacy bubble established.

"We're clear." Blaise said, falling into the seat next to Neville.

Draco sniffed as though disinterested and took a sip of pumpkin juice.

"So what's on your mind?" asked Neville pointedly to Hermione, knowing it had to be big if she was worrying about it.

"I'm worried about Harry." Hermione said.

"We're all worried about Harry." Ron commented in agreement.

"Has anyone seen him today?" asked Neville.

"I saw him just before lunch." Lavender offered. "I cut across the courtyard and he was there with Professor Flitwick practicing duelling. He looked, well, fierce."

Parvati nodded, tucking a long strand of dark hair behind her ear. "I was with her. He was winning against the Professor."

"All he seems to do is practice fighting or go over plans for Saturday!" Hermione fretted, biting her lip. "He never seems to get the opportunity just to rest like we're doing right now! It's so unfair."

"I can't see Sirius accepting him working every hour of the day." Ron argued. "He's manic about looking after him."

"I know." Hermione sighed deeply. "I just...there's so much going on and I haven't seen very much of him. I'm spending all my spare time with the coven and working on the blessing..."

"Yeah, I know." Ron commented uncomfortably. "Dumbledore's had those of us chosen for that Hogwarts' spell Harry dreamed about together going over everything."

"There's another evacuation drill planned for Friday." Theo commented.

Neville nodded. "We all have our parts to play." Only his part wasn't entirely what everyone else thought...

_Neville was surprised to find a sleek black wolf sitting on the floor by his bed as he entered the boys' dorm. He was less surprised when a moment later it transformed into Harry._

"Wow. I can't believe you've got that form down so fast!" Neville exclaimed.

"Being the lion helped get the rest of it in place in my head." Harry said with a shrug. "You have a minute?"

"Sure," Neville said, "do you want me to get Hermione and the others or..." He wasn't sure where Hermione was – she'd disappeared after dinner with Professor McGonagall. Come to think of it, he
hadn't seen Ron since dinner.

"Just us actually, Nev." Harry sat down on Neville's bed and Neville took a seat beside him. Harry waved at the dorm door and it closed soundly.

Neville raised a privacy bubble recognising that Harry would want one. "What do you need?"

Harry's lips twisted. "I've been having these dreams from the dead. Last night it was the Founders. Ron's in with Cedric, Luna and Draco being asked to take the Gryffindor role in a spell that might help protect Hogwarts."

"Alright." Neville felt a flicker of hurt that Harry had clearly chosen Ron but he pushed it aside. He knew as Harry's second he had an important job ensuring the evacuation of Hogwarts took place after the tournament task was done.

"I chose Ron because he is Gryffindor to me in lots of ways." Harry explained. "He's brave and he's reckless; he's courageous but he sticks his foot in his mouth a lot of times too."

Neville gave a chuckle. He couldn't deny that.

"You're equally as brave and courageous, and I was going to choose you but…I can't."

"It's fine, Harry." Neville hurried to reassure his godbrother. "I know it wasn't an easy choice. Ron's your best mate and obviously you'd pick him…"

"I picked him because I can't pick you." Harry interrupted sharply.

Neville blinked bemused.

Harry sighed and met Neville's eyes fully. "You're the other possibility for the prophecy."

Neville swallowed hard. "I don't think that's the way it works, Harry."

"We both had the potential to be his downfall." Harry argued. "He's focused on me right now but he's going to remember you if I'm dead at his feet. He will come for you, Nev."

"You're so much more powerful than me!" Neville said, jumping up and pacing. "If you can't defeat him, how am I supposed to do it?"

"Because you'll stand up to him." Harry argued, rising to stand in front of Nev. "Because you'll defy him. Because you won't let him simply win and take the world he wants without a fight. Because I know you'll do these things not because of any prophecy but because you're you."

Neville couldn't speak; emotion clawed at his throat and stopped his breath short in his chest. Harry's green eyes were fierce and bright.

"Nobody can really know if I am the one prophesised." Harry said in a calmer tone. "Yes, there's a lot of weight to the argument it's me but…it's not a certainty. It could be argued that he Marked you the night his supporters destroyed your family in his name. You have such an affinity for plants that nothing like anything anyone else has; power he has not. I might be Death's Champion, I might have power but I might not be the One Trewhaly foresaw with the power to vanquish Voldemort. The prophecy might still be about the two of us not just me no matter what wizards think now – prophecies are just possibilities." He sighed. "If I die, I need you to believe it's you and do what I couldn't; because I need you…I need you to believe you're his Death if I'm not."
There was a long moment of silence but Neville didn't shift his gaze away from Harry. He slowly nodded.

"I'm his Death if you're not." Neville repeated.

Harry nodded, relief flowing over him and easing the lines on his face, his posture. "Thanks, Nev."

"I'm still expecting you to kill the bastard." Neville blurted out. "Just so we're clear."

Harry laughed. "I'm going to try." He grimaced and ran a hand through his hair. "It's…I hate thinking I have to kill someone."

"He's not human anymore. You're just destroying an evil remnant." Neville argued, sympathetic to Harry's discomfort and anguish. "Think of it that way."

Harry nodded again. "I should get back to my quarters. Sirius wanted me to have an early night since my sleep keeps getting interrupted."

"Sounds like a plan." Neville agreed, silently thinking Sirius was right to insist on the bedtime; Harry looked tired.

Harry made to leave, had gotten to the door when Neville called out to him and made Harry pause, one hand on the door handle, looking back over his shoulder.

Neville met his eyes solidly. "I'll be his Death if you fall. I swear it as your godbrother, Harry."

"I'm glad you're my godbrother, Neville." Harry said sincerely. "And I'm proud to be yours."

"…and I think we should tell Harry that."

"Hmmm?" Neville came back with startled awareness and realised he'd missed some of the discussion. He blushed at Hermione's chiding look.

"I was saying we should go round tomorrow and drag him out to do something fun in the evening." Hermione said, a hint of reproach in her voice.

"It'd be good to spend time with him." Neville agreed.

"How about flying?" offered Draco. "He hasn't had a chance to use his broom with the Quidditch pitch out of operation."

"That's brilliant!" Ron said enthusiastically.

Neville shook his head a touch. The year before if anyone had ever told him Ron would ever say that about a plan proposed by Malfoy…

Blaise exchanged an amused look with Neville and leaned in. "I should have taken bets on that happening. I'd have made a fortune."

Neville grinned and tuned back into the conversation; the girls were arguing for staying in and playing board games but the boys were mostly for flying.

Hermione gave an annoyed huff, arms cross over her chest. "What do you think, Neville?"

"I think we should let Harry decide what he wants to do." Neville said firmly.
It was only a small thing but he thought Harry would appreciate the gesture of choosing something for himself. The prophecy…Harry had been burdened enough with choices outside of his control. But if Harry didn't make it – and Harry would make it, Neville was sure of it – but if he didn't make it, Neville would keep his promise.

*Don't worry, godbrother,* Neville silently thought, *I'm his Death if you're not.*

o-O-o

22 nd /23 rd June 1995

Harry was only slightly surprised to find himself in some kind of forest clearing.

*It looked like a natural grove but the circle had different trees arrayed him which felt purposeful. Harry recognised some of them from his primary school nature education. Seven different types, Harry realised, as he counted. He knew they had specific meanings so he guessed the circle had been planted and wasn't natural.*

*He wandered over to the first tree and place a hand on its bark.*

"It's a birch tree."

*Harry whirled around at the sound of the voice and stared at the sight of his paternal grandfather; Charlus Potter.*

"New beginnings and cleansing; a change." Another voice drew Harry's attention and he recognised Arcturus Black immediately.

"Grandfathers." Harry made a small bow.

Charlus and Arcturus returned the bow, but Charlus held out his arms and Harry moved forward to hug the man, feeling a little awkward.

"I haven't held you since you were a babe." His grandfather commented gruffly.

Arcturus waited a moment before he coughed. "Let the boy go, Charlus. We have much to get through and a short space of time to do it."

Charlus shot Arcturus a glare but he did ease back from Harry, settling his hands on Harry's shoulders momentarily to gaze at him. "You've grown into a wonderful young man, Harry. I'm very proud of you."

"We both are." Arcturus said gruffly.

Harry smiled shyly, pleased beyond words at the approval.

"And now onto business before Archie hexes me." Charlus said briskly.

Arcturus shot him another glare.

"Unfortunately your Grandfather Evans cannot join us here but we needed to bring you here because this is the beginning." Charlus said. "The family magic links us in a way unlike any other."

"It's the spirit and magic of everyone who has vowed to use it in defence of their family." Harry realised out loud, knowing without being told that he could in a blink have the grove filled with every individual involved.
"Exactly." Arcturus said with an approving nod. "Every time you call forth your magic, you call us forth."

Harry frowned. "Morgana Le Fey?"

"She gave her life in the first spell." Charlus explained. "She was the King's sister, married to Lot. Her twisted step-son, Mordred, believed the throne to be his if the King died; that he was the Heir. He killed Arthur and brought the downfall of Camelot. She stood with Merlin in this grove and sacrificed her life to rid the world of his evil."

"Your mother's sacrifice was powered by the family magic." Arcturus confirmed. "She is part of it now just as your father."

"The stories aren't wrong." Charlus said. "Camelot was gone and the world in disarray. Wizards and witches were being hunted because of the damage the final battle had wrought; dark wizards and witches plotted to take control. Here in this grove, Merlin called forth the most powerful wizards and witches of his time and they gave of their lives and magic to protect the world and cleanse it of evil."

"Birch," Arcturus pointed to the tree Harry had touched, "for new beginnings and cleansing; change."

Charlus gestured at the next tree. "Alder for creation."

"Gorse for healing." Arcturus offered, shifting to the next tree.

"Hazel for justice." Charlus said.

Arcturus pointed at a tree Harry recognised. "Rowan for protection."

"Oak for knowledge." Charlus smiled.

"And Blackthorn for spirit." Arcturus finished. "The families of those who were part of the spell were gifted with the ability to call the magic for protection and justice. They formed the first ruling Council."

"Sirius told me about the origins of the Wizengamot." Harry murmured.

"Politics." Arcturus said succinctly. "That came later."

"Merlin anchored the spell." Charlus shifted them back on topic. "He added an…addendum."

"None could call the entirety of the family magic." Arcturus said bluntly. "So much power would be dangerous to any one individual. Those in the first Council could only call the magic gifted by their own bloodline."

"But then…" Harry frowned, confused. Why did it feel like he could call it all?

"There was a hidden clause to the addendum." Arcturus said. "Only if one united the families in a common cause against evil would the family magic respond to the call of an individual."

"You carry Black and Potter blood." Charlus said. "You always had the power to call both family magics – as the incident when you were unborn showed. But when Voldemort was banished the first time, the families were united in relief."

"Even those who followed him were relieved once the initial fear of his defeat and the practical
"consequences faded." Arcturus explained.

"While it lasted but a moment, magic took note." Charlus added. "But what sealed it was the first Wizengamot you attended."

The memory of the Heirs sinking to one knee and swearing fealty came to Harry's mind and he saw both older men nodding their heads.

"Yes." Arcturus said with satisfaction. "The power of a people united against evil."

Charlus looked at Harry soberly. "The family magic can defeat Voldemort and you alone have the power to summon it."

"But not without price." Harry countered.

"A sacrifice of life and magic." Charlus agreed.

"So a last resort." Harry said firmly, remembering his promise to his mother; to Sirius.

"A choice." Arcturus corrected. "One we trust you to make."

Harry frowned again. Regulus had mentioned a choice to him; did this have something to with that?

"You'll know when you need to make it, Harry. Just as your father and mother knew when it was their time." Charlus smiled sadly. "Know we stand beside you every step of the way."

Arcturus nodded. "Where there is love there is life."

And a rush of wind blew through the grove and knocked the breath from him…Harry closed his eyes…

His eyes snapped open and he took in a deep breath feeling as though he needed oxygen; needed air; as though he'd been on the edge of suffocating.

Hedwig hooted an alarm.

He wasn't surprised when a moment later the door burst open and Sirius hurried inside.

"Harry?"

"I'm fine." Harry cast a silent and wandless lumos which immediately gave the room a soft glow of light. He struggled into a sitting position just in time for Sirius to sit on the edge of the bed and cup his face with one hand.

"You're shaking." Sirius stated in a clipped tone. "These damned dreams…"

Harry let Sirius tug him into a gentle hold. He wanted the comfort of his father too much to resist. Sirius's hand stroked through his hair, down his back.

Safety.

He was safe.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Sirius softly.

Harry shook his head but he knew he was going to have to talk about it eventually. "In the morning."
"Alright. I'll leave you to get some more sleep."

Sirius pulled away but Harry caught hold of the edge of his pyjama top.

"Can Padfoot stay?" Harry asked.

Sirius nodded and immediately transformed. The big black Grim pushed his head into Harry's questing palm. Harry petted him for a few minutes before patting the end of the bed. The Grim jumped up, circled and settled down.

Harry felt the weight of the Grim across his legs. He extinguished the light and huddled back down, snuggling into his pillow. He was asleep almost instantly and missed the way the Grim and the owl exchanged a long look; the way the Grim stayed awake guarding his charge through the dark and endless night.

O-o-o

Remus stepped out on the top of Gryffindor tower and was immediately thankful that he'd chosen to wear a heavy cloak. He remembered all too well that the top of tower was on the most exposed Northern position. Even in the month that heralded the beginning of the Summer, the tower could be bitingly cold.

The temperature didn't seem to unsettle the lion sat lying along the top of the parapet as still as a Sphinx.

The wolf in Remus stilled a little in the presence of such a dangerous predator. He pushed back the reaction. "Harry?"

The lion looked over and seemed to duck its head a touch. The big cat got to its feet and jumped down from the wall. It loped over and between one step and another, the lion blurred and Harry stood in its wake.

Remus motioned over to a bench on the wall and they both made their way to sit down.

"Padfoot sent you, didn't he?" queried Harry with a short exasperated sigh.

"He said you were upset and weren't talking to him about it." Remus didn't even try to deny it. "He's worried about you."

Harry was quiet for a long while and Remus was about to concede that the youngest Marauder wasn't going to speak when Harry leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped tightly.

"I met my grandfather and Sirius's." Harry said without preamble. "We stood in the grove where the family magic was created and they confirmed I have the power to call it to defeat Voldemort."

Remus wondered what about that had Harry so upset. "It's good we have confirmation?" He offered.

"They also confirmed it's a sacrifice." Harry snapped out.

Remus's eyes widened.

Harry shot to his feet and started pacing. "I mean, I meet my mum who tells me not to sacrifice myself unless it's the very last thing I do and now they tell me I can get rid of Voldemort, I just need to sacrifice..."

He cut himself off so sharply, halting his movement so suddenly, that Remus was surprised he hadn't
"The thing is…Regulus warned me there would be a choice and not to hurt Sirius; to live for him."
Harry said. "And…my grandfather said this would be a choice, and…” he swallowed hard, and covered his face.

Remus sprang up from the bench and swept the distraught teen into his arms. He hugged Harry to him. "It's going to be alright, Harry."

"I'm scared, Moony." Harry whispered.

"I know." Remus said, dropping a light kiss into his hair. "But it's going to be alright."

Harry shivered and Remus wrapped him up closer.

"I'm…I'm not scared to die, Remus." Harry said eventually. "I know there are people waiting for me who love me and who I love, but I'm not ready yet."

"We're not ready for you to die yet either." Remus confirmed. Just the thought of losing Harry made him sick to his stomach and he knew Sirius wouldn't last a moment without his son alive and well and whole.

"If there's a sacrifice to be made…” Harry began.

"It doesn't have to be you." Remus stressed. "I think that's what everyone beyond is telling you. You can choose that it isn't you."

Harry pushed back out of Remus's grip enough to look him in the eyes. "If not me, Moony, then… who?"

The question haunted Remus as he made his way back to the Black Estate in the late afternoon. He wandered into the steward's office and sat down in the leather chair with a sigh. He rubbed a hand over his scarred face and railed silently against the fact that Harry, his sweet cub, should have to make such a choice.

"He's fourteen." Remus whispered.

The mirror on the desk vibrated.

Remus picked it up and answered it with trepidation. Sirius's worried face swam into view.

"Padfoot." Remus said softly.

"He's gone up to bed for a nap." Sirius began before his face crumpled. "Moony…”

"He's struggling with a realisation, Padfoot." Remus wouldn't lie to his friend. "But he's working through it." He paused. "He just doesn't want to hurt you."

Sirius nodded briskly, but his silver eyes were bright with tears. "I don't know how to help him."

"You love him and you'll be there for him just like you have been all along." Remus instructed gently. "He's going to get through this."

Sirius sniffed and sighed heavily. "I still think plan A has its merits."

"I agree with you." Remus acknowledged lightly. Wrapping Harry in cotton wool and hiding away
with him sounded great to him. "Anything on getting close to Voldemort?"

Sirius shook his head. "Snape confirmed there's a couple of Dementors hanging around where he is so…no. However, I did get an interesting letter just after Harry went to bed."

"Oh?"

Sirius held up a piece of parchment to the mirror. "From Wormtail."

Remus's brow lowered. "What does the rat want now?"

"The same covering his arse stuff." Sirius said. "He says he's been thinking about the night we brought Harry home and the promise we made. Rambles on a bit about how he only chose Voldemort to keep us all safe and how it's never too late for us to make the right choice."

"Bollocks to that." Remus said strongly. His grip tightened on the mirror. "He chose the wrong side, not us, and you want to know why I know that?"

"I'm going to guess you're going to tell me." Sirius commented dryly.

"Because Harry is going to kick his Master's scaly arse." Remus thundered out. "Because Harry cares. That's what's tearing him apart right now. Because he cares and he wants to make the best, the right choices when he's faced with them." He gestured, sending the image in the mirror out of focus. "I'm going to make a choice! I'm going to strangle the rat with my bare hands!"

Sirius gestured at him through the mirror. "That's not the choice Harry would want us to make."

It wasn't. Remus knew that. He could quite distinctly remember the way Harry the year before had argued against the two Marauders killing the third.

"No, it's not." Remus agreed. "He's a better man than us."

"I won't argue with that." Sirius said. He put the parchment down, his image wavering a touch. "It's strange, isn't it? How much our choices define us? I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I hadn't argued with the Hat for Gryffindor. Would I have gone to Slytherin? Would I have joined the Light against Voldemort?"

"You would have fought against him, Padfoot." Remus said firmly. "I don't believe there is a Sirius Black in all of creation that would have joined Voldemort."

Sirius gave a huff. "Well, right now, I'm going to choose to check on my son."

"'Bye, Pads." Remus said softly.

"'Bye, Moony."

Sirius's face disappeared leaving the mirror blank. Remus set it down.

Choices. That's what it all came down to at the end of the day. Wormtail had made his and it had led to the death of two of the best people Remus had ever known; two people he loved.

He was damned if it would cost him anybody else.

o-O-o

23 rd/24 th June 1995
Harry blinked at the sight of the Gryffindor boys’ dorm.

It was empty but the five beds were arrayed in their usual position. Harry’s was set out just the way he’d arranged it during the weekend he’d stayed over a month before. His school robes were set out on the chair; the bedside table held pictures – his friends and his family. He picked up one of himself and Sirius; the same picture he’d chosen for their portrait at Christmas.

"It's a good picture."

Harry spun around.

James Potter grinned at him.

"Dad!" Harry rushed forward, unsurprised when his father caught him and hugged him as tightly as his mother had done.

It was safety and love and home.

It felt the same and different to his hugs with Sirius.

His Dad swept a hand through Harry’s hair, prompting Harry to inch backwards. For a long moment the two Potter men simply gazed at each other.

"You've grown up so much." His Dad commented, a touch of sadness in his voice.

Harry didn’t know what to say.

"Your Mum and I..." His Dad sighed. "We had so many plans."

"Mum said." Harry murmured, remembering the list of life events his mother had listed.

"It's...it's not like we don't get to watch you but it's not the same." His Dad’s hand rested heavily on his shoulder. "I wanted to watch you play Quidditch and shout at the ref from the sidelines. I wanted to be there when you asked me about the girl you liked – or the boy. I wanted to teach you the fine art of pranking. I wanted to hand you my cloak and tell you the tale of the Peverells."

"I wish..." Harry stopped unable to finish the sentence.

His Dad smiled knowingly. "I didn't lie the night in the cemetery, Harry. If I can't be there, I'm glad it's Pads. You're his son as much as mine. He's your Dad. Neither of you ever have to apologise for that."

Harry nodded. "We both miss you though." He thought Sirius actually missed James more than he did. Harry missed the idea of James rather than James himself whereas Sirius missed his friend, the brother of his heart.

"Guess that might be why we ended up here." His Dad glanced around nostalgia evident in his bright eyes. "Some very good memories were made in this dorm."

"For me too." Harry said, remembering the past three years. He might have needed his rooms with Sirius but he did miss the dorm – especially when the guys weren’t drinking and coming up with insane theories.

"You've been upset since you talked to your Grandpas." His Dad sat down on the bed and patted the space beside him.
Harry sat down. "I think I'm going to have to choose between Sirius and me; I think I'm going to have to choose a sacrifice."

His Dad met his eyes squarely, serious and attentive. "And if you do have a choice?"

"He'd want me to choose him." Harry said succinctly. He knew that. Sirius would want him to live and Regulus had pointed out just how much it would hurt Sirius for Harry to die; Harry wasn't sure Sirius would live much beyond Harry's own death.

"Of course he would choose himself to sacrifice rather than you." His Dad agreed. "It's an easy choice when it's between you and your kid. I didn't even have to think about it." He sighed. "And I'm guessing that's why everyone in the afterlife is forcing you to think about it now."

"Because in the moment I wouldn't think, I'd just do it." Harry mused out loud.

"Wouldn't you? You or Sirius?" His Dad said bluntly. "Who'd you choose to take the hit?"

Himself.

He'd throw himself between Sirius and Death and...and that was the point of all the warnings; all of the urging to think about his choices.

"I don't want Sirius to die." Harry finally put into words the underlying issue he had with all the warnings.

"But you know he wouldn't want you to sacrifice your life for his." His Dad countered. "No parent wants to outlive their children, Harry. It's against the natural order of things. More, it would devastate him."

"I feel like everyone is trying to argue me into letting Sirius die!" Harry sprang up and stormed over to the window. The view was the usual one; the maze he would have to face nowhere in sight.

His Dad wandered over to him. "You know the thing I wanted to teach you most?"

Harry frowned and shook his head.

"Never to give up." His Dad said simply. He placed his hands on Harry's shoulders. "You already have the instinct in spades. I think it's genetic."

Harry felt a warmth spread through him at his Dad's words. He stared at their reflection in the window; his father behind him, hands on his shoulders, eyes meeting his in the window pane.

"I fell in love with your mother on the first train to Hogwarts. I didn't even know I had; I just knew she was it for me." His Dad smiled fondly. "I spent the next four years trying my hardest to gain her attention any way I could." His expression turned sheepish. "I may not always have gone about that the right way."

Harry smiled sympathetically. "Girls are hard."

His Dad smiled. "My fourth year was bad. It was the year most everybody started dating. All I wanted was one weekend with Lily. Either I was going to with her or I was going alone."

He caught Harry's gaze meaningfully. "Two options. A choice; one or the other." He grimaced. "Then, my Dad sat me down and gave me a Talk."

Harry's lips twitched. "I saw Sirius's memory of you telling the Marauders about the Talk."
His Dad's eyes brightened with mirth. "It was the most excruciating conversation of my life." His expressions sobered a touch. "But it made me realise that I'd narrowed my focus too much. Lily and I...it didn't have to be either I had her as my girlfriend or I didn't. Once I stopped trying so hard at forcing a relationship with her, we actually became friends." He smiled widely. "And once we became friends, things developed from there."

"A third option." Harry said.

His Dad nodded. "You've already identified it for the prophecy. It doesn't have to be you or Voldemort, although that train is definitely in motion, there is the faintest possibility remaining that it could still be Neville who defeats him. So maybe it doesn't have to be you or Sirius." He held Harry's gaze. "Maybe what everyone is trying to tell you is that you don't have to sacrifice either of you."

Harry breathed out slowly, tension eking away from him and leaving him sleepy. A third way. He could find a third option. Something that didn't mean he'd lose Sirius or Sirius would lose him.

"Come on." His Dad ruffled his hair. "You should get to sleep."

Harry let himself be led over to his dorm bed and climbed in. His Dad tucked him in and Harry felt his heart squeeze in pain and loss for all the times his Dad should have tucked him in before and hadn't.

His Dad dropped a kiss on his forehead. "Sleep, Pronglet. There'll be no more dreams for now, I promise."

And Harry slept.

It was the sun shining brightly on his face that woke him. He gave a groan and stretched. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and glared at the slit in the curtain that had allowed the sunlight to flood in. But for all his early awakening, Harry felt refreshed for the first time in a week. He gave a yawn and slid out of the bed.

He walked over to the window and pulled the curtains back. The view was different from the one in his dream since the maze stood where the Quidditch pitch should have been. Harry once again mourned the loss of the pitch.

It was finally the eve of the solstice.

The day of the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament.

The day of his final battle with Voldemort.

Harry breathed in deeply, trying to still the nerves fluttering in his belly.

There were plans.

He was prepared.

And he'd find a way for both him and Sirius to survive the coming storm.

o-O-o

It wasn't a surprise that Sirius was dreaming.

It wasn't a surprise that he was dreaming of that night; reliving his worst nightmare; his worst reality…
Wormy hadn't been where he was supposed to be and Sirius's gut said that the bluff had gone wrong; horribly, horribly wrong.

He pushed the motorbike faster, higher, through the clouds. He swore under his breath. He had set up the anti-apparation ward at the cottage himself. James had wanted another layer of protection and Lily had agreed on the proviso that they had an emergency portkey. Merlin, he hoped – well, he hoped they didn't need it but his gut was telling him they did and he hoped they'd used it.

He yanked the bike to the left and down as he caught sight of the lights of Godric's Hollow. His heart pounded in his chest fiercely.

He landed in front of the house and knew immediately.

The door was open.

"No." Sirius said, his mouth dry with fear. "No, no, no."

He dismounted and raced inside.

The sight of James undid him.

"Prongs." Sirius lurched against the door jamb before pushing off and propelling himself to the bottom of the stairs where James's body lay. He touched a trembling hand to James's neck, trying to feel for a pulse, but the truth of it was already blatantly obvious in the wide lifeless open eyes.

"James." Sirius sobbed the name, his hand cupping his friend's face tenderly. "James. Please, please."

A baby cried.

Sirius's head snapped around and up.

Another cry.

"Harry!" Sirius was on his feet and racing up the stairs.

He skidded into the nursery and was almost undone again when he spotted Lily's body in front of the crib. A pile of robes, expensive and chic, lay in front of her. He ignored it all to focus on the black-haired baby, the beautiful alive black-haired baby in the crib. He was so focused on the baby, he didn't see the mountain of a man beside the crib.

"Black." Hagrid stepped forward.

"Hagrid?" Sirius frowned, momentarily stunned by the sight of the Hogwarts' groundsman.

And Harry wailed.

"Harry." Sirius whispered hoarsely. One moment he was at the door, the next he was lifting the baby into his arms.

Harry clutched at him, sobbing his heart out; each wrenching cry tearing into Sirius's heart.

"It's alright, Pronglet." Sirius murmured, his voice choked with emotion. "It's alright. Uncle Pads has got you now. It's alright."

He hugged the child to him. Harry had been his world since his birth. The tiny bundle of life; so
precious; so loved. All that was left of James and Lily.

He manoeuvred out of the nursery and onto the landing. He was faintly aware that Hagrid was following him as they descended the stairs and went out into the night.

Sirius hushed Harry and frowned at the blood streaked across Harry's forehead. He juggled the baby to reach for his wand, cleaning the blood from Harry's face and gently applying a healing charm.

"There, Pronglet. Isn't that better?" He frowned when the lightning bolt scar remained, but Harry's distress was easing; the red fading out of his cheeks as his sobs lessened into unhappy whimpers.

"Black." Hagrid cleared his throat noisily. "I've orders from Dumbledore to take the lad to Hogwarts."

"Hmmm?" Sirius tried to focus on the half-giant. Had he spoken?

Hagrid gestured at Harry. "Dumbledore wants the lad safe. He said he's going to his aunt's, Lily's sister. Just needs to get checked out by Poppy first."

Sirius tried to make sense of the words. Dumbledore wanted Harry at Petunia's? He shook his head a touch. "He should stay with me." He didn't want to let Harry out of his sight. He had no idea how the baby had survived or where Voldemort had gone after killing James and Lily, and he didn't care. He just wanted to protect his godson; do the job he'd promised his friends he'd do in their stead if anything ever...

"You're his guardian then?" Hagrid said, visibly confused. "'Cos Dumbledore seemed pretty sure he should go to his aunt's."

Sirius rubbed Harry's back soothingly. "No, I'm...Frank and Alice..." he swallowed hard against the rush of emotion as he realised anew James and Lily were dead and weren't ever going to raise Harry, "Frank and Alice are his guardians, Hagrid."

"Well, they're still in 'iding." Hagrid said scratching his beard. "Maybes Dumbledore thinks this aunt's the best place until they can take him?"

That was probably true. Nobody would look for Harry in the muggle world. And hadn't Lily said there were blood wards around her sister's place? Placed illegally but they existed and would protect Harry well until Frank and Alice were located.

Sirius sighed and dropped a kiss on Harry's head. He really didn't want to let go of the little man.

"You could come with us as far as Hogwarts." Hagrid offered gruffly. "See the lad's alright."

Sirius shook his head. The Fidelius was down. Wormtail had given up the secret. Sirius didn't know if the rat's betrayal was voluntary or not but he was beginning to think he'd been very stupid about who the traitor in the Order was. He had a rat to hunt and bring to justice.

He dropped another kiss on Harry's head. His godson would be safe with Hagrid and if he was going to find Wormtail he needed to get going while the trail was fresh. He shifted so he was looking directly into Harry's eyes.

"Uncle Padfoot has to go now, Pronglet, but I will see you as soon as I'm done. You'll go with Hagrid and be a good boy." Sirius stroked a finger down Harry's plump cheek. The baby gurgled up at him.
It was a wrench to let him go but Sirius shuffled so he could place the baby in Hagrid's hands.

"Careful." Sirius instructed. "Get Poppy to check out that scar on his forehead, Hagrid."

"I will." Hagrid promised.

They both looked back at the house.

Sirius swiped at his face, at another rush of hot tears.

"Sorry about James and Lily." Hagrid offered roughly. "They were good people."

"The very best." Sirius agreed.

Hagrid gave a nod and started to amble off down the lane. Sirius frowned.

"Where are you going?" Sirius called out to him.

Hagrid stopped and turned back. "Only 'ad a one-way portkey. Need to find the local to use the floo."

Sirius scowled. "Harry's injured, Hagrid." He hurried over and pressed his keys into Hagrid's free hand. "Take my motorbike."

Hagrid brightened. "That's right kind of you." A moment later and he was mounted, the bike soaring up into the night sky.

Sirius shivered in the cold night air. He took a few steps over to the garden and blew up a single stone; the anchor for the apparition ward. It was time to hunt a rat. He turned sharply and left with a crack.

He landed in the cemetery.

Sirius wobbled but corrected himself straight away. He was dreaming, he reminded himself. He was dreaming and that was why he'd landed in the cemetery in front of his friends' graves rather than finding himself on the trail of the rat.

He crouched down and ran his fingers over the words he'd added to the stone: 'where there is love there is life'.

"And you are both so loved." Sirius whispered. "Harry's incredible and I'll not apologise for keeping him here with me. I know you're so very proud of him because I am."

"As you rightly should be, my Grim."

Sirius shivered and stood. A dark hooded figure stood in front of him. "Death, I presume?"

The hooded figure bowed their head. "I miss you by my side."

"Then you should have thought twice about making an innocent boy your Champion." Sirius snapped out. There was a sense of knowing, of familiarity. A hint of timeless eons spent beside a cloaked figure; of protecting innocent souls as they went beyond; of standing against evil.

"You stood for him then; you stand for him now." Death said simply.

"I will always stand beside him." Sirius said firmly. "He's the son of my soul."
"He is my Champion." Death said.

"He's fourteen and facing a fight for his life; for the lives of his friends and his loved ones." Sirius argued. "He should be playing Quidditch and having fun, not fighting evil."

"He is special, the last of the Peverells; the Master of the Hallows." Death countered. "He was always destined to meet the one who tries to flee my grasp. His power would have attracted Riddle like honey attracts a bee."

"I'd rather you said like a moth to a flame." Sirius muttered.

"Perhaps you are not wrong." Death replied. "I sent you to him for a reason."

Sirius studied the figure for a long moment. "You've loaded the dice."

"I gave my Champion everything he needed; everything he needs." Death said. "He is, after all, my Champion, my Grim."

Sirius came awake with a gasp.

He shuddered violently with cold. He huddled underneath his covers for a long moment, struggling to hold onto the remnants of his dream. He'd been reliving the awful night in 'eighty-one and then… something to do with the cemetery? It was all hazy. It didn't matter.

The sun was up, Sirius realised, as he took in the edge of light around the curtains. He hadn't been alerted by Harry's bedroom charm so his son must have slept the night through for the first time in a week.

James, thought Sirius with satisfaction. Harry had said it would be James who would be his last visitor before the battle and clearly James had done the right thing and ensured his son – their son – had gotten a good night's sleep.

Sirius stretched and stayed still, content to doze. He wasn't unduly alarmed when the charm sounded to tell him Harry was up. It was early but it was still more sleep than Harry had achieved any other night.

Sirius slipped out of bed. It was going to be a long day and it would be good to get a head start. He smiled grimly. There would a battle to fight, a war to win, and Sirius was going to ensure Harry survived to see the next sunrise.

o-O-o

Thomas could see the sunrise from the bed. Peter had forgotten to draw the curtains the night before and the wash of light had woken him from his slumber. His temporary body ached badly and Thomas knew that the end of the day would see him in a new vessel one way or another.

The way he wanted, Thomas reminded himself. He would gain a new body the way he wanted. Severus had done an outstanding job on the potion. It had been completed and was in stasis. It looked exactly as it should. Thomas could admit to himself that he was inwardly pleased he hadn't had to rely on Peter to brew it. Made badly the potion would still restore him but perhaps not to his former glory. Severus's involvement ensured that his new body would be just as good as his old.

Better.
Thomas stretched and winced anew at the pain seeping into every joint; the itchiness of his skin which was blistering with lesions and sores. He had only a few wisps of hair remaining on his head. The possession had damaged the frail human body of the child badly.

Only a few more hours, he promised himself; only a few more hours and he would be able to walk upon the ground; he'd be able to stand tall; cast his magic without fear of using so much he'd lose control of his body.

Freedom.

He would be able to bathe and feed himself rather than relying on one of his servants. He would be able to walk and breathe air with his own nose; his own mouth. He would be able to speak with his own voice.

The longing was intense and almost angered him; he wanted it so much he could almost taste it.

Twilight.

That's all he had to wait. The ritual was best done at the finish of the day; under the cover of dark. It was a mere few hours. He had waited over a decade; he could wait those few hours. He would have his body back and then it would be time to reclaim his life.

He would kill the one who had condemned him to his years in the wilderness: Harry James Potter.

His face screwed up into a scowl.

The boy was proving to be a worthy nemesis. Potter had survived the Triwizard Tournament; he had survived his run-ins with Bartemius. Potter seemingly had risen to the challenge.

All the better for when he lay dead, Thomas thought viciously. When he crushed the boy beneath his feet; when he executed him, no-one would be able to deny Thomas's power. He would rule, and the wizarding and muggle worlds would burn; they'd pay for every slight and every hurt Thomas had suffered.

Only a few more hours.

Only a few more hours and he would rise again and destroy all those who would stand against him.

Chapter End Notes

TBC - Harry faces the third task of the tournament and his fate...

Thank you all for the continued messages of support - they are all very appreciated.
24th June 1995

Harry stared at his image in the bathroom mirror. He couldn't believe that it had only been a short few months before when he'd stood there ahead of the first task. In just under an hour he'd face the third task of the tournament and after…

He was dressed all in dragon-hide. He brushed a hand over the tight black jacket he wore over a thin long-sleeved t-shirt. They, along with the durable black trousers that encased his legs, added another layer of protection. Hard-wearing durable boots in a thicker dragon-hide completed the outfit. He wore the crests of the Houses of Potter and Black stamped in silver and gold thread, one on each upper arm. His gold-framed glasses had been charmed to repel water, stay clear and stay on; his hair was…well, it was its usual messy style but it was him. There was a thigh holster for his holly wand on his right leg; a knife was strapped to his left.

He felt bereft with only his wand and a knife but the rules stated the only magical item he was allowed was his wand. His invisibility cloak was laid out on his bed; he would call for it as soon as he could along with the Resurrection stone and the Elder wand. The Headmaster had demurred over the use of the wand, stating his preference for his own chosen wand.

Harry was ready.

Maybe.

Apart from the huge butterflies that seemed to have set up camp in his stomach.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he reopened his eyes, his father's reflection was in the mirror.

Sirius looked every inch the hit wizard he had been in the past war. His own clothing was similar to Harry's; dragon-hide long-sleeved t-shirt, trousers and boot. Where Harry wore a short jacket though, Sirius had opted for a long duster-style version which looked almost like robes. His dark hair was tied back with a strip of leather.

Harry held his father's silver gaze in the mirror as Sirius walked up behind him and placed his hands on Harry's shoulders. Harry was reminded of how James Potter had stood behind him in the same position in his dream the night before. He and Padfoot hadn't spoken about the dream. Sirius had asked him if it was James who'd been there and Harry had nodded; that had been it. But seeing the similarity between them; seeing how much they both loved him…

"I can see why you miss Dad so much." Harry blurted out.

Sirius smiled at him sadly. "He was the best."

"He loves you a lot." Harry said with certainty.
"I love him too." Sirius confirmed with a smile. He squeezed Harry's shoulders gently. "You ready, Pronglet?"

Sirius's confidence in him shone from his eyes and made Harry's heart almost want to burst with feeling.

"I'm ready." He said, and was surprised to realise he meant it.

"We're going to be with you as soon as we can." Sirius promised in a low voice. "You just keep yourself alive until then."

"I know." Harry said firmly. He turned and hugged Sirius hard. "You'll keep yourself safe."

Sirius dropped a kiss on the top of his head. "I promise."

Harry stayed where he was for a long moment; drinking up Sirius's love and affection for him as though it was a secret power – and it was, Harry mused. His love for Sirius was how he'd worked out what he had that Voldemort didn't; people who loved him; people he loved.

He eased back from the solid embrace.

They went down the stairs side by side only to both slow at the sight of a pacing Snape at the bottom.

The rest of their family, and most of the War Council, remained seated in the living area watching concerned.

Snape's head snapped up as he realised they were there and Harry felt a small nudge from Sirius to complete the journey.

"He's summoned me." Snape said as soon as they were down.

"We knew that was going to be likely." Sirius said cautiously.

Harry could understand his concern.

Snape's sallow face was pale and pinched; he looked fearful.

"He said he needs a Secret Keeper." Snape snapped out.

And Harry knew what Snape meant immediately. "He's going to put the cemetery under Fidelius."

Snape breathed in deeply and nodded, finally stilling. "I believe so."

Harry nodded briskly.

"Once I'm the Secret Keeper no doubt I'll be kept under lock and key, or right beside him so…" Snape began.

Sirius smiled, a dangerous humourless smile. "So we'll have to use one of the contingency plans for you to tell us, Snape."

Harry saw how Snape's shoulders went back and his chin went up as he remembered the contingency plans.

Snape gave a sharp nod.
"You'd best be going." Sirius said firmly. "Stay as safe as you can."

Snape nodded and whirled around to leave. He paused by the portrait door but didn't turn around. "Good luck, Potter."

"Professor." Harry acknowledged quietly.

And Snape was gone.

"Right." Harry said briskly. "We should get going or we're going to be late."

There was a flurry of hugs; of kisses.

Dora's eyes were bright as she wished him well with the task; Andy didn't speak, her eyes glistening with tears; Ted wasn't much better. The Grangers were stoic but their faces, white and lined with tension gave away their worry. Narcissa's eyes were clear but her hand shook as she cupped his cheek. Lucius gave only a nod.

Draco clasped his hand warmly. "I expect you to win, Cousin. Don't make a liar out of me."

Harry nodded.

There was Hermione left. She hugged him tightly. "Remember..." she whispered in his ear.

"Friendship, bravery and love." He whispered back at her.

They held hands as they walked out through the castle to the newly revealed maze.

Harry took comfort in Sirius walking to his left; his hand on his shoulder. Hermione was on his right; her hand held his tightly. The maze was surrounded by the usual Quidditch stands; with the seating so far up to watch the match in usual times, the audience had a good view of the maze below them, although just like with the lake the action below would be projected above.

The stands were packed. The rest of the school were crowded into the lower rows; ticket holders into the upper. Moody had been super vigilant over the tickets and Harry knew that within the crowd there were a number of undercover aurors and Unspeakables, ready and waiting for war. The Alliance were present; banners raised in support of Harry.

Bright balls of light suspended in the sky illuminated the whole maze as the sky was darkening from blue to grey.

Harry breathed in deeply. There was a heavy scent of vegetation; bright green leaves exuding the brash odour that filled the air. The hedges were high; high enough to dissuade the contestants from climbing over them. The vines and branches were thick; too thick to cut through, and Harry recognised that the type of hedge would be impervious to flame. The only way to win was to traverse the maze.

The platform at the entry of the maze came into view.

The Minister had taken his position. Dumbledore sat beside him along with Karkaroff's replacement, Professor von Humberg and Madame Maxime. Viktor was already on the platform; he'd chosen a similar outfit to Harry's. Fleur stood beside him in practical black robes that couldn't quite hide her beautiful form. Cedric had chosen open black robes edged with Hufflepuff yellow; the crest of Hogwarts proudly displayed on his chest.
Ludo Bagman grinned and put his thumbs up as he saw Harry approaching. "Ah, excellent. We can make a start."

Hermione sweetly kissed him, squeezed his hand and slipped away. He watched as Ron and Neville stepped out from the shadows of the stand to escort her.

Sirius grasped his shoulders. "I want you to remember that whatever happens tonight; you are my son and I love you, Pronglet."

"I love you too, Padfoot." Harry hugged him unashamedly. He stepped back at Bagman's unsubtle throat-clearing knowing he couldn't delay things any further. He nodded at Sirius just once.

Sirius nodded back and stepped away.

Harry took his place on the platform.

Bagman bounded up to the magical microphone someone had erected on the platform. "Ladies, Gentlemen, boys and girls!" He announced, his voice echoing around the stands. "Welcome to the last task of the Triwizard Tournament!"

The crowd roared.

Harry took a deep breath.

"The final task our Champions have to take on is simple!" Bagman declared cheerfully. "They need to enter the maze and find their own personal Goblet." He held up his hand and an illusion shot into the air revolving around the centre of the pitch above the maze. It clearly showed four gold cups each emblazoned with a different name. "Once the winner has found their Goblet, they and the other Champions will be transported to this platform and the maze will disintegrate! The winner will be presented with their prize..." he paused dramatically, "a thousand galleons and the real Champion's Cup!"

The air was filled with cheers, whistles and clapping.

Bagman hushed the crowd again. "Now as much as it pains me to say it, we do have a few rules to go through..."

The crowd groaned collectively.

Bagman laughed heartily.

Harry exchanged a bemused look with the rest of the Champions.

"Yes, yes, rules!" Bagman said loudly over the noise and surprisingly everyone settled again. "Firstly, there is a net of magic above the hedges which will not allow any travel over them or anything to enter. There will be three challenges within the maze for each of our Champions. They will face a trial by element, a trial of wit and a trial by creature. Different for each of them! Four elements! Four creatures! Four puzzles! They will face their fears! They will have to show bravery and cunning; wit and hard-work! Only when have they overcome these challenges will they find their cup!"

"Let's hope it's not another bloody dragon." Cedric muttered under his breath.

"I would be on the look-out for snakes." Harry murmured back.
"And now," Bagman paused dramatically, "now we are ready to BEGIN!"

Another loud cheer went up from the crowd.

Harry scanned the boxes and sought out first Sirius and then Hermione. They'd made it into the Champion's box and were watching him. He nodded at them and was grateful when Sirius gave a nod back, Hermione a small wave.

Bagman pointed his wand at the hedge. Four archways appeared. There was a stone pedestal beside each one with a statue; four statues for the four different Hogwarts' houses.

"As all the Champions received equal marks in the second task," Bagman announced, "the order is the same as after the first task: Lord Potter will choose his path first. After five minutes have elapsed, he will be followed by Mister Krum, then our own Mister Diggory, and finally the lovely Miss Delacour will take the last path left."

He turned away from the microphone to them and smiled widely. "Any questions before we start?"

"What if we get into trouble?" Cedric asked. "Are we able to request help?"

Bagman's cheery expression faded. "I'm afraid not, well, not until someone has won. As soon as you're on the platform, at that point the game's over and you're no longer competing; the Goblet won't consider it a break in your contract."

"Mon Dieu!" Fleur sighed heavily.

"You can say that again." Cedric said tersely.

Even Viktor looked grim.

Harry felt a twinge of guilt. He knew that the original parameters of the tournament probably held some kind of fail-safe arrangement – a way for the contestants to request help if the maze became too dangerous for them. Voldemort had removed the safety net and they would all have to prove their mettle.

"We were all chosen by the Goblet for a reason." Harry said, glancing round at his fellow Champions. "We survived the other two tasks and Voldemort's sabotage, we can survive this."

The other three straightened a touch with his words.

Viktor gave him a silent salute, Fleur nodded sharply and Cedric met his gaze determinedly before turning back to Bagman.

"We're ready."

Bagman attempted another smile but it fell away at the sight of four resolute expressions and he turned back to the microphone. "Lord Potter, you may begin!"

Harry turned and faced the hedge. He made his way over to the paths. The first was a badger and he walked past it leaving it for Cedric. The next with the eagle with its wings spread wide almost appealed but he knew the path wasn't for him regardless of his animagus form being a raven. That left him with the one he was paused in front of – the snake – or the lion which represented Gryffindor.

He smiled.
He'd made his choice once before sitting on a stool and the Sorting hat on his head.

Harry walked confidently to the last path; to the lion. He'd chosen Gryffindor once before and he'd choose it again. He stepped inside the maze.

o-O-o

Severus shivered as he stepped inside the ballroom of the old Riddle manor and repressed the urge to go for his wand.

The vampire leaders huddled in the far corner barely glanced in his direction as Severus slipped into the room. In the other corner, the dark shroud of a Dementor lurked.

Carrow, Travers and Crouch were already prostrated in front of the Dark Lord; they were wearing formal Death Eater robes, white masks affixed to their faces.

Pettigrew had also changed into the robes but his mask hung from his hands. He stood hovering next to the chair which held the decaying vessel of the Dark Lord. Nagini slinked in and out of the chair legs, hissing lowly.

"Come here, Severus." The Dark Lord beckoned him.

Severus walked over to him with a confidence he didn't feel. He shielded his mind tightly. He could afford no slips if he was to assist Potter. "My Lord." He prostrated himself and kissed the edge of the black robe. He kept his head down and his eyes lowered.

"Rise, Severus, and take your place at my side." The Dark Lord said.

Severus rose gracefully. He took the position indicated by the Dark Lord and waited.

The Dark Lord bade the others to their feet and they stood in line in front of him like the pawns they were.

Crouch's dark eyes glittered with hatred as they briefly met Severus's, but the wizard looked away before Severus could make any kind of reply.

"I have gathered you here today to finish what I started so many years before." The Dark Lord proclaimed arrogantly. "Tonight will see Lord Voldemort rise from the ashes and destroy those who would betray him; those who stand against him. I will use the boy whose parents once defeated me with arcane magic," he gestured at Pettigrew, "and my loyal servant, and I will reclaim a body of my own. The rest of you will go with my army to Hogwarts and lays waste to Dumbledore's foolish followers. We will join you when the Potter boy lies dead."

The others made murmurs of agreement.

Severus said nothing.

"Dear Severus, how is it at Hogwarts?" The Dark Lord said silkily.

"They run around like headless chickens, my Lord, preparing for the final task of the tournament." Severus said simply.

"How did Dumbledore and Black react to the news of my summoning you?" The Dark Lord asked.

Severus tilted his head, keeping his eyes lowered. "The Headmaster was concerned; Black was not."
"They do not treasure you as I." The Dark Lord said smoothly. "I do not wish to be disturbed at the cemetery; we will need to place it under the Fidelius, and you shall be our Secret Keeper." He continued.

"Your wish is my honour, my Lord." Severus said dutifully.

He was thankful when the Dark Lord turned back to the others.

"Bartemius," the Dark Lord ordered, "you will lead my forces at Hogwarts. You will take the castle from Dumbledore and see his life's work destroyed in front of his eyes."

"Yes, Father." Crouch bowed his head.

"Go." The Dark Lord decreed sternly. "It is almost time."

Crouch bowed his head again and gestured for Travers and Carrow to follow him. The vampires and Dementor slunk out with them.

Severus felt the temperature of the room rise without the Dementor's presence but he didn't relax.

"Kneel before me, Severus." The Dark Lord raised his wand as Severus took his place. He heard the words of the Fidelius charm and felt the rush of the Dark Lord's magic as it swept through him; he breathed in sharply as his Dark Mark rippled against his skin. He felt the secret launch into his mind and thinned his shield to allow it past his mental barriers.

Severus waited until his mental barriers were back in place before raising his head and giving a sharp nod to the Dark Lord. "It is done, my Lord."

"Yes." The Dark Lord smiled grotesquely. "The secret I have asked you to keep, Severus?"

"The cemetery at Little Hangleton can be found behind the church." Severus repeated quickly.

Pettigrew's confused face cleared into bright understanding. His eyes met Severus's briefly and Severus swore he could see the 'rather you than me' the rat had clearly thought as though it was written on Pettigrew's forehead.

"Excellent." The Dark Lord said brightly. "You will remain at my side, Severus, where you belong. Peter will gather what we need for the ritual and we will begin to make our way there immediately. I do not doubt that it will not take Potter long before he is within our grasp."

Severus frowned and fingered the mirror within his pocket. He had retrieved it on his way from the school. If there was an opportunity, any opportunity to give Black the secret, Severus would take it.

O-O-O

Barty glanced around the London flat with barely hidden disdain. He checked his pocket-watch; the vanishing cabinet would resume its form shortly and as soon as word came from his besotted spy… they would go through.

Half of the vampires had been sent ahead to the Forbidden Forest, to lie in wait there for the signal to attack. He'd sent Carrow with them, mainly because he couldn't stand the dirty foul-smelling cretin. He'd kept Travers with him and given him the personal mission to down Moody. Barty had a better target for himself; Sirius Black.

Once he'd killed the wizard, he didn't really care what happened. His plan had him taking out Black
in a suicidal magic explosion that would wreck Hogwarts and destroy the Dark Lord's plan to use it as the base of his power, no matter what happened to Barty.

It seemed fitting to destroy everything on his way to Rab.

o-O-o

Sirius stared hard at the four viewing mirrors suspended over the maze. Harry had chosen Gryffindor and entered the maze a few moments before. So far the path had been free of any kind of challenge and Harry was proceeding slowly and with care.

"Breathe, Padfoot."

Remus soothing whisper did remind Sirius to take in a breath. He let it out slowly. He glanced around the box.

Hermione stood beside her parents, their arms around each other providing comfort. Andy and Ted stood close by, shielding them from the view of others. The Weasleys, with the exception of Bill who was already in position elsewhere, were also gathered closely together; a strong family unit despite the pallor of their skin underneath their freckles and shock of red hair. Neither Dora nor Narcissa were present. They had gone ahead to prepare Privet Drive with some of the coven. Neville and Augusta stood beside the Weasleys while Lucius and Draco stood apart from everyone else with Theo Nott and Blaise Zabini close to them; all their faces were pinched with tension.

Sirius glanced outside of their area towards the other sections; to where Fleur's little sister had her face hidden in her mother's embrace as her father glared at the maze. The Krum family huddled together in stoic support for their most famous son. Beyond them, Amos Diggory and his wife held each other's hands tightly; the Abbotts and a nervous Susan Bones hovered close by to provide them with support.

As though he'd felt his regard, Amos turned his head in Sirius's direction and gave a slow nod as their gazes met. Their politics didn't matter in that moment; only the truth that they were fathers and their sons were in danger.

Sirius gave a shaky nod back and returned his own eyes to the mirror where Harry continued through the maze.

Neville shifted beside Sirius. "Krum's entering the maze."

Krum had chosen Slytherin. It made sense as the Bulgarians had been sat with the Slytherins during their time in Hogwarts.

Sirius still didn't take his eyes off the mirror with his son. Harry was turning a corner and…

*Dear Merlin.*

"Is that a…" Remus managed to croak out.

Sirius swallowed hard against the lump of horror that was lodged in his own throat. "A Hydra." He nodded grimly. "Yes, it is."

o-O-o

Harry stared at the corridor of hedges in disbelief.
The ground was a swampy mess; sulphuric fumes rising up from bubbling ponds of mud. The hard mossy type grass covered rocky ground before descending into a large dip which was filled with the muddy form of the Hydra.

Harry immediately slapped a Bubblehead on. Hydras were poisonous creatures; their breath was toxic, their sweat, their blood.

Harry grimaced; no wonder he was facing one in the maze. He was grateful that the Alliance Research group had thoroughly studied any and all creatures that they’d thought might be used. Hydra had been a possibility.

The seven heads were sleeping.

It meant nothing, Harry knew. As soon as Harry attempted to sneak past they would be awake. He considered his options.

The tale of Hercules had the Hydra dying when Hercules had cut off one head with a sword gifted to him by Athena and his nephew burned the stump with fire. One of the heads was immortal and had to be buried alive when it was cut off.

Hermione had theorised that the sword and fire were both magical; that the Sword of Gryffindor would probably be just as good as the basilisk venom would probably do the same job as the fire in cauterizing the stumps before another set of heads could grow.

Harry reached down and retrieved his knife. He held it in one hand, his wand in the other. He took one step forward…

The heads rose in unison, swivelling to stare at him with wide amber eyes; the vertical reptilian iris narrowed in a thin line.

"Who daress approach uss?" The middle head spoke in a low voice, feminine almost.

Harry cocked his head as he realised he understood the creature. A Hydra was serpentine. Maybe he could talk with it parseltongue? He considered his options. He could try speaking with the creature first before killing it…

"Honoured Creature," Harry began, "I am a pawn in a game. I must get past you to proceed."

The Hydra's many eyes blinked. "Speaker."

"Yes." Harry confirmed.

The Hydra lurched upwards, staring at Harry as though perplexed. "We have been set to guard this place, Speaker."

Harry's heart sank.

"But I am bound to obey a Speaker." All seven faces frowned in unison. "It is a dilemma."

The furthest right head rose higher than the rest. "Guard."

His furthest left head rose to match the height of the other. "Obey."

The right's neighbour lowered its head. "Guard."

The left copied the right and hissed, "Obey."
Harry watched as the right head next to the centre pinned him with a forceful glare. "Guard."

"Obey." The left snapped out quickly.

The centre head rose and the others dropped down. "Guard or obey." It hissed. "We are divided." Its head tilted thoughtfully. "We will guard and if you defeat us, we will obey."

And almost immediately one of the heads struck out towards him.

Harry leaped backwards and silently engorged the knife to the length of a sword, swinging it in the direction of the head. It sliced it cleanly from the neck. Harry didn't wait; he followed up immediately.

"Ignis flagellum!" His wand instantly sprouted a whip of fire and Harry wielded it with unerring accuracy at the bubbling, bleeding neck in front of him.

He barely avoided the strike of the next head, rolling on the ground to avoid it. He hefted his makeshift sword again; and whirling around followed it with the whip. The wound was cauterized before the second head hit the ground.

The third right head gave an angry hiss and reared back.

Harry panted for breath, adrenaline surging through him as he waited for the Hydra to make its next move.

The Hydra blinked and struck; two heads diving for Harry in unison.

He scrambled backwards until his back hit the hedge, he only just remembered to ensure his Bubblehead didn't make contact…

The heads were close…

So close…

Harry leaped to the side and used the whip of fire to divide the Hydra's heads from its body.

He eased to the side, almost at the edge of the pit, and the Hydra immediately countered his path. Three heads remained; one on either side of the Hydra's immortal middle head.

"I will spare you." Harry offered.

The two heads either side of the immortal one looked to each other and both struck out at him from both directions.

Harry went left; his sword moving into action almost without thought. He defended his right side with the whip, the crack of it forcing the striking Hydra head closest to it back a moment. It was just enough time for Harry to finish killing the left; the whip following the sword quickly.

He dived over the right head and slammed the sword through it; the whip once again used to prevent the head from regenerating.

The Hydra slithered back into the pit.

Harry tried to catch his breath. He was panting a touch with the exertion. "I will spare you." He offered again.
The Hydra glared at him from its place in the pit. "Why would I wanted to be sspared? You have left me all alone without my companionss..."

Harry sighed, went to rub his nose and only just stopped himself from knocking the Bubblehead he wore. "Neither you nor I are in this maze because of choice." He gestured at the hedges. "I don't want to kill you."

The Hydra considered his words for a long moment.

Harry felt his heart pounding in his chest.

The Hydra lowered its head. "You have defeated uss. We will obey, Sspeaker." It turned around, its back to Harry.

Harry moved quickly, sidling around the pit on the very narrow ledge that was available. He made sure to keep the Hydra in sight at all times. He didn't trust it. Once he was past, he still walked backwards until he turned the corner into an empty corridor. He quickly warded the turn with a creature trap that would suspend the Hydra in a ball of magic should it try and breech it.

With that done, he finally cancelled the Bubblehead and bent double, panting trying to catch his breath.

He took stock.

He was a touch winded and shaky from the surge of adrenaline but he was relatively unscathed. He had some bruises from rolling around the ground; a couple of scrapes over his hands but he was uninjured. He also had a knife which now had the poison of a Hydra magically imbued into its metal. He'd have to be careful how he handled the blade, but he knew it was an advantage.

He frowned, wondering whether Crouch had guessed which path Harry would take and had therefore set out tasks which were a challenge but played to Harry's strengths. After all, none of the other Champions could have spoken with the Hydra.

He shrugged the thought away. Whether Crouch was making it easier for him or not, he knew the dark wizard wouldn't mind Harry being maimed before being served up to Voldemort. He still had to focus; there were two trials remaining before he could find his cup.

o-O-o

The cemetery looked ominous in the gathering gloom as the daylight seeped away from the already grey and overcast sky.

Severus shivered. He cast a glance around. The ground was not well-maintained; grass had been allowed to grow to a substantial height around most of the stones. The main pathways were muddy trails that had few paving stones and were pitted with holes.

He set down the vast cauldron he had been levitating and waited for Pettigrew, the Dark Lord and the snake to catch him up.

"Where exactly are we to place this, my Lord?" Severus asked deferentially.

The Dark Lord gestured imperiously with a chubby infant hand. "Over there between the graves marked Riddle and Oberman."

Severus made no comment. He simply lifted the cauldron again and set it down as directed.
"Perfect." The Dark Lord praised. "We should take our positions. Potter will not arrive before it is fully dark." He conjured up a chair and Peter placed him on it reverentially.

Severus transfigured a nearby tree-stump into a bench. Peter sat on one end before Severus could say anything. Severus sniffed, gathered his robes and sat down stiffly at the other end. He resisted the urge to reach into his pocket and finger the mirror.

He had to be patient. If he acted too soon…

Nagini hissed and the Dark Lord responded. She slithered away into the grass.

"She is taking the opportunity to hunt." The Dark Lord informed almost proudly. "And while she goes to hunt her prey, we will await the arrival of ours."

Severus shivered again and stared out blindly into the cemetery. His only hope was that whatever plan Black and Potter had concocted would actually work because right at that moment, he couldn't see how any of them would survive.

o-O-o

Sybill Trelawney stumbled across the room to the cupboard by her desk. She always kept an emergency supply in that particular cupboard for medicinal purposes post lessons.

She flung her brightly coloured scarf back around her neck when it flopped forward and reached into the dark space. Her hand closed around the bottle and she gave a small shout of triumph.

She pulled out the bottle and regarded it with a frown.

It wasn't the expected bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream but rather a bottle of Croft. Minerva had gifted it to her at Christmas.

Sybill sniffed. She really wasn't fond of the brand but it was all she had until she could get to The Three Broomsticks and replenish her supply.

"Dry!" Sybill muttered under her breath. "She knows I prefer a medium!" She staggered over to a bean-bag and sat down with a thump.

She unearthed her wand from her pocket and clumsily summoned a glass. It bounced on the rug in front of her. She picked it up and carefully poured a large measure of sherry. She set the bottle carefully down and took a large gulp.

Immediately her shoulders dropped with relief as the alcohol burned its way down her throat and warmed her.

Sybill took another sip. What a day it had been. The school was overridden with people because of the infernal tournament. Her Inner Eye had been restless all day. She knew, knew, something terrible was going to happen.

Probably to the Potter boy because didn't it always happen to the Potter boy and…her vision suddenly darkened…

"The one to vanquish the Dark Lord will face his fate. Born as the seventh month died; born to those who had thrice defied his enemy; born with the power the Dark Lord knows not for he is the Raven, Death's Champion. And at the end, he will face Death and choose. For one in the Light must die so the rest may live."
Sybill blinked and burped loudly. "Oh my!"

Her head was fuzzy. Had she said something? She shook herself and took another sip.

Terrible day, she thought darkly. Too many people trampling around the school. Too much excitement. No. She was pleased to be safely inside her tower and away from the tournament.

Behind her a small unicorn ornament glowed brightly and shifted, returning to its original shape as a vanishing cabinet.

-o-O-o-

"Fleur's finally in." Neville commented, fidgeting with his wand. His eyes were affixed to the four massive viewing mirrors suspended over the maze.

The Beauxbatons Champion was cautiously taking her first footsteps down the Ravenclaw path in one mirror. Cedric was also progressing cautiously down the Hufflepuff path. Their caution wasn't surprising as they had already witnessed Harry's first challenge before either of them had entered, Cedric beginning his path a few moments into Harry's fight with the Hydra.

"What is Krum doing?" asked Ted frowning.

Neville's gaze shifted from Harry's mirror to Krum's. Viktor was traversing the Slytherin path and had found his first challenge just as Cedric entered the maze. It was a deep pit as long and as wide as the maze corridor bar a small landing on the opposite end; the pit had been filled with magical vipers. A long ladder provided a way down into the pit but there was no way out.

"He's going to use the ladder to fashion a bridge over the pit." Hermione answered briskly. "It's quite clever."

It was too, Neville thought grimly, watching as the Bulgarian levitated the ladder into position and enlarged it to ensure it bridged the entire distance.

"Why doesn't he just vanish the snakes?" asked Andromeda.

"Magically resistant." Remus replied tersely. "He tried as soon as he got to the pit but it failed. They've been modified by someone."

Neville took a breath. Crouch was a sadistic bastard. He felt the weight of his grandmother's hand on his shoulder and leaned into her touch.

"Merlin, is that an Acromantula nest?!" Ron blurted out, pointing at Cedric's mirror.

Along from them, Diggory's mother gave a horrified cry and turned her face into her husband's shoulder.

Neville shuddered at the sight of the multiple webs spanning the corridor in front of Cedric, one vast spider sitting threateningly in the middle of the corridor surrounded by its webs.

"I can't watch." Ron said, turning away, visibly shaking.

Neville nodded. All the boys in the dorm knew of Ron's phobia. Cedric was dealing with the problem with a liberal use of the Incendio spell; the web catching aflame but it was slow to turn to ash. The Acromantula though was beginning to move to deal with the prey that had sneaked into its nest…Neville was suddenly glad Harry had decided to have deputies for the Hogwarts spell. If
Cedric didn't survive the maze, at least Sue could step in.

"Harry's found the second challenge!" Hermione announced breathlessly. "Oh! It's the wit challenge!"

Neville's gaze immediately sought out Harry's mirror. It looked like Harry had come to a dead end but there was a raised pedestal in the centre of the space and clearly it had instructions written upon the stone because Harry was reading it intently…

o-O-o

"To discover the way ahead, solve this puzzle."

Harry traced the words and grimaced. Was it wrong that he wished it was another Hydra? He really hated riddles. At least Hermione and Luna had semi-prepared him with endless rounds of brain-twisters in the previous month. He heaved a heavy sigh.

"In front of you are three walls; one to your left, one to your right and straight ahead." Harry recited out loud. "One is crossbred with a poisonous plant called Venoma whose invisible thorns are imbued with a deadly toxin causing disintegration." He looked warily at all three hedges. "Nice."

He couldn't tell from the distant visual comparison whether there were any differences between the hedges.

"The second hedge is crossbred with a woody vine. Get too close and it will tie you up." Harry rubbed his head. So he was dealing with two killer plants and the third…

"The third hedge will allow you to pass through to the path if you can take the pain that it will shock you with at the attempt."

Harry frowned. All three hedges were dangerous then even if one of them allowed him to progress. He bit his lip and continued reading.

"If you don't want to be left behind, the right path may be painful but ahead of you is death." Harry concluded. "Choose carefully."

He tapped the stone thoughtfully.

"Left behind…the left is the one with the vines. If you get caught, you're left behind all tied-up."

Harry murmured to himself. His head swivelled to the front. "Ahead is death so that must be the one with the poison while the right is the one that's painful so that's the one that will let me progress."

Or that's what Crouch wanted him to think.

Harry pointed his wand at the ground. "Serpensortia!" The snake appeared instantly. Harry sent it off to the left path. Another few seconds later and two more snakes were dispatched on test runs.

The first snake slithered up to the left and disappeared into the hedge. There was no violent reaction from the hedge at all.

Harry carefully watched as the second snake almost reached the path ahead – suddenly vines shot out and wrapped around the snake, yanking it from the grass and into the hedge. He wiped his brow and turned to the last snake. It approached the right path but as soon as it touched the hedge it gave a hiss, rising up in startled anger before disintegrating into a puddle of blood.
Well.

Clearly Crouch wasn't too bothered if Harry died. Or maybe what was written wasn't actually the answer to choosing the way forward. Or maybe it was all too clever - the left path was the one where the snake had disappeared so clearly it was the right path. So if the left path was actually the right path, ahead was actually behind Harry and that way was death – it was the Hydra. Which meant that the right path was painful because it was imbued with the Venoma.

Harry stepped off to the left. He regarded the hedge with trepidation, took a deep breath and walked forward.

It was almost like stepping through the barrier at King's Cross combined with being electrocuted.

Pins and needles attacked his skin ferociously, viciously, making him feel like he was being burned and just when it became unbearable, when the wordless cry screamed in his breast to be heard…he was through.

He stumbled and landed heavily on the ground. He instantly rolled and got to his feet, wand and knife in his hands.

The dark maze corridor stretched out in front of him.

Harry glanced at the corpse of the snake to the side. It had been unable to take the pain. He checked his hands, trembling a touch as he did so. He was untouched but everything stung. The scrapes from his encounter with the Hydra were aching badly; it was though someone had dumped ammonia into the wounds. He felt sore and achy; drained. His legs felt shaky.

It was what Crouch wanted; what Voldemort wanted; Harry knew that. They wanted him delivered weak and vulnerable.

His jaw tightened as his lips firmed into a tight thin line. It had hurt but physically he wasn't bleeding to death or maimed.

Harry refused to let them beat him.

He dredged deep and with a will of iron, continued down the corridor.

O-O-o

Peter glanced across the bench at the stern visage of his former childhood nemesis and swallowed the urge to laugh hysterically at the realisation he sat waiting with Snape. He doubted the Dark Lord would appreciate him getting a fit of the giggles. Instead, he yanked his gaze away from Snape and looked nervously around the cemetery.

It was cold despite the time of year. Dank and dismal with a drizzle of rain falling almost invisibly through the sky. Not that they were getting wet. The Dark Lord had immediately ordered Snape to cast a spell to divert the rain around their area and they remained dry, if not warm.

The Dark Lord was quiet. He waited on his perch like a stone statue. It was clear that the vessel he inhabited was at its end. The skin looked dead; grey and papery; lesions oozing with pus. Its hair was gone bar one or two strands that clung onto its scalp. The eyes were sunken; the lips non-existent. The body stank of decay.

Peter reviewed the ritual again in his head.
Snape would be responsible for performing the ritual. It was something of a relief for Peter because the idea of being responsible for ensuring the safe resurrection of the Dark Lord terrified him. It had been a happy day when the Dark Lord had declared Snape would brew the potion. If it had been left in his hands…well, he wasn't bad with potions – the Marauders had all had skills apart from Remus who could melt a cauldron just by being near it – but he wasn't that good. No doubt he'd have gotten something wrong and instead of something human, it would have been something less that would have been created instead. The image of a naked snake-like Dark Lord emerging from the cauldron flitted through his mind and Peter had to repress the urge to giggle again.

Peter clenched his fist. The ritual called for him to willingly cut off his own hand. The Dark Lord had promised him a prosthetic – a silver version of his hand that would be stronger and better than his own. Peter grimaced. He really didn't want to lose his hand but he had vowed to be the Dark Lord's willing servant and he would play his part.

Besides, Peter thought determinedly, his flesh would rebuild the Dark Lord. He would effectively become a parent to the form that the Dark Lord would take. It was an honour. And perhaps the Dark Lord would look more favourably upon him afterwards. Perhaps Peter would be rewarded over and above the new hand.

Peter started as Snape cast a tempus into the sky. The sun was beginning to set.

"It is time we made preparations, my Lord." Snape said quietly. "The task will have started."

"Ready the cauldron and potion, Severus," the Dark Lord instructed, "Peter will see to my needs."

Peter hid a moue of distaste. One last time, he reminded himself; it would be one last time of changing soiled nappies and clothing; one last time of feeding the Dark Lord by hand. By the end of the night the Dark Lord would walk among them in his own adult form again and Peter’s role as caretaker would be over.

But not his role as servant, Peter mused as he hurried to take care of the Dark Lord. He would always be the Dark Lord's servant.

Unless Harry won.

Peter shook his head of the traitorous thought. The Dark Lord would rise and Peter would be by his side. He'd made his choice. Of course, Peter thought, as he ignored the low hiss of the Dark Lord's snake behind him, if the Dark Lord was restored, and if it looked like Harry would win…then there was nothing stopping Peter from making another choice. After all, once the Dark Lord had a body, Peter would no longer need to be his servant.

But until then…until then he was the Dark Lord's willing servant.

O-O-o

There was a moment of regret.

One.

The look on her best friend's face when she'd realised, when she'd understood what was happening. That look of betrayal and horror…it had poked at something inside of her. The part of her who was a best friend; who'd spent years playing with the other girl loyally beside her; who'd listened to her dreams and commiserated when things had gone wrong.

Years of friendship…all destroyed in the moment when she'd turned her wand on her best friend.
She grimaced.

Barty was going to be so angry with her but she just couldn't kill her best friend. She'd settled for stunning her, wrapping her in ropes and locking her into a closet where she'd be safe from the coming fight. She'd even cast the spell that would hide her from the map the others would use; the same spell she had cast on herself; the one Barty had taught her.

There had to be a chance to change her mind and bring her over to the right side once they'd won. Hadn't she thought the same nonsense for years? How Dumbledore was a great wizard? How the Light side was always in the right? Hadn't she wanted to run and inform Dumbledore, her parents, everybody when she'd realised who had been leaving her the love notes in her bag?

But she hadn't. She still didn't know why.

She had met with Barty and realised the truth that he was right; that Sirius Black had subjugated the magical world; had influenced Harry into believing that Barty was evil when he wasn't. He was sweet and kind and mourning his first love.

She would be his last.

The memory of their love-making the previous night flitted through her head; how tenderly Barty had touched her; how lovingly he'd taken her. Her fingers touched her lips remembering the gentle kisses he'd bestowed upon her.

It had been so risky meeting up with him at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He was a wanted man, unfairly and unjustly because of Black. And he had the machinations of the Dark Lord to deal with too. He'd been unfairly punished for rightly protecting the Dark Lord's interests but he had finally returned from the awful trip and he had wanted to meet with her; wanted to make love with her too much to resist the temptation of meeting up.

She shook her head and checked the time. She needed to hurry. She made her way swiftly through the castle to the ladder that would take her into the Divination classroom. She pushed open the hatch and looked around cautiously. Her nose wrinkled at the heavy scent of incense, perfume and sherry.

Trelawney sat nearby her back to the hatch and the newly visible vanishing cabinet. The Divination Professor was oblivious as she drank back more alcohol and mumbled something about too many people.

She aimed her wand and fired.

The spell hit Trelawney with enough force to send her flying forward; she hit the floor in a sprawling mess of scarves, unconscious.

Another spell saw the hapless teacher bound in rope.

She grimaced at Trelawney. She never had liked the woman. She moved to the window and breathed out a sigh of relief at the sight of the mirrors. As soon as Harry took the cup…as soon as he took the cup she'd open the vanishing cabinet.

Soon Hogwarts would be theirs, and the wizarding world…

Hermione took another deep breath as she watched Cedric finally slay the Acromantula he'd been fighting. He'd taken a bad gash to his leg, presumably infected with the venom of the spider, and he
was clearly lame as he staggered down the maze corridor.

"Thank, Merlin." Amos said softly, his voice carrying over to them as Cedric stopped and performed a healing spell that would cauterize the wound and burn away the venom before continuing.

In the mirror beside him, Fleur sat by a pit of water which she had come across, complete with multiple Giant Squids, and continued to transfigure grass into planks of wood for her raft. It was a slow, time-consuming task and Hermione figured it was deliberate. Fleur knew she was last into the maze and as long as she remained alive and attempting the task she would survive as one of the boys was bound to win the cup. Hermione admired her tactics.

Viktor was tackling his wit challenge; the Greek alphabet laid out in stepping stones over what appeared to be quicksand. If he stepped on the wrong stone he'd be dropped into the mire. There was a determination about him though and Hermione believed that Viktor wanted to win; his competitive spirit wouldn't allow anything else.

The Krums were silent but Hermione had noticed that their eyes had never strayed once from their son.

She finally let herself watch Harry again. She was relieved he was still walking through the maze. He still had the third challenge to overcome but until then he was safe.

Hermione shivered and didn't protest when her mother placed an arm around her and rubbed her briskly. She leaned into the maternal comfort.

It seemed surreal that they were just watching and waiting for Harry to be kidnapped. She couldn't help but think that there had to have been another way.

But…

She had seen Sirius try everything to get to Voldemort and fail.

She knew letting Harry be kidnapped was their best hope to ambush the self-proclaimed Dark Lord. She just wished it wasn't Harry.

Prophecies.

She hated the idea that Harry had been targeted because of a prophecy from a woman she considered a fraud. Yet she couldn't deny that it was in motion; had been in motion from the moment Voldemort had chosen to believe it.

More unfair was the halting story Harry had told her, Ron and Neville earlier that week. The story of the Peverells and Death; of Death’s Champion and his Grim. None of it seemed real to Hermione; none of it.

Yet she couldn't deny the reality of Harry's situation; the tournament and Voldemort's pursuit of him.

And she wouldn't shirk her place beside Harry for the world.

She would stand beside him and watch him stamp Voldemort into dust. She touched the leather strap around her neck with the rune of protection. Harry had given her his Christmas present for safekeeping; he hadn't been able to wear it as it was designated a magical item. But that was alright; she would wear it for him when she stood in the centre of the coven and blessed him with the protection of the House of Black; when she and the others would turn Voldemort's thievery of Harry's blood against him.
"Cedric's slowed down a lot." Neville muttered beside her.

"He's feeling the poison from the spider." Hermione said quietly. "Even though he's cleaned the wound, some of it had to have seeped into his blood already."

Neville's gaze flickered to the Diggorys and Hermione followed his gaze. Cedric's parents looked incredibly worried. Leonard Abbott had stepped forward to place a hand on his friend's shoulder and his wife similarly had an arm around Cedric's mother.

Hermione frowned. "Where's Hannah and Susan?"

Neville shrugged as though unconcerned but his eyes gleamed with worry. "They left a while ago. I don't think Sue could take watching Ced."

Hermione bit her lip but before she could say anything, the sudden murmur from the crowd had her eyes flashing back to the mirrors. Her heart leapt into her throat…

Harry had found his third challenge.

o-O-o

The chasm in front of Harry seemed endless.

Turning the corner into what he thought might be another dead end, he had only just stopped himself from falling off the narrow ledge that was all that was left on his side. The vast empty space was shocking.

Magical space, Harry considered with a touch of exasperation.

Of course the maze couldn't just be a maze. The ground was a long way down and while Harry could believe it wasn't quite the distance of a skyscraper – it was probably some kind of illusion after all – he could believe that he would fall a fair distance if he fell.

Clearly the goal was to get to the other side. He guessed he could change into Snitch and fly across but he wasn't sure that was a good idea. He'd faced the wit challenge and the creature so the chasm had to be the elemental challenge. He doubted whether it was going to be as easy as flying from one side to the other. He suspected that as soon as he was in the air something would emerge to try and kill him.

He needed to have his wand available which meant he couldn't be Snitch. But how else was he meant to get across? A glint of something to his left caught his eye; he turned and found a broomstick propped up against the fence.

Right.

He felt a little chagrined at not spotting it immediately. He felt tired though. The trip through the hedge had weakened him; his body still trembled and ached.

Harry pushed away the weakness and squared his shoulders. He waved his wand at the broomstick performing a series of diagnostics.

The broomstick was just a broomstick. No hidden curses or enchantments. It was a decent Cleansweep; not as good as his Firebolt or his latest Christmas present but it was sturdy and in good condition.
Harry sheathed his knife and took hold of the broomstick. He paused on the edge of the chasm and looked out to the other side.

He could just make out the hint of a platform. He took a deep breath and launched himself into the abyss.

The broomstick responded beautifully and he zipped along for the first minute without anything occurring. He lowered himself and pushed the broomstick to go faster.

Maybe he could get there before anything…

A tower of water shot up from the ground directly in front of him.

Harry's heart rate accelerated; his breath caught in his throat as he smoothly diverted the broom to the left…

Another tower shot up…

He went right.

And another…

He was clearly being targeted. He lowered his body to the broomstick and hung on grimly.

He dodged and weaved through the gauntlet.

Right, then right again, then left, then right…

His hair and face grew damp from the spray of water, his hands slick on the wood, but he pushed on…

Left, left and…

He pushed the broom almost vertically upward as the next tower shot up right in front of him. He managed to get over the top of it but could feel the edge of the ward at the top of the maze graze his head before he zoomed back down into the maelstrom.

There was a wind on his back now; his body was synched with the broom…he accelerated into the dive and straightened out just in time to evade the next tower…

Right, left…

The platform was almost in front of him…

Left, right and…

He put his hand out and whispered a spell, grateful for all the training he'd done…

The wall of water in front of him cleaved into two, parting to let him through…

He shot through the opening, barely aware that the two sides of water crashed back into each other with a thunderous clap in his wake.

He brought the broomstick to a screeching halt above the small square of maze left, a wooden stand in the centre with a single cup upon it. He dismounted, wincing at the way his muscles had stiffened. As soon as his feet hit the ground, the chasm behind him flickered and disappeared, another hedge
appearing to block the way.

There was no other exit; no other way forward. Just a square of ground surrounded by the green hedges with the only way out the cup that sat there innocently on its wooden plinth waiting for Harry to take it.

Harry disillusioned his knife and un-holstered his wand. His jaw tightened as his chin lifted. He knew with a bone deep certainty that the cup would take him to Voldemort. Crouch was too good not to have rigged it somehow no matter the checks Moody had done.

Harry closed his eyes briefly.

He wasn't alone.

He had Sirius.

And Remus. And Hermione and Ron…Neville and his friends…the House of Black and the Potter alliance…

He wasn't alone.

He had to hang onto that.

Harry opened his eyes.

It was time to meet his destiny.

o-O-o

The rain stopped abruptly.

Thomas fingered the plain white cotton robe he wore. It would disintegrate in the cauldron, in the heat of the potion as he was made anew.

He breathed in deeply.

The air tasted of the rain; new and clean.

It was time for his rebirth to begin.

o-O-o

The mirror had expanded over the length of the Quidditch pitch, beaming the image of Harry Potter winning the TriWizard Tournament to all the spectators and one cackling witch watching from the window of the Divination classroom.

She almost jumped up and down with glee as Harry stood in front of the cup which would whisk him away to his fate.

A low moan from the Divination Professor behind her was ignored as she whirled away and skipped over to the vanishing cabinet.

It was time to open the door.

o-O-o
Sirius felt his heart leap and lodge into his throat.

Harry was reaching for the cup.

He wanted to yell for him to stop, not to do it, not to take it…prophecy be damned.

He didn't want Harry hurt or scared or…

Sirius's hands curled into fists as his son opened his eyes.

Even with the horrible quality of the mirror, they gleamed brightly with determination.

Sirius took a breath.

Harry would survive the night. He'd live to be old and grey and to give Sirius a Quidditch team of grandchildren…

He believed it.

He believed it because he believed in Harry.

It was time to end the threat to Harry's future once and for all.

o-O-o

Harry reached for the cup.

His fingers clasped the handle and for a moment it was as though time froze.

The air stilled around him.

Silence fell.

His heart beat loud; his breath rasped through his lungs…

And the portkey yanked him off his feet, a shock of a stunning spell charged through his body, and the pain sent him spinning into darkness.
Harry disappeared within one blink of an eye and another.

Sirius held his breath, hoping…

The maze disappeared in a flash of magic that had the whole audience flinching back.

When the light was blinked out of his eyes Sirius gazed at the empty expanse of the Quidditch pitch below before his gaze darted to the platform, hunting for a sign of Harry.

The tournament was over; three of the Champions stood on the platform, but Harry wasn't among them.

Sirius swallowed hard, ignoring the growing murmur of the crowd at Harry's disappearance.

He knew it would happen. He had known. They had planned for it. He just hadn't considered how much it would hurt. The Grim inside of him want to howl and was almost tempted to let it. But there was no time to waste.

His son was in the hands of Voldemort.

He whirled into action.

Minerva stood stern-faced with fierce eyes beside a white-faced Hermione whose hands clutched onto her mother's arm tightly.

"Go!" Sirius growled.

Minerva simply placed her hand on Hermione's shoulder.

Augusta hugged Neville tightly. "Stay safe, Neville."

Neville gave his Gran a solemn nod in response as she moved to stand behind Hermione. She also placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

Molly finished hugging her sons goodbye. She brushed a hand over Ron's messy hair, anxiety written across her face.

Arthur moved to her side and carefully eased her away. "It's time, Molly. We agreed we'd do this. I'll watch over them. You need to leave with the others."

Molly nodded jerkily and took a deep breath. "I expect all of you home for breakfast." She took Ginny's hand as though she were a young child, but Ginny didn't protest, simply leaning into her mother to give her comfort. They gathered next to Hermione and they both placed a hand on her shoulder.
Hermione caught Sirius's gaze for a moment and gave him a slow nod; a promise, Sirius realised. She'd fight for Harry.

She touched the necklace she wore and spoke clearly. "Sanctuary."

The women disappeared in a swirl of colour.

"ATTENTION, EVERYONE!" Albus's voice sounded out over the crowd and a hush fell. "HOGWARTS IS DECLARING AN EMERGENCY. ALL STUDENTS AND VISITORS ARE TO BE EVACUATED. PLEASE LEAVE IN AN ORDERLY FASHION TO THE EVACUATION POINTS. AGAIN, ALL STUDENTS AND VISITORS ARE TO BE EVACUATED."

Neville caught Sirius's attention; determination set in the lines of his body in a way that reminded Sirius of Frank. "I've got to assist with the evacuation. Blaise?"

"I'm with you." Blaise said.

"I'll escort you." Percy offered.

Arthur patted Percy's shoulder as he moved to join Neville and Blaise.

The three boys hurried out.

Sirius breathed out sharply knowing Albus would only have given the order so early if the invasion had already begun. Before he could speak, the ethereal shimmer of Albus's phoenix patronus flew into the box.

"Sirius," Albus's voice travelled out of the phoenix's mouth, "the wards have alerted me to a breech in the castle and the centaurs have sent word that there are Dementors and vampires in the forest. We need those who are tasked to raise Hogwarts' defences in place."

"I'll send a reply." Remus offered.

Sirius nodded and turned to the other men with him.

Arthur turned to Sirius. "We'll take the students involved with the Hogwarts spell to the Headmaster's office now. We'll rendezvous with those missing as agreed." He motioned toward the two men standing at the back. "Richard, Leonard? Are you ready?"

Sirius turned to look at them and frowned at the huddle of the Bones' and Abbotts. The families of the other Champions were already gone and Sirius vaguely remembered them heading for the steps at the sight of their children on the platform below.

"Richard?" Sirius questioned sharply.

The Head of the Bones' family turned around, a panicked look on his face, his hand sweeping through his hair. "Sue and Hannah went back to the castle already…"

"Hannah said Sue wasn't able to watch Cedric…" Karen Abbott asserted strongly. Leonard nodded beside her.

Felicity Bones bristled. "And I told you Sue said Hannah wasn't feeling well."

"Well, it won't be the first time Sue has used Hannah to…" Karen began heatedly.
"Ladies!" Sirius interjected sharply. "Now is not the time to argue about this."

"Agreed." Leonard said quickly before his wife could reply.

Felicity gave a disgruntled snort but nodded. "Karen, we should leave."

"I am not leaving without my daughter!" Karen bristled.

"Yes, you are. We have a duty we have committed to doing, sworn on our family magic, to look after the evacuated children." Leonard said briskly. "I'll find Hannah in the castle and send her onto you."

Karen was barely mollified but she conceded with a huff. Her eyes brimmed with anxiety. "You bring our little girl home."

Leonard kissed her softly.

Felicity turned to Richard and hugged him. "Same orders for you too, Rich."

Richard tightened his hold around his wife. "We'll come home to you, Flick."

Felicity shifted out of the embrace and Karen sidled up to her with a defiant gaze. She put her hand on Felicity's shoulder and the two women disappeared in a portkey swirl.

"Draco." Lucius put a hand on his son's shoulder as Draco moved to join the men leaving. "Your survival is paramount. Your mother will be very upset if you are so much as scratched. You understand?"

Draco returned his father's intent gaze and nodded. "Good luck, Father."

Lucius let his son go and Sirius felt some empathy for Lucius's fleeting look of anxiety that travelled across Lucius's expression.

Sirius watched as the motley band of Weasleys, Draco, Theo, Richard and Leonard left. The box which had been so full a moment before was almost empty save for himself, Lucius and Remus.

Remus lifted his communication mirror. "The pack is in position here."

"Now what?" Lucius said, breathing in deeply.

"Now we leave for Little Hangleton and find Harry." Sirius said firmly. Because he wasn't leaving his son in the hands of Voldemort for any longer than necessary. He lifted the plain wool scarf they'd use as a portkey and the others shuffled to grasp it.

We're on our way, Harry, Sirius thought fiercely, hoping somehow his son could hear his thoughts and take strength from them.

o-O-o

It was the sounds around Harry that crept back into his consciousness first.

A crunch of a twigs and the sucking sound of someone stepping into mud by his head. A low hiss nearby. The wind hitting something metallic and heavy. The crackle of a fire…

The scent of the smoke drifted across him, dragging him from the unnatural sleep he'd been in.
His nose wrinkled. There was smoke and ash in the air but also a strong smell of dirt and grass and leaves…and over it all the stench of a decaying body.

Harry kept still, fighting the urge to open his eyes and understand where he was and what was happening.

He'd taken the cup and been stunned; he had allowed himself to be abducted by Voldemort. Wherever he was, he wasn't safe.

And he was cold.

Harry figured he was lying on the ground. There was stone against his back; a headstone or tomb most likely. His hands were tied in front of him, resting heavily on his stomach, and there was the heavy weight of rope around his ankles. The sharp bite of the wind wrapped itself around his whole body and he was fuzzily aware that he seemed to have lost his jacket. He still had his knife but he figured he'd lost his wand. Voldemort wasn't an idiot.

As though to prove the truth of that, Tom Marvolo Riddle spoke. "You might as well open your eyes, Harry Potter."

Harry opened his eyes. For a moment he wondered where his glasses were as his surroundings blurred in his vision, but then he felt them still on his face. He pushed his panic down and scrambled to sit up.

"Severus, please inform young Harry where he is." Voldemort said silkily.

"The cemetery at Little Hangleton can be found behind the church." Snape intoned loudly, clearly somewhere to Harry's right.

The world sharply clicked into focus.

He was in a cemetery tied to a headstone.

Voldemort sat on a chair to his right in front of a large cauldron. Harry felt for the child Voldemort had possessed; the stink of rotting flesh was almost overpowering and the sight of the corpse Voldemort wore was horrific. Harry felt a rush of nausea at the pus and bloody lesions that littered the grey skin, and had to swallow hard.

Pettigrew hovered behind his Dark Lord, a shuffling ratty figure. Harry shot him a look of contempt before shifting his gaze to Snape.

He knew he couldn't give away Snape's position and effected a dark scowl. "Snape! I knew you couldn't be trusted."

"Just as pathetic as your father and Black." Snape shot back sneeringly, his hands deep in the pockets of his robe.

"Now, now." Voldemort said sternly. "Let's not argue with our prime ingredient, Severus."

Snape immediately lowered his head. "As you wish, my Lord."

"Traitor. You're as bad as the rat." Harry hissed, keeping up the pretence, and noticing how Pettigrew scurried back behind his Dark Lord at the mention of him. "My Dad is going to…"

"Do nothing." Voldemort asserted. "I may have sent Barty along to play with him at Hogwarts." He
smiled grotesquely. "After all, this matter is between us."

Harry felt his mouth go dry. Sirius wouldn't be at Hogwarts for long, he reassured himself. Sirius planned to get to Little Hangleton as soon as everything was in motion at the school.

"What do you want with me?" Harry snapped. "Didn't getting disembodied the last two times we met tell you anything?"

"It told me you are a worthy enemy." Voldemort replied. "Tonight you will assist in returning me to a body and I will return to my former greatness."

Harry made a show of struggling against his bonds.

"We'll begin as soon as the potion is at temperature," Voldemort continued, his tone almost lecturing as though he was in a classroom, "and then we shall meet on the battlefield, Harry Potter, and I will give you the honour of a wizard's death." He caressed the wand in his hands. "But until then… Crucio!"

Harry's eyes widened as the spell shot towards him; he had nowhere to go. The spell hit and his body arched in pain for a long excruciating moment before he fell back against the stone headstone, panting. His body was screaming in pain; every ache, bruise and scratch burned. He took in a rasping breath.

"My Lord," Snape murmured deferentially, "as much as I enjoy seeing Potter finally put in his place, the potion requires his blood to be at a resting state. I fear if you continue to torture him before the ritual some of the effects may be duplicated into your new body."

Harry tried to control his expression; tried to make sure the relief of Snape intervening wasn't too obvious.

"You may be right, Severus." Voldemort tilted his head as he considered it. "I shall wait until after the ritual is completed."

"I believe you've made a wise choice to wait, my Lord." Snape inclined his head and went back to the potion.

Relief washed through Harry so fast he almost felt dizzy with it. Snape had saved him from getting tortured.

"Peter, gag our guest. I don't wish to hear him speak until after the ritual is done." Voldemort ordered.

Harry struggled as Pettigrew hurried over but he was forced to accept the black cloth Pettigrew used to gag him. Harry glared at the rat until he scampered back behind his master.

Harry lowered his eyes and focused on his breathing; every breath hurt. He pushed the pain aside and reached inside to his magic. He focused on a wandless silent healing spell that Flitwick had taught him for duelling. It wouldn't do much to counter the Cruciatus spell but it would help with the damage he'd taken in the tournament and his portkey landing.

He just had to be patient, Harry told himself; he had to be patient and wait for the right moment. Once his blood was used, he could call the Hallows and even the playing field. He knew Sirius would be somewhere close just waiting. He risked a quick glance towards Snape.

Whatever happened, he wasn't alone.
Barty stepped out of the vanishing cabinet and into the Divination room classroom. He allowed himself a small smile and opened his arms to the girl waiting impatiently beside it. He tolerated her gauche hug and separated himself from her after only a moment. He hadn't enjoyed having sex with her the night before when she'd sneaked out to meet with him and he was glad the pretence was almost over. Almost over but not quite done. He cupped her cheek.

"My beautiful girl." Barty kissed her lips softly. It had been so easy to seduce her, so easy to turn her from her parents and her vows. Of course, the occasional compulsion spells on the notes and suggestion potions his elf had ensured she'd received had helped things along. "My beautiful Hannah."

Amos Diggory had been a wonderful tool. Barty had been able to control the drunkard easily once he'd had access to the Ministry in the Summer and before he'd lost his access at Halloween. Diggory had taken a sympathetic-to-his-werewolf-cause Crouch to dinner with the Abbotts just before the World Cup and Barty had realised just how useful Hannah would be inside of Hogwarts, inside the alliance.

It had been easy to convince her to romance Neville Longbottom. Barty had wanted to make the boy his own son, the happy memory of playing with him alongside Rab one of the few he had left. So easy to convince her to make sure that Neville was alone on the night of the Yule ball so dear departed Igor could kidnap him.

She'd grown sick of pretending with Neville though and Barty had encouraged her to use her friend's reaction to the second task as an excuse to gain some distance from him. They'd also used her excuse of spending time with the depressed Bones girl to sneak away and meet in secret. It had been perfect.

Perfect until after Easter when the truth had been discovered and the alliance had put the buddy system in place. Luckily his identity of Pinner had given Barty the excuse of tutoring Hannah to help her catch-up her studies. She had been his secret weapon; the spy who had told him about the alliance's plans allowing him to be a step ahead.

"Barty!" Hannah simpered. "Are you alright?"

"I'm well." Barty smoothed a lock of hair away from her fringe. "And you have done wonderfully, my Hannah."

Hannah kissed him again and he allowed her passionate mauling for as long as he could stand. Luckily a low moan across the room gave him the excuse to break her hold.

"Well, well, well. Look, if it isn't Sybill Trelawney." Barty smiled widely as he walked over to the terrified woman. Hannah had done a pretty decent job of wrapping her in ropes and gagging her.

"Do you know the Dark Lord wants you alive?"

Trelawney's shook her head frantically.

"Apparently," Barty continued stooping to kneel on one leg beside her, "there's some prophecy about him that you gave all those years ago. You know the one? The one that proclaimed Harry Potter would be his downfall."

Trelawney's shook her head frantically.

"Apparenty," Barty continued stooping to kneel on one leg beside her, "there's some prophecy about him that you gave all those years ago. You know the one? The one that proclaimed Harry Potter would be his downfall."

Trelawney tried to avoid his hand, wriggling away, but Barty caught her hair easily and yanked her head back.

"It's because of you the Dark Lord went after the Potters." Barty commented still in the same
conversational tone. "Because of you we went to the Longbottoms. You're the reason I lost Rab." He paused. "Well, not the whole reason because that's on Black."

Trelawney made a muffled sound; trying to speak.

"Shush now." Barty crooned. "Don't worry. I'm not going to hand you over to the Dark Lord." He threw her down and stood up.

"You're not?" asked Hannah surprised.

"No." Barty adjusted his gloves and un-holstered his wand. "Once I might have rushed to do his bidding but no longer. I'm working for my own future now."

Hannah smiled at him brightly. "Oh Barty. That's wonderful."

"It is." Barty agreed. "So I don't need some old deluded crazy woman who smells of sherry and piss. Avada Kedavra!" He slashed his wand and in a wash of green light Trelawney's life was ended.

Hannah gave a short cry, hands flying up to cover her mouth.

Barty turned to her and hugged her. "She had to be killed, Hannah," He soothed her. "She would have been in the way."

"You're right." Hannah said. "You're right."

"Where are Moody and Black?" Barty asked.

"Still at the Quidditch pitch." Hannah said. "Sirius was in the Champions' box."

"Then I'll meet him there." Barty kissed her gently. "You know your mission."

Hannah nodded. "I'm to stop the students from raising Hogwarts' defences."

"Go now." He ordered softly. "We will meet when it is over."

Hannah pulled away reluctantly but she nodded and left.

Barty waited until she was gone before he moved back to the cabinet and knocked against the door three times. He opened it and Travers stepped out and moved aside for the vampires and the wizard mercenaries that followed.

The room quickly filled with the first wave of the Dark Lord's army.

Barty stood on the desk to gain their attention. "We're in the heart of Hogwarts. You have the run of the castle. Kill anyone you find." He wasn't too bothered if they found Hannah. Her usefulness was at an end. "Kill them all."

They all clattered out of the tower.

Travers stepped up to Barty. "Where is…"

"Our targets are on the Quidditch pitch." Barty said briskly. "Shall we?"

Travers grunted and made to leave. He stopped abruptly catching sight of Trelawney. "The Dark Lord wanted her alive."
"My spy unfortunately killed her before we arrived." Barty lied easily.

Travers shot him a sceptical look but he continued on.

Barty grinned.

Oh, it was going to be a wonderful night, Barty considered cheerfully.

The whole world was going to burn.

o-O-o

Hermione wrenched her gaze away from the awful carpet in the hall and followed her mother into the newly magically expanded kitchen where the rest of the women had gathered with a worried Dobby. Hermione sat at the table and quietly observed, her head and heart too filled with thoughts of Harry.

The moment he had disappeared...it had been expected but so devastating.

Harry was in the hands of his enemy; an evil Dark wizard who wanted him dead. He had to be scared and hurt.

She wished she could be with him but it was always Harry in the end. It had been their first year with the traps and puzzles; only Harry had faced Voldemort at the last. Second year had been no better since Harry had ended up in the Chamber of Secrets with the shade of Voldemort on his own with only a phoenix to help him. At least in their third year she had been with him as they had saved Sirius.

She was barely aware of the others arriving and gathering around; of Kreacher and Dobby taking care of making tea and getting everyone settled. The elves had been ordered by Harry to keep the women of the House safe.

Ginny slid into the seat next to her and wrapped a hand around the fist Hermione had rested on the table. "He'll come home."

"He damn well better." Hermione murmured.

"Harry won't let Tom win." Ginny promised, her brown eyes warm with promise and determination.

Hermione nodded, uncurling her fingers to grasp her friend's hand. "We'll help him make sure of it."

"Ladies, if I can have your attention." Andy called for attention and the gathered women quickly sat at the table.

One side was filled with the House of Potter and Black with the exception of Ginny who remained beside Hermione; Narcissa, Dora, and Minerva. The other was filled with the rest of the women who would constitute the protective coven along with Ginny; Augusta Longbottom, Griselda Marchbanks, Molly Weasley, and an elderly lady who had been introduced as Vivien Verte, and who Hermione knew had a special link to Harry's ancestral line. Hermione's mother was also present but she would remain in the kitchen during the ritual.

Andy stood at the top of the table. "We need to make our final preparations." She cleared her throat. "But I first want us to go over what we're going to do. Minerva?"

Minerva stood and Andy sat. "Lily Potter was an outstanding witch and she gifted Harry with a
defensive ward which is based on her love and sacrifice, anchored in the blood she and her son shared. The gift was the result of a spell Lily cast based on the Old Religion." She placed a book on the table. "In this same book, there is a blessing which we performed at Harry's adoption. It ensured the ward was continued by changing the anchor from Lily's blood to the blood of the House of Black." She paused and straightened. "We know this ward has already saved Harry twice. We also know Tom Riddle will steal Harry's blood for his own tonight."

Hermione bit her lip.

"He hopes that the theft will make him immune to Harry's protection and every arithmancy and magical theory on the subject suggests he is right. The theft will effectively neutralise Harry's shield in this and create a magical tether for Harry's magic. But we stand in the stead of Lily and we will not be so easily defeated. The way he has devised his ritual makes him vulnerable to witches' magic and we intend to take full advantage of that." She deferred to Andy.

Andy rose from her chair again. "The House of Black has a reputation and while there are many things in our past we may rail against, we are united in the love we have for our children; in the belief that family comes first." She tapped the book. "As you all know originally we were planning to restore the protection, a spell suggested it could be done but…further study uncovered that it would require the willing sacrifice of someone with Lily's blood – not Harry – and while many of us could cheerfully strangle Lily's sister, she would never give her life willingly." She held up her hand. "And no, coerced to be willing under a threat would still count as unwilling in magical terms."

"Willing and unwilling are difficult to get around." Minerva agreed. "We've had to be very careful about this ritual just as Harry has to be very careful about his state of mind and the circumstances of during the ritual Riddle will enact this evening."

Hermione nodded in understanding. Harry had told her Voldemort's ritual called for his blood to be taken by force. It had been a difficult line to tread, to accept and allow he would be kidnapped for the ritual but retain an unwillingness for his blood to be used in the resurrection of his enemy.

"Then I confess to being slightly bemused," Vivien interjected, "the preparations we've been doing…the ritual is to summon a spirit to restore a blessing."

"It is. Since it is likely that only the death of Riddle will see the protection return via the tether, we've had to find a different way to help Harry." Andy looked around the table. "You've all read and we've discussed the material on the ritual but unfortunately we haven't quite been able to give some of you all the facts regarding the actual blessing we are targeting."

"Then you'd best get on with it," Griselda remarked brusquely.

Minerva stood up. "During Harry's adoption there was a second blessing bestowed upon him by the spirit of Morgana Le Fey. Bertie declared the event need-to-know and those present undertook a vow to never disclose it. Miriam was obliviated of the memory."

"You were exempted?" Griselda said shrewdly.

"Yes." Minerva nodded. "Sirius believed my vow as the Potter Regent was enough to cover the circumstance."

"Tonight, we're going to call forth the spirit of Morgana Le Fey and ensure her blessing is restored to Harry." Andy said firmly. "He'll be shielded with the blessing of the most powerful witch in our history called by witches' magic."
"And?" Vivien tapped the parchment in front of her. "There's a second part to this."

"Well, if everybody agrees we thought we'd also cast that spell. It's going to take back by force what Voldemort has stolen; it's just a very advanced switching spell really." Dora commented brightly.

"Miss Granger had the idea." Narcissa said, her voice heavy with approval.

Hermione blushed as everyone turned to look at her.

"And we've helped her create the spell." Minerva confirmed. "Riddle will be the first test subject."

"Well done, lass." Griselda said.

Andy gave a sharp smile. "We're going to make him regret stealing from the House of Black."

"Good." Griselda stated, clearly pleased.

Molly nodded slowly. "You won't get an argument from me."

Augusta tapped the table decisively. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get started."

Hermione touched the necklace she wore. *Hold on, Harry*, she thought fiercely; *hold on, we're with you.*

o-O-o

Neville hurried back along the pathway from the Black Lake to the castle. There was a magical storm gathering overhead; dark clouds rolling in with bright splashes of lightening.

The Durmstrang ship was gone. All their students and visitors had been evacuated except Viktor who had stayed behind to help protect Natalie Warren, his girlfriend and the reserve for the Ravenclaw spot in the Hogwarts spell.

Similarly, the Beauxbatons' carriages had taken to the sky, disappearing from view within seconds. But a few of their students and parents, Fleur and her father included, remained behind determined to help Hogwarts defend itself from the invasion. They'd been sent by Moody to defend and assist in the infirmary.

Neville made a final dash along the path and entered Hogwarts through a side door to the gardens. Blaise was waiting for him.

"We're missing five students. All the other lower years and upper years except for the few seventh years who volunteered to stay and defend the castle are evacuated. The Professors who were in charge of the evacuated students are gone. There's a group of werewolves, aurors and Unspeakables being led by Professors Flitwick and Hilliard who've entered the castle and are starting to search for the invaders. There's another contingent out on the grounds under Moody's direction." Blaise reeled off easily. "The group heading for the Headmaster's office entered fifteen minutes ago through the main doors."

"Who are the five missing students." Neville said not breaking stride as they left the passage-way and went up a set of stairs.

"Lavender Brown, the Patil twins, and the Creevey brothers." Blaise flashed a smile. "All Gryffindors."

"Idiots." Neville huffed. He paused and took out a brand new parchment from his pocket. He tapped
it with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

A copy of the Marauder's Map unfolded in front of them and Blaise whistled.

"You have to give Lord Black his due," Blaise said admiringly, "he and his friends were bloody smart."

Neville nodded absently; he was just pleased Remus had found a way to duplicate the original. He focused on finding the missing group. He frowned as he registered the packs of vampires moving out of the Divination tower; at the name Barty Crouch written there along with Dennis Travers. He pushed aside the need to inform someone; Flitwick would already know and Ron would keep a check on the map he had.

"There!" Blaise pointed at Gryffindor tower.

"What the hell are they doing there?" Neville muttered. He sketched a clear route through the school for himself. He had no wish to become a vampire snack and he knew he had to stay safe if he was to keep his promise to Harry. "Right," he said, "I'll go get them. You'd best use your emergency portkey and evacuate."

Blaise shook his head. "Someone has to watch your back. We'll go together."

"Blaise…" Neville sighed heavily, meeting his friend's eyes bravely. "I won't be evacuating. I'm staying." Not that he'd told anyone but Harry that. His Gran firmly believed he would be at the Black Estate safe and sound once the evacuation was complete. But he had promised Harry and he needed to be at Hogwarts in case the worse was to happen.

"Yeah, I figured that." Blaise shrugged. "It doesn't change the fact that you need someone to watch your back."

Neville swallowed hard. "That's not exactly Slytherin of you, Blaise."

"Of course it is." Blaise said firmly. "If you or someone can reign in your Gryffindor recklessness and ensure you don't get killed, you're going to be Chief Warlock some day." He grinned widely at Neville. "We Slytherins like to plan ahead."

Neville snorted and mock punched Blaise on his upper arm. He knew Blaise was planning ahead and he also knew that it wasn't the reason he was staying with him. "Come on then. Let's go round up the rest of the reckless Gryffindors."

Blaise fell into step beside him and they continued up the stairs. They rounded the corner and they stopped abruptly as they almost walked into Hannah.

"Neville!" Hannah gave a cry and threw herself at him.

Neville frowned but his arms were already around his former girlfriend, patting her tentatively on the back. "What are you doing here, Hannah?"

"I got separated from Sue somehow and I've lost my portkey and I've been trying to find my Dad…I was going to the Headmaster's office." Hannah babbled out.

Neville gently disengaged her. "We're on our way to Gryffindor tower to round up some students. You can come with us and once we have them evacuated we'll get you to the office and see where Sue's gotten to."
"Thanks, Neville." Hannah beamed at him.

Neville shook his head as she went to grasp his hand. "We should both have our hands free and wands out. There's an invading army in the castle."

"You're right." Hannah blew out a breath. "Sorry."

"Shall we get going?" asked Blaise breezily.

Hannah nodded and set off, leaving the two boys to follow her.

Neville exchanged a look with Blaise; something wasn't right. Blaise signalled that he'd keep an eye on their unexpected company and Neville accepted with a quick nod. He caught up with Hannah quickly and frowned as he tried to work out what was bothering him.

They were almost at the tower when his mind cleared; one thought echoing through his head like a siren…

Why hadn't he seen Hannah on the Marauder's Map?

o-O-o

Albus strode across the Quidditch pitch towards Alastor. His pace was quick without seeming rushed. He was glad to see the paraphernalia of the tournament had been set aside with only the platform remaining as Alastor was using it as a command post.

Albus hurried up the steps as his sense of the wards pinged again. "The wards are reporting multiple incursions in the castle!"

"We're almost fully evacuated. Longbottom looks like he and Zabini are going after the strays. Flitwick's leading a group to deal with the intruders inside the castle." Alastor replied gruffly. "The infirmary is locked down and guarded – only someone with a valid portkey can enter."

"The children who are to perform the Hogwarts spell…"

"Should have been in your office the whole time." Alastor remonstrated. "It was a bloody stupid idea for them to watch the task!"

Albus looked slightly taken aback by his friend's ferocity but he couldn't argue that the more sensible approach would have been to have had the group already in place. "They would have been missing Mistor Diggory."

"They could have done it without him." Alastor grumbled. "Anyway, they're making slow progress but so far so good, and they've got a good set of adults protecting them."

"Is there any word from Sirius?" Albus asked.

"Amelia said he and the others had made it there; everyone's in position." Alastor heaved a heavy sigh. "But they're blind and deaf to the location until Snape manages to give them the secret."

He pointed towards the forest. "We've got vampires and Dementors just inside the forest. They're probably waiting for some kind of signal to attack."

Albus fingered his wand – his first wand. The Elder wand was with the cloak waiting for Harry to call them. Albus missed its hum of power but there was a familiarity about his first wand that warmed and welcomed him in a way he'd never felt when he had carried the Elder wand. Perhaps,
Albus mused, it was another sign that nobody but the Peverell line, that *Harry* was meant to carry the wand.

"On the ward line by the forest." Alastor said bluntly. "You need to keep everything in the forest out of the grounds."

Albus nodded. "Understood. Send Hagrid to assist me?"

Alastor agreed. "He's locking the gates but as soon as he's done I'll send him your way." He paused and his magical eye whirled around. "Watch yourself, Albus. Riddle wants this place and you dead as much as he wants Potter's blood."

"Tom Riddle will never take Hogwarts." Albus said confidently. "You stay safe, old friend."

They clasped hands for a brief moment; their years of friendship almost tangible enough to touch as they regarded each other with fond affection.

Albus let go and made for the forest ward line.

He had a school to protect.

o-O-o

"Damn it!" Cedric clung onto the bannister and took a deep breath.

Ron tried hard not to nag at the older boy but the group was only as fast as their slowest member and Cedric was it. They were stuck on a small staircase. There was a landing just behind them with a corridor to the left which led towards Ravenclaw; an alcove to the right with a statue of Armitage Flank, a famous Quidditch player and former Hogwarts student. They still had a long way to go to the Headmaster's office.

It wasn't Cedric's fault, Ron reminded himself. Cedric had been injured in his challenge with the Acromantula. Ron knew just how awful those monsters were first hand.

"Are you alright, Cedric?"

Ron wasn't surprised that it was Luna who stepped forward and put a hand on Cedric's shoulder.

"I'll make it." Cedric said, his eyes shining with a grim determination. "I have to; I'm the only Hufflepuff student here."

"Sue and Hannah must have had a good reason to leave." Ron's Dad said evenly, casting a look toward the two unhappy fathers who were accompanying them.

Ron still couldn't believe it. Well, he could because Sue had gone through a lot but he'd really thought she was committed to helping them with the spell. She had been great during the preparation sessions.

"We should keep moving." Amos Diggory had insisted on escorting his son.

"Maybe we should create a stretcher and have someone levitate Cedric." Ron suggested.

"That actually…" Fred began.

"Is an incredibly good idea." Natalie agreed. She twirled her wand and took off her scarf. A second later it was transfigured into a stretcher. "Come on, Cedric, hop up."
"I don't…"

"Want to delay us further." Draco stated with characteristic tactlessness.

Ron wasn't going to argue with the Slytherin though; he was fairly willing Cedric to get a move on himself.

Cedric grimaced but he gave in and started to limp back down to get to the stretcher. Viktor moved to his side to assist him.

"Great," Ron breathed out a sigh, "let's…"

"KILL THEM ALL!" A voice shouted.

A flash of green light came from above.

"Cedric!" Amos dived on top of his son and a moment later landed lifeless on the floor.

"DAD!" Cedric called out horrified.

"GET OFF THE STAIRCASE!" shouted Ron urgently, pulling Luna down the steps.

The blasting spell came out of nowhere aiming directly at Viktor.

Cedric pushed Viktor roughly aside –

Viktor fell to the landing, taking Ron's Dad and Leonard Abbott with him –

and the spell punched through Cedric and blasted the staircase.

They all went flying.

Someone had the presence of mind to cushion the floor and they bounced.

Cedric landed like a broken doll; blood already pooling around his head and blasted middle.

"SHEILDS!" Ron shouted, not caring that he was ordering his own father and brothers.

"Everybody, take cover!" His Dad ordered, running forward and dragging a shocked Viktor to the side of the staircase.

Another blasting spell came down toward them and Ron grabbed Luna, hustling her behind the nearby statue. He was joined a split second later by Draco and Theo. Fred and George had grabbed Natalie and they'd dived around the other side just before a green spell hit, cracking the stone. Ron winced. He glanced up the stairwell and his heart sank as he took in the dark shapes of vampires crouched in the shadows.

Ron swallowed hard at the sight of the Diggorys lying abandoned at the foot of the ruined staircase. He should do something…grab Cedric and…

Luna placed a hand on his arm. "They're gone." She said sadly.

The vampires leaped to the top of the staircase and Ron tightened his grip on his wand.

A moment later and his Dad, Viktor, Leonard and Richard were all fighting, magic erupted in streams up and down the staircase.
"GO!" His Dad shouted from the other side of the landing. "RUN! We'll hold them off!"

Ron felt frozen with fear. It was his Dad! He couldn't expect to leave his Dad!

"Through here!" Fred opened up a panel behind the statue and gestured for them all to get inside.

Draco and Theo moved immediately.

"Come on, Ron!" Natalie caught his arm and yanked him to the opening. Luna went ahead of them, casting a lumos as soon as she entered the dark narrow space.

They all paused as George closed the panel and sealed it. He added another spell.

Natalie grimaced. "What was that?"

"A bit of a surprise for anyone trying to follow us." George said grimly.

"This way." Fred said. "It leads to a corridor near the office."

"Do I want to know how you know all the secret passages in the castle?" Natalie asked with a sigh.

"It's a damn good thing they do!" Ron said hotly.

Natalie shook her head. "I didn't mean…"

"We know." Fred interjected, sounding so serious that Ron could hardly believe it was Fred who had spoken. "But we all have to stick together, right?"

"Well, do we?" asked Draco suddenly. "I hate to be crass but we're missing a Hufflepuff." His white face shone in the dark. "We can't do the spell."

"Draco's right." Theo said. "Unless anyone knows where we can find a replacement?"

"The infirmary." Natalie replied promptly, causing them all to look at her.

"Robert Ogden is in the infirmary helping to guard it." Natalie explained. "He's aware of the spell and he can do it. He was a bit disappointed not to be on Harry's list."

Ron sighed and rubbed his nose, unaware of the streak of dirt he was leaving behind. "And how exactly are we meant to get him?"

That stumped them all for a long moment.

"Floo." Luna said suddenly.

"What?" asked Ron feeling stupid.

It was Theo who replied. "We can floo the infirmary from the Headmaster's office and Ogden can step through the same way. Moody locked down the external floo but internal should still work."

"Good plan, Luna." Natalie said.

Ron saw how Luna's face brightened with the praise. "Brilliant, Luna." He added.

There was a small moment of shared camaraderie.

"Right then." Fred said. "Let's get moving."
And they set off again. Ron cast a look behind him, worry about his Dad niggling at him again. But he had a duty to perform and he wouldn't let Harry down.

o-O-o

Sirius stared at the mirror.

It had activated a moment before and Sirius had grabbed hold of it. He didn't dare speak to acknowledge the connection had been made in case he gave away Snape's position as a spy. He'd charmed his own mirror immediately to ensure it didn't transmit any of the noise around him.

They were all camped out in the small flat they had acquired as their Little Hangleton headquarters. Lucius waited in the back room while the rest of them stayed in the living room; Amelia, the Rat Squad and the female member of the Treasure team, Caro.

The Treasure team had planned to be in the cemetery, camped out in a hidden corner in the hollow of a tree. They had suspected that Voldemort would place it under Fidelius but both were hopeful that being present prior to the secret would enable them to remain in place. Theoretically, it should have worked. Unfortunately the reality was that the secret obliterated the location from their minds and they had been left confused about where they were and why they were there.

Caro was chagrined. She had been in the tree in her animagus form and had simply flown off only to realise her mistake once she'd resumed human form trying to resolve the confusion she'd felt. Bill though had somehow managed to stay put and Sirius gave thanks the Weasley heir was somewhere already in the cemetery; hopefully within earshot of Harry.

All Sirius could see in the mirror was darkness; the inside of Snape's pocket. He could barely hear anything except for Snape despite casting an amplification charm so the whole room could hear it.

Remus hovered by his arm.

"My Lord," Snape's voice rasped out of the mirror, "as much as I enjoy seeing Potter finally put in his place, the potion requires his blood to be at a resting state. I fear if you continue to torture him before the ritual some of the effects may be duplicated into your new body."

Sirius stiffened, a low growl escaping him. The bastard was torturing his son!

"I believe you've made a wise choice to wait, my Lord." Snape's voice sounded strongly through the mirror again.

"Thank Merlin! It sounds like Severus managed to convince him to wait until after the ritual before..." Remus's voice trailed away.

"Before continuing to torture Harry?" Sirius snarled caustically.

Remus placed a hand on Sirius's arm and Sirius was vaguely aware of the flash of amber that flitted through Remus's gaze as he silently warned the others to leave Sirius to him. "We always knew this would be the hardest part; that even if we knew the secret of the location, we have to let the ritual take place. It will be easier to get rid of Riddle if he inhabits a corporeal body than if he's still a wraith."

Sirius spun away from his old friend and paced the length of the room to the window. Outside the grey pavements with their myriad of puddles looked dirty and bleak. He breathed in deeply. He should never have allowed this. He should have found a different way. What had he been thinking?
Remus settled beside him again. "A few more hours, Padfoot, and it will be over. Tom Riddle will be gone; Harry will be safe. You and he can live long and happy lives. You just have to hold onto that."

Sirius dragged a hand over his face. "He's been tortured, Moony."

"And we'll heal every hurt when we can get to him." Remus stressed.

"Sirius!" Amelia called out to him urgently.

Sirius hurried back over to the mirror. "What?"

"The ritual..." Amelia cleared her throat and pointed to the dark mirror, "they're about to begin the ritual."

Sirius sat down abruptly. It had to happen; Voldemort had to regain his body and the ritual be completed so they could kill him once and for all. The theory was far too vague about what would happen to the wraith if all the horcruxes were destroyed prior to Riddle regaining a body of his own.

Harry wasn't alone, Sirius reminded himself. Snape for all his flaws and faults was with him. He'd already intervened about the torture...not to mention Bill was somewhere in the cemetery. Harry wasn't alone.

"The potion is ready, my Lord." Snape's voice echoed in the living room.

"Maybe you should step out, Padfoot?" Remus murmured with far too much sympathy in his voice.

Sirius shook his head. "No," he said roughly, "if Harry must suffer through this, it's the least I can do to bear witness."

Remus nodded and took the seat next to him. He offered his hand and Sirius took it, holding on tightly as a hush fell and they all stopped to listen to the resurrection of Riddle.

o-O-o

Harry squirmed against the ropes that bound him. There was a little bit of give in the set that tied his hands and wrists. He'd bet money that it had been Snape who'd tied him up. The Potions Professor would have tried to have given him some kind of advantage whereas Pettigrew seemed invested in the opposite – the gag was certainly tight enough.

Snape turned to the Voldemort-infested corpse. "The potion is ready, my Lord."

A huge snake slithered into view and wound itself around the legs of the seat Voldemort was perched upon. "I will watch them, Master, as you commanded."

Harry kept his expression blank, not wanting to give away that he had understood even if the likelihood of Wormtail not informing Voldemort that he was a parselmouth was slim.

"Excellent, Nagini." Voldemort replied. "Peter, deliver me to the cauldron!"

Harry watched unwillingly as Peter picked up the slimy husk and carried it to the large cauldron. He could hear the liquid inside bubbling away over the crackle of the fire that still burned below it.

Peter carefully lowered the Voldemort-thing into the cauldron. There was a slosh and plop as the liquid sucked the thing below its surface.
Snape pointed his wand at a nearby bag and a small vial whizzed past Harry and into Snape's hand. "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son." He intoned as he sprinkled the powder substance into the cauldron. Bright white sparks lit the night sky.

He kept the vial and nodded at Pettigrew.

Peter stepped forward and pulled a dagger from his robes. He held out his right hand with its missing finger over the cauldron's surface.

Harry could see how scared the rat was; it fairly blared from every line of his body, from the whites of his wide eyes, and tensed face.

"Flesh of the servant," Peter stuttered out, "willingly given; you will revive your master." He lifted the dagger high.

Harry turned away as it arched downwards and flinched at the shriek of agony which sounded through the graveyard. There was another splash as the flesh hit the liquid. Bright purple sparks shot into the air and there was a bubbling, churning, hissing sound coming from the cauldron.

Snape snapped a spell at the prone Pettigrew, huddled on the ground, cradling his mutilated arm to his body. Bandages wrapped themselves around the bleeding stump. Snape summoned the dagger Pettigrew had abandoned and caught it with finesse. He walked steadily over to Harry and knelt beside him.

Harry made a show of trying to get away from him. Snape's hand snapped out and grabbed his left arm – his least dominant one. Snape shoved the material of the shirt up until the wrist was revealed.

Snape's dark eyes glittered as they met Harry's. "Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe." He slid the knife into Harry's flesh, neatly avoiding all the major arteries and veins; ensuring the damage could be easily healed.

Harry cried out, the sound muffled by the gag, because – damn it! – it hurt! The dagger was drawn out of him, and placed on the ground while Snape spelled the blood that trickled down into the vial.

Snape waited until the vial was almost full before he stood up in a sharp movement. His wand twitched out and Harry felt the wound seal itself; knitting together tightly. It was painful but Harry was grateful for the simple healing. He couldn't afford any lingering weakness if he was to survive the confrontation to come.

The blood was added to the cauldron and almost immediately there was a bright red flash; static electricity shot out and around the cauldron. It was mesmerising until the reason for the display was considered.

Snape kept his back to Harry, eyes on the cauldron…

The snake hissed loudly in celebration, rising up to see…

Wormtail was a sobbing mess on the floor…

And Harry knew it was time to disappear.

Steam erupted from the cauldron in a thick white cloud…

Harry reached inside of himself to the Hallows and called…
A figure emerged from the cauldron as the cloud evaporated...a tall and muscled naked adult male with dark wild hair slicked with grey at the temples; sharp aristocratic features whose handsomeness was twisted by the cruel glint from red eyes. "Robe me!"

Harry closed his eyes and called again for his cloak, for the stone, for the wand...

_Hallows to me_, Harry whispered desperately; _Hallows to me, the last of the Peverells_...

As Snape hurried a distracted Voldemort into a black cloak, Harry felt the air stir; a wand slapped into his hand; the stone landed as a heavy weight in his pocket and the cloak wrapped itself around him, covering him completely...

"Thank you, Severus," Voldemort said politely, "you have done well." He stroked a hand down his robes. "My new body is excellent. _Is it not, Nagini?"

"_It is better._" Nagini replied.

Harry cast a localised severing charm on the ropes with the Elder wand.

Voldemort raised a hand and his wand sailed from the chair he'd occupied into his hand. He obliterated the chair with a silent blasting spell and Harry used the moment to pull free from his ropes and dart around the back of the headstone.

"Finally." Voldemort turned towards where Harry had been tied and froze.

Snape made a show of following Voldemort's gaze and giving a startled gasp. "Potter! But I had him tied up!"

Voldemort gave a low hiss and gestured at the dagger. "He must have used that to free himself. _Find him, Nagini! Bring him to me!_"

Harry kept huddled in his invisibility cloak. The snake slid right past him and gave no sign that it had even suspected at his location.

"No matter." Voldemort said slowly. "A Dementor friend guards the perimeter. He won't get far."

It explained the chill in the air, Harry mused.

Voldemort smiled nastily. "We'll deal with Potter soon but first..." he gestured at Snape, "your arm, Severus!"

Snape held out his arm and Voldemort poked his wand into the centre of the Dark Mark.

"'Think of the secret as I call them, Severus, so they will know where they are when they arrive." He laughed, a short inhuman sound. "Let's see who of them dares not answer my call after all this time!"

Harry repressed the sigh that wanted to escape. He'd hoped Voldemort would have to speak it out loud again and hopefully communicate it to Sirius. Still...Voldemort was voluntarily accepting additional players into the cemetery and they'd planned for that...all he had to do was wait.

O-O-O

Barty gave a laugh as he managed to clip Arthur Weasley with a cutting curse. The slash across the man's forehead started bleeding immediately.

The mercenary beside him sent another blasting hex down the stairs.
A vampire jumped down to the landing only to be dispatched with a beheading by the Durmstrang Champion. It was a decent beheading.

"THERE!"

The shout came from above them and suddenly spell-fire was raining down on them.

Barty swore and raised a shield, scuttling back behind cover. He caught a glimpse of Flitwick at the head of a large group of people and cursed again. The half-goblin was just as bloodthirsty as the rest of his species.

"SOLUS VAMPIRUS!"

Two of the vampires immediately disintegrated into dust; the others dived for the shadows.

Three men jumped down to the landing Barty was using. He recognised them immediately; werewolves.

It was time for him to retreat but first…

Barty threw a vial of potion into the air and fired off a flash spell to hide his own exit. The potion was the Carrows’ invention and would turn the werewolves into their animal form. They would be mindless rampaging beasts. Maybe they'd kill the vampires and the mercenaries along with the Weasley idiot and his friends but Barty wasn't too bothered by that.

He was disillusioned but he cast another scent-neutraliser and silencing spell as he ran down the corridor. He made it into a classroom and barricaded the doors. He headed for the window and was pleased to see it had a small trellis just outside of it which went all the way down to the rose garden. He set a fire in the corner of the classroom and started to climb down.

He'd been distracted into fighting the group on his way out which had been a mistake, Barty mused as he carefully avoided the growing roses and found his next handhold.

He had to remain focused.

He needed to find Black and take his revenge.

Nothing else mattered.

He looked out across the grounds and frowned. They seemed strangely deserted. Where were the tournament-goers? The rest of the Hogwarts’ staff? He glanced across to the Lake and glowered at the empty expanse of water; Durmstrang was gone and he would bet the rest of his galleons that Beauxbatons was gone too.

They knew.

Somehow they'd known that there would be an invasion.

Probably Moody's bloody paranoia, thought Barty with disgust as he lowered himself to the ground and brushed off the dirt that clung to his robes.

Or maybe they had a spy.

His upper lip curled.

Snape.
Well.

Barty didn't care. It didn't matter to him if the Light rallied and fought the Dark Lord, even if they won. All he cared about killing Black and destroying everything in his wake.

He casually set the rose garden alight as he walked through it.

He knew the maze had been situated at the Quidditch pitch with the stands there reused for the tournament audience. He headed across the grounds in that direction.

He had just rounded the Quidditch changing rooms when he froze at the right of two aurors stood just in front of him. One was smoking and the other was looking at his compatriot with disgust.

"Bloody hell, Jimmy, we're meant to be on duty." The younger one remarked.

"'m 'aving a last fag." Jimmy retorted. "They said we'd be battling vamps and Dementors, not standing on the side-lines guarding a poxy pathway, Padraig."

"You're just sore because Bones took the Rat Squad with her to find Potter." Padraig replied, the reprimanding tone strident in his voice.

"Of course, 'm bloody sore!" Jimmy muttered. "That's where the action'll be! Mebbe if I was there, I'd save the lad and be a hero! Lucy would have to drop her knickers for me then!"

"You're an idiot." Padraig stated. "You have as much chance at getting in her knickers as a Hippogriff."

Barty was amused. He shot out the Killing curse at the idiot, and before Padraig could do more than drop his mouth open in shock at the sight of his friend falling lifelessly to the ground, Barty had killed him too.

He lightly jogged across the ground to the Quidditch stands but slowed as he neared; voices carrying over the wind.

"Moody says Jimmy and Padraig just blinked out. We're to investigate." A crisp upper class accent said loudly.

"Jimmy's probably gone and done something stupid." Another voice complained. "He can barely find his own arse."

"That might be true, Lucinda, but we have our orders."

Lucinda. Barty turned the name over in his head. He wondered if Lucinda was the very sensible non-knicker dropping Lucy. He watched as the women came into view, turning the corner from the entry to the Ravenclaw stands.

One was a very pretty blonde; the other a statuesque brunette.

"Right then, Dorothy, you lead the way." The blonde, Lucinda, said.

Dorothy sighed and pointed in Barty's direction. "They're supposed to be over there."

Barty raised his wand in anticipation. It was like a duck shoot, he thought happily.

"Jimmy was pissed at not going with Bones." Lucinda shook her head. "I can't see either her or Lord Black putting up with his kind of antics, not when Potter's life is on the line."
"Neither can I." Dorothy sighed. "Did you see Black before he left? He looked so yummy in that
 dragon-hide."

"Yummy's the word." Lucinda was close enough for Barty to see her grin but he ignored her, his
entire body frozen as his mind caught up with their comments.

Black wasn't at Hogwarts.

Black had gone in search of Potter.

Black wasn't there and Barty had no idea where the Dark Lord was because the location had gone
under a Fidelius.

Bloody, buggering, bum-fuck!

Barty snarled out his anger and sent a blasting charm towards the stands. He was oblivious to the
shouts and yells as a group of aurors ran to investigate. He stormed away, heading to the gates.

He'd have to start at the Dark Lord's manor and head into the town...try to find Black there...

Pain shot through his left arm sending him to his knees and he struggled with the urge to scream.

Barty clutched onto his left forearm, slapping a hand over his Dark Mark.

It was done.

The Dark Lord was resurrected and was calling his Death Eaters.

Bloody Dark Lord.

If Barty had been mid-battle with Dumbledore he'd have been captured! Couldn't the bastard
distinguish between them all and leave him alone? He gulped in another breath and pushed a hand
through his hair, trying to think past the pain.

"The cemetery at Little Hangleton can be found behind the church."

The secret whispered itself into his brain as Barty panted for breath, his arm burning. He gritted his
teeth and surged up to stand. He cast a numbing charm over his arm; it dulled the call to an ache.

He could answer the call. Of course, if he simply answered the call, he'd be dead moments after
appearing since the Dark Lord had put him in charge of the forces at Hogwarts.

But...

He was disillusioned; he could hide in the graveyard and wait for Black to show up. Merlin knew the
bastard probably had some way of tracking Potter; some plan to rescue him.

Well, Barty had a plan now too, Barty thought with furious glee.

And his plan was the only plan that mattered.

He set off again for the gate.

As soon as he was clear of the Hogwarts ward line he'd apparate to Little Hangleton; oh, he'd have
to delay his plan to destroy Hogwarts completely but what was an hour or two between explosions
after all?
The white shimmer of the wolf patronus came to a halt in front of Minerva. "Riddle has his body. Harry's hiding. Do the ritual now." The patronus faded.

Hermione felt her heart leap into her throat. Harry had been hurt; his blood taken. It was necessary for the resurrection but...

She touched her necklace again. He was hidden by the Hallows. He was safe. For the time-being.

"Places, everyone!" Minerva said loudly.

They all made their way to the living room. It had been part of their preparations during the previous week.

It had been cleared of furniture and decorations; the hideous carpet had been removed to reveal plain wooden floorboards. The walls had been whitewashed and the room thoroughly cleaned with sage.

There were two circles laid out on the floor with plain thick white candles.

The inner circle was only for Dora, Andy, and Narcissa; the blood daughters of the House of Black. There had been quite a discussion about whether Hermione should be within the circle as she was a sworn daughter but ultimately the arithmancy had determined three in the centre and seven in the outer circle.

Minerva ushered the rest of them into position in between the two circles.

Hermione held her breath as she took her place. Vivien Verte took North as the eldest; Ginny took the position to her left as the youngest. Griselda stood beside Vivien on her right and Augusta next to her. There was a space left for Minerva. Molly was next, with Hermione herself rounding out the circle to Ginny.

They each wore delicate white robes edged with silver and gold thread, the crests of Black and Potter stamped upon their cuffs. It was their only clothing. They were all barefoot. They had each undergone a cleansing before they had changed and Hermione felt almost naked. She touched the necklace she wore. She'd been allowed to keep it for the ritual; its connection with Harry allowing it to be present.

"One last check," Andy called out, "we could be here for some time. We don't know how long it will take to summon Morgana Le Fey. Does anybody need another comfort break?" Her eyes glanced over the two pregnant women next to her.

Dora rolled her eyes.

Narcissa sniffed imperiously.

"Right, Ladies, candles."

They all stooped and picked up the candle behind them.

Minerva switched off the lights. She took her own place in the circle and accepted the candle Augusta offered her. She nodded briskly. "If you please."

Andy smiled. "Lumos."

The candles lit up; their steady yellow flames brightened the room.
"Blessings be to magic." Andy began. "We women of the House of Black gather, protected by our sworn sisters, to call upon Morgana of the line of Le Fey and beseech her help to guard our child, Harry, son of the House of Black. I am Andromeda, mother of the House of Black and I stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter. Morgana, hear my call by blood, by magic, by spirit."

"Hear her call." Hermione joined in the chime with the rest of the outer circle.

"Blessings be to magic." Narcissa picked up the chant. "I am Narcissa of the House of Black, mother of the House of Black and I stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter. Morgana, hear my call by blood, by magic, by spirit."

"Hear her call."

Dora took a breath. "Blessings be to magic. I am Nymphadora of the House of Black, mother of the House of Black and I stand in the place of Lily of the family Potter."

"Hear her call."

"Blessings be to magic." Andy began again, and the chant continued.

Time slipped away.

Two, three times they spoke the chant.

And Andy begun again.

Hermione kept focused and willed Morgana to appear.

Four, five times.

"Hear her call."

Six.

Hermione pushed away any despondency; Harry was depending on them.

"Blessings be to magic…"

Hermione felt the candles flicker at Andy's seventh intonation; magic swirled around the room; its touch against her skin electrifying.

"…I stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter. Morgana, hear my call by blood, by magic, by spirit."

The candles flamed higher.

"…I stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter. Morgana, hear my call by blood, by magic, by spirit."

And higher.

"…I stand in the place of Lily of the House of Potter. Morgana, hear my call by blood, by magic, by spirit."

Hermione wished with all her heart; she had to save Harry. "HEAR HER CALL."
And the candles went out, plunging them into darkness.

Silence.

The candles flared to life; brighter than before.

Hermione blinked.

And in the centre of their circles stood the silver spirit of Morgana Le Fey.

o-O-o

Harry pressed himself against the gravestone and watched as Voldemort laughed harshly as he called for his Death Eaters.

He tightened his grip on the Elder wand, thankful for the cover of the cloak, even the weight of the stone was a comfort.

His family's legacy.

Defeater of Dark Lords.

Death's Champion.

The Raven that stalked the battlefield.

Harry took a breath; calm and centred.

It was time to send the last pieces of Voldemort's soul to Death.
Neville entered Gryffindor tower cautiously, stepping through the portrait doorway with his wand already drawn. He frowned at the sight of three dishevelled witches holding the Creevey brothers at wand-point; the two muggleborn brothers were bound and unconscious.

"Neville!" Lavender noticed him first and her voice teetered on the edge of hysterical. Her skirt and blouse were torn and there were bruises and scratches all over her. "Thank Merlin!"

Neville turned back and motioned for Blaise and Hannah to join him before spinning back to the group. "What's going on?" He gestured at Padma who was the most level-headed to explain. "Padma? You're not even a Gryffindor; you shouldn't be here."

"She's not?" Blaise muttered. "I thought she was."

"I'm a Ravenclaw. I went to find my sister as soon as the call for the evacuation came, but Parvati insisted on looking for Lavender because she'd come back here," Padma sighed. "I wasn't going to let my baby sister go off by herself so…"

"I only came back to the tower because I realised I didn't have my wand, Neville." Lavender babbled almost in tears. "I was so excited about the tournament I forgot it! When I realised I ran back and found it but then…" her eyes landed on the Creevey brothers.

Hannah cleared her throat. "Sue and I saw them on our way into the castle. They said Colin had run out of film and they were going to get some more."

"Yeah? Well, we found the Creevey brothers trying to assault Lavender so they clearly took advantage of the situation." Padma concluded.

"Bastards!" Parvati muttered.

It was so uncharacteristic of the chirpy brothers that Neville couldn't believe it. He glanced at Blaise and found him mid-wand movement.

"Imperius." Blaise declared. "Someone set them on her." He went to wake them up but Hannah stepped in front of him.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Hannah waved back towards Lavender. "What if they're still imperiused?"

"The stunning will have reset their brains." Padma answered almost in unison with Blaise.

They looked at each other before blushing and turning away.

Neville woke the brothers up briskly.
Dennis blinked rapidly. "What…?"

Colin came round with a gasp. "Ow! What hit me?" He blanched as he realised he was tied up and so was Dennis. "What…what's going on? Who tied us up?"

"I did." Parvati admitted without a hint of remorse. "You were hurting Lavender."

Colin paled. "I would never!"

"You were both under the Imperius." Blaise informed him. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Colin swallowed hard as he thought. "We'd come into the entrance hall and…" he glanced at Hannah, "Sue and Hannah were there and we talked a bit and then we started up towards Gryffindor tower and then…nothing! I don't remember anything else!"

"We have to leave." Neville said grimly. "We can sort this out later." He reached into his pocket and brought out his emergency portkey, a sock. "This will take you straight to the infirmary." He released the Creeveys. "I'm sorry but you're all going to have to go together."

Padma nodded briskly. Lavender sighed tremulously and Parvati put an arm around her.

"Let me." Hannah took it from Neville and carried it over to Padma. She handed it to the other girl with a soft smile.

Padma frowned as Hannah stepped back. "You're not coming with us?"

"I'm staying with Neville." Hannah said.

Padma held out the sock. Lavender and Parvati took hold of it and Colin encouraged his brother into doing the same.

"Portus!" Padma called out firmly.

Neville watched as they disappeared from view. He exchanged a glance with Blaise who sent a meaningful glance in Hannah's direction briefly.

"Hannah," Neville said cautiously, "how did you and Sue get separated?"

Hannah frowned at him and bristled. "I needed the bathroom if you must know, Neville. She came in with me and went to the sinks while I…you know." She blushed furiously. "I thought she was just outside the stall and I was chattering to her but when I stepped out she wasn't there."

Neville frowned heavily…

"Someone will betray us." Harry stated as though it was fact.

_They were sitting on Neville's bed in the dorm. Harry had stayed after the flying session. The others had disappeared to make preparations for the weekend. Neville half-wondered why Harry hadn't but then the weight of the conversation they'd had before stayed with him._

"That's not…" Neville went to argue.

_Harry shook his head. "Learn from our mistakes, right? Pettigrew betrayed my parents, Sirius, Remus, everyone – and he did it without anyone suspecting a thing. We have no way of knowing if we have another Pettigrew in our midst."_
And that was horrifyingly so true that Neville took a well-earned moment to panic. Then a thought struck him and he turned back to Harry.

"How'd you know it's not me?" asked Neville.

"Is it you?" asked Harry with a glint of amusement.

Neville settled for glowering at him.

"Just..." Harry shrugged. "You know, constant vigilance!"

"Damn it." Neville muttered. He couldn't shake the feeling he was missing something. Sue was gone. Someone had imperiused the Creeveys before the invasion started. Hannah wasn't on the map.

Ron's half-forgotten drunken theory popped into his head. What if Hannah or Sue were actually Crouch?

"Neville," Hannah interrupted his wool-gathering, "shouldn't we be making a move? I want to get to my Dad. He and the others could be at the Headmaster's office by now."

"We should." Neville agreed. He didn't want to take out the map in front of her; they'd have to take their chances. He glanced at Blaise who nodded as though he'd understood.

If they believed Hannah's story potentially Sue was Crouch...but if she wasn't telling the truth...

He sighed and led them back out of the tower.

o-O-o

For what seemed like endless moments, there was nothing but the dark of the Forest before them; scarily silent and undoubtedly brimming with threat, a cold stealing over the ground and through the air as though the Dementors didn't care who knew they were lurking.

And perhaps they didn't, Albus considered. Hagrid stirred beside him, fidgeting with the club he held. Kingsley Shacklebolt glanced at the Hogwarts gamekeeper but kept silent. He and the rest of the auror contingent waiting with Albus were tensed; waiting. The werewolves shifted restlessly beyond them.

They'd heard of the casualties back at the castle, heard of people winking out from the map; knew they'd already taken losses...

Suddenly, it was as though a switch was flicked –

Vampires burst from the treeline in wave...

"LUMOS MAXIMUS!" yelled Albus loudly.

Light filled the sky as though it was day - Albus's power at full force - and A whip of fire took out five vampires as Shacklebolt raced to meet the threat...

Hagrid clubbed three into the Black Lake where the Squid caught them tightly.

"Dementors!" Someone called out as they drifted into view behind the vamps, like a wave of black evil.
Fawkes flashed into being; landing on Albus's shoulder with a loud brilliant trill. And Fawkes sang…the song lifting Albus's heart…

Albus lifted his wand. His mind filled with thoughts of love and family; laughter in their childhood home where their father ruffled his sons' hair, kissed his daughter's forehead; where their mother scolded them for pranks with barely hidden mirth; where Abe called him brother and Ariana gave him socks…

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Albus called out strongly, oblivious to Hagrid plucking away a vampire who had managed to steal close to him away and crushing its head.

A fierce wild phoenix erupted from Albus's wand and swept ahead of him.

It sent the Dementors tumbling back to the Forest…inhuman cries filling the sky as Aragog's children found a meal.

Patronus after patronus burst from the ward line and leapt towards the Forest; a duck and a tiger; a squirrel and a snake…

All fighting for the Light.

Albus thought of Harry and lifted his wand. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Another massive phoenix patronus burst free and scattered the Dementors.

And still another wave of vampires emerged.

Albus set his shoulders and took a breath.

He would not let them pass.

He would fight to the end.

o-O-o

Severus barely repressed the flinch as Voldemort stepped back finally and let go. The Dark Mark burned and Severus could barely lift his arm.

"Bring me my clothes." The Dark Lord commanded imperiously.

Severus took a deep breath and summoned the bag of clothing they had set aside earlier. "Your apparel, My Lord."

Voldemort cast a spell and his clothes flew around him in a tornado that hid his naked body from view.

It was a decent body, Severus reflected, disgusted. He had brewed the potion to perfection. Perhaps it said something that his greatest achievement was the resurrection of the darkest wizard of all time. He shuddered lightly.

He fingered the mirror in his pocket.

At least Potter was following the plan and had hidden himself. Now there only needed an opportunity – an opening for Severus to tell Black where they were. He had hoped to speak the secret aloud when Voldemort called the Death Eaters to him but the Dark Lord had circumvented that idea. Severus practically vibrated with frustration.
"Better." Voldemort declared. "Now, Peter; rise and you will receive your reward."

Severus repressed the urge to grimace. Pettigrew deserved nothing but what he was doing; writhing around in the dirt in pain. He barely paid attention as Voldemort set to making the rat a new silver appendage.

Clearly, Severus decided abruptly, if the Dark Lord wasn't going to give him an opening. He would have to make one.

His eyes fell to the tangle of rope where Potter – Harry had been tied up. He had vowed to keep Lily's son safe; he had promised himself he would see the Dark Lord dead for killing her. If he was to succeed, he couldn't take the chance on an opening suddenly arising; he had to create one.

Of course, Severus mused as Peter cooed and babbled about his hand, the moment after he created the opening, he'd be dead at the Dark Lord's wand but...he could use those vital seconds to attack and try to land some damage that would help weaken the dark wizard.

And what was his life worth?

Far better that he sacrifice himself for the cause than Potter, than Harry. Yes, mused Severus as the first Death Eater arrived, he would wait for the right moment and give Black the secret. He would sacrifice his life to enable Harry to live and defeat the Dark Lord. If such an act was right for Lily, than it was right for him too. He was ready to die.

o-O-o

"Minister!"

"Minister, what's your..."

"Minister, where is Harry Potter?"

"Minister, do you believe..."

Percy winced at the noise level in the ballroom of the Black Estate and wiped his brow tiredly. He wished fervently that he'd chosen a different assignment. Maybe he could have stayed with his father and brothers at Hogwarts or gone with Charlie to guard Saint Mungo's, but he had believed that he would be an asset to the evacuation, able to quickly shepherd the kids through the Ministry to the Black Estate where they would be safe.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Cornelius's voice rose above all the chatter as he took the stage at the front of the ballroom, "please, if you can all be quiet for a moment, I have a statement!"

The crowd settled.

It was a weird mix of Ministry personnel – they had evacuated at the same time as Hogwarts, the tournament crowd including the press, and some of the Hogwarts staff and students.

"Firstly, I want to thank you all for your patience and cooperation." Cornelius began a touch pompously but he was dressed only in trousers with colourful bright green braces, and a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. "I know many of you have questions about what is happening, why you've been brought here. I have the following statement."

Percy's eyes widened as his former girlfriend offered the Minister a piece of parchment.
"In June last year Lord Black presented evidence to the Ministry of a threat to his ward and soon-to-be-son, Lord Potter. This threat was the wraith of the former Lord Voldemort, also known as the wizard Tom Riddle."

A murmur went around some of the crowd but Percy could see that it didn’t appear to be news for the Hogwarts students.

"Together the Ministry as a whole with Lord Black have been seeking to contain this threat. Unfortunately despite our best efforts, Voldemort managed through his agents, the wanted criminals Bartemius Crouch Junior and Peter Pettigrew, to place Harry Potter into the tournament as a means to torture and kidnap him for a ritual that would take place on the eve of the solstice; this very night."

There was a hushed silence.

"In the knowledge that the kidnap attempt would take place and that there would likely be an attack on elsewhere in the magical world this night, we have made preparations." Cornelius looked out steadily at the crowd. "Even now Ministerial forces, the werewolf packs of Europe, devoted Hogwarts’ staff including Albus Dumbledore, fight against the forces of darkness at Hogwarts. More including Lord Black and his allies are in place to assist young Harry in his fight against Voldemort."

He raised a hand when muttering began.

"There is a prophecy spoken years ago that declared Harry James Potter to be the one to free us from Voldemort. We applaud the courage and bravery of that young man in stepping forward to meet his destiny and fate tonight; to fight for us; to fight for the Light. We all hope and pray that Harry will succeed."

Percy wasn’t surprised when the Minister paused and allowed everyone to absorb that news.

"Lord Black has provided his home to us as a safe haven. The wards here are strong enough to deter Voldemort and his followers. You will be made comfortable while we wait for news. I ask for your indulgence and continued patience."

He stepped away without asking for questions and immediately was swallowed up by a small group from the Potter alliance and Bertie Croaker. Percy recognised Daniel Greengrass and Tiberius Ogden.

Percy began to make his way over to them. There had to be more that he could do than simply wait around like a spare part. He pushed past one group people, round another and…walked straight into Penny.

She stumbled and he hurriedly reached out to steady her.

"Percy." Penny smiled at him tentatively.

"Penny." Percy reluctantly let go of her. "Apologies, I was trying to get to the Minister to offer my help and…"

"You could help me." Penny cut in. She flushed at his wide-eyed look and brushed her fringe away from her forehead; an adorable habit she had when she was nervous. "I mean, there's lots to do and I…I could do with some help."

"Then you have it." Percy declared.

She smiled brightly at him. "Come with me then."
Percy nodded in satisfaction as he followed her out of the ballroom. He just hoped the rest of his family were safe.

o-O-o

Harry watched silently as the Death Eaters arrived.

One by one they came; clothed in black apparel apart from the white masks. The graveyard filled until more than twenty stood there.

At the sight of their Dark Lord more than one prostrated themselves; some did not. Harry figured that Tom was taking note of each and every one.

"Welcome back my followers." Voldemort began smoothly. He walked the length of the loose line the Death Eaters had formed.

"As is evident, I have returned." Voldemort cast a hard look at the group. "Those who believed me vanquished by a mere babe should lower themselves to the ground and grovel before me."

One stooped as though to follow the instruction before halting in a jerky motion when he realised he was the only one.

Harry grimaced. That Death Eater was an idiot, he thought dryly; whoever it was had just effectively confessed to his Dark Lord that he’d thought Harry had vanquished him.

Voldemort unleashed another crucio and the Death Eater fell to the floor screaming in agony.

Harry looked away, the memory of his own time under Voldemort's curse leaping into his mind.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Avery, never to doubt me again."

Avery crawled over to kiss the hem of the Dark Lord's robe. "My Lord."

Voldemort briskly ordered him back in line. Harry winced at the way Avery was limping.

"None of you should doubt me again." Voldemort said strongly. "I told you long ago that I am immortal and so tonight you have your proof." He paused. "But perhaps I can forgive your doubts as I was tricked those years ago; tricked by a smart witch using Old Magic." He ran a hand down his body. "But I have removed the protection Harry Potter once carried and if he wasn't a coward hiding from me among the gravestones I would prove it to you." He smiled nastily. "I will once Nagini finds him and herds him back to face me."

Nobody spoke.

"I've called you here at the start of my resurrection, at the start of a new beginning for us," Voldemort said. "Even now my army is storming Hogwarts. It will be mine before the night is out and then a new dawn will be upon us and we will begin to build a new wizarding world. We will rid ourselves of the filth that inhabit our hallowed halls..."

One of the Death Eaters stepped out of the loose formation they had formed and removed his mask. Benjamin Nott gazed at his Dark Lord with steady eyes.

Harry swallowed, his discomfort forgotten as the sense that something of great importance was about to happen. He hunched down but kept his eyes on the centre of the graveyard.

Voldemort glared at Nott. "Why have you interrupted me, Nott?"
Nott sighed and with a gesture the mask in his hand disappeared. "I remember this speech the first time you gave it. All of us sitting in the Slytherin common room, talking about how you would change the world and we would be by your side. You promised a great many things and we would have followed you anywhere."

"Do you no longer believe in me, Benjamin?" Voldemort said silkily. "Has my one defeat so shaken your faith in me? When I drag the boy before you and show you he is just a boy who survived because of his mother's luck, will that strengthen your faith?"

Nott hummed. "My faith died the night Sebastien died."

There was no sign of recognition on Voldemort's face.

"You will not remember him," Nott said bitterly, "for what was he to you but another pawn in your game? But he was mine and you killed him. You've killed so many of us because that is your true goal. Not to lead us into a glorious new age but to simply destroy the world which would not recognise or help a penniless orphan boy until he gained enough power for the truth of that not to matter."

"You deny me because of I killed some stupid child?" Voldemort sneered in disbelief.

"A child I loved." Benjamin stood straight. "Family." He met Voldemort's hard eyes with courage. "I will not let you harm my family again."

Voldemort's handsome face twisted into something ugly. "You challenge me, Benjamin Nott?" He gestured dismissively. "You are old and powerless."

"I may be old," Nott acknowledged dryly, "some of us have lived with the same one body for the past sixty odd years after all, but I am far from powerless and there has always been magic in this world you have not understood, Tom Marvolo Riddle. My ancestors once vowed to protect this world and I will follow them now." He smiled suddenly and lifted his voice. "The House of Nott surrenders to the House of Black."

Voldemort's wand flicked outward, green lightening snapping forth…

Nott didn't even go for his wand, he stood and let the curse take him.

Harry's eyes slid shut as the dull thud of Nott's body hitting the ground echoed across the cemetery like thunder.

"Does anyone else dare deny me?" Voldemort shouted, whirling around to face his followers, black hair streaming behind him, his robes swirling around him.

Another lifted his hand and removed his mask. Wilkes looked out at Voldemort disgruntled. A few others unmasked.

Harry's heart beat fast in his chest. It was all those who held détentes with the House of Black; Gibbon, Selwyn…all of them…

"You should not have killed him," Selwyn said, his voice shaking but his face was set in determined lines. "Unlike you, he was a pureblood Lord!"

Voldemort glowered at them. "You think you better than I? The Heir to Slytherin?"

"Our magic has protected this world for centuries." Wilkes replied gruffly. "It will protect it for
centuries long after we are dead and you have no part in that. You claim a blood status that is not your own and kill everyone no matter what their blood!"

"We followed you blindly once." Selwyn said. "We will not follow you again."

Voldemort reacted violently, the torture curse landing on Selwyn and sending him to the ground in agony.

Wilkes stepped forward as though he couldn't stop himself. "Do you intend to kill and torture us all?"

The curse blinked out and Selwyn huddled on the ground.

Voldemort regarded them with an amused lift of his eyebrows. "I only intend to kill and torture those who are disloyal." He waved his hand down the line. "Who is loyal to me here?"

Avery immediately stepped forward to stand behind Voldemort. Peter scurried into place. Others slowly started to break the line and move. Eventually only those who had unmasked were left on their own along with one more.

Voldemort took a step towards that one Death Eater. "You, Lucius? You deny me?"

Lucius tugged the hood from his head and unmasked. He grimaced but he kept a dignified silence.

"So Black has been successful in seducing you." Voldemort said tutting.

For once Harry felt sorry for the Malfoy patriarch. Although Lucius's oaths to the House of Black wouldn't stop him pretending disloyalty if he was desperate enough, they would make it difficult for the wizard.

Voldemort paced around the wizard and froze. "What is this?" He hissed.

He grabbed Lucius's arm and with his wand tore away cloth to reveal the Dark Mark. He pressed his wand against it and Harry saw Lucius's face distort with pain.

"A beacon?" Voldemort snarled.

Harry's eyes widened. Was Sirius on his way?

"What did you sell me out for, Lucius? Your life? Your magic? Both?" Voldemort lashed out again. A cutting curse slashed through Lucius's leg and he fell to the ground with an agonised cry.

"CRUCIO!"

The curse hit Lucius and he screamed.

Harry couldn't bear Lucius's cries. Whether Lucius had worn the beacon willingly or not, he was under the protection of the House of Black. With a thought the cloak slid away and into a pocket.

"STOP!" Harry sprang forward from his hiding place and banished a headstone into the path of the curse with the Elder wand.

Lucius remained on the ground, gasping and trembling. In the eerie twilight, Harry could see that the leg Voldemort had hit was bleeding badly.

Voldemort turned to Harry with a sneer. "Potter." He twirled his wand through his fingers. "You would reveal yourself for Lucius?"
"For family." Harry said, remembering Nott's words.

Lucius's gaze flickered to him and he gave a short nod of acknowledgement, of confirmation. Harry's heart lifted a touch even as fear curled through them. Sirius was on his way. He gripped his wand tighter.

Voldemort lifted his eyebrows. "I think you actually believe that."

Harry pressed his lips together. "He's protected."

"Protected?" Voldemort laughed harshly and a murmur went through the assembled line of Death Eaters. He stared malevolently at Harry. "You cannot protect him, Harry Potter. You cannot protect any of them." His arm snapped outward, the Killing curse leaving his wand…

The green light sped toward Lucius…

Harry reached out his hand and the silver snake of the Blacks appeared…it wrapped itself around Lucius…

The Killing curse arched downward…

Lucius and the snake disappeared in a shower of silver…

The curse impacted the grass and the ground cracked open.

Voldemort howled a denial and whirled on Harry. His black hair streamed out behind him, his nostrils flaring wide. "You will pay for that, Potter!" But Harry could see the flicker in his eyes; Harry could see the doubt and uncertainty that had crept in.

"'And he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not.'" Snape said stepping out from the line behind Voldemort.

His words travelled like lightning across the graveyard and Voldemort tensed as they impacted as sharply as though they were knives.

"Severus!" Voldemort snarled. "You challenge me?! You take his side? The son of the wizard who stole your witch?"

Snape stared down Voldemort; eyes dark with anger. "Better his side than the monster who killed her." He sneered. "The cemetery at Little Hangleton can be found behind the church." He declared and then he attacked.

o-O-o

Albus allowed he was a touch winded as he paused and took a breath before levelling a group of vampires with a directed sunlight charm.

To his left a bloodied Shacklebolt sent another vampire to dust.

And another wave of Dementors moved out of the Forest.

"We can't keep this up!" Shacklebolt gasped.

"Yes, we can," Albus said gravely, "and we must!"

Suddenly, a cacophony of pops were heard. The Hogwarts House elves lined up on their side of the
ward line, ready to fight, ready to die.

Fawkes streamed across the space and darted in between the Dementors singing loudly. An anguished shriek erupted from the deadly creatures and one stretched out a bony hand towards the bird…

Albus slashed a cutting curse across the space between them and dismembered the Dementor's limb before it could touch his familiar. He raised his wand. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

They would prevail. Hogwarts would not fall.

He would stand until there was no breath left in his body.

o-O-o

Arthur scurried back as the vampire reached for him and suddenly there was a werewolf leaping…it took the throat of the vampire and sent it crashing to dust on the staircase below.

And there was silence.

"We're clear!" Flitwick's voice boomed through the staircase.

Arthur staggered to his feet. Blood ran freely down the side of his face but he couldn't remember how he'd been injured.

A pale and pained Leonard helped Richard stand and the head of the House of Bones hopped gingerly on one foot, unable to place weight on what appeared to be a broken ankle. Beside him Krum held one arm to his side protectively; it was clearly broken.

They all glanced at the bodies around them. Mercenaries littered the staircase; vampire dust covered the stone. The Diggorys remained still.

"I need to get to the Headmaster's office." Arthur said, his only thought for his own sons. They had gotten away; he knew that much. He'd seen them disappear into the hidden tunnel. He hoped they were safe.

Flitwick came down as far as he could; a dozen aurors behind him; the werewolves gathered off to the side and sat down, waiting. The damaged staircase had creating a yawning chasm between Arthur and the path to the office.

"Right," Viktor said coughing wetly, "we should…"

"You should go to the infirmary, Mister Krum." Flitwick advised immediately. He brandished the parchment that Arthur knew was a copy of the Marauder's map. "You all should. According to the map there's a second wave of invaders coming through the Divination classroom."

Arthur's heart sank. "I need to go to my boys."

"Arthur…" Richard protested.

"No, you go to the infirmary, but I," Arthur shook his head, "they're my children!"

Richard nodded in understanding. "We still haven't found Sue." His voice edged on hysteria.

"I'll go with Arthur." Leonard said. "I can find the girls."
"Neither Miss Abbott nor Miss Bones are within Hogwarts' walls according to the map. They must have evacuated." Flitwick said.

Richard raised a shaking hand to his eyes, hiding his tears of relief.

"Thank Merlin for that." Leonard said. "Still, I'll go with Arthur and…" he'd barely taken a step when he grimaced and held a hand to his side. It came away bloody.

"All of you to the infirmary then apart from Mister Weasley." Flitwick waved his wand and Arthur found himself floating to the upper part of the staircase. He was gently set down.

Richard pulled a sock from his pocket and a moment later the three men on the lower landing were gone.

Flitwick gestured at Arthur. "This way."

They set off up the stairs and took the next landing, hurrying down a corridor.

Flitwick suddenly stopped them.

Arthur frowned. "What's…?"

"Look!" Flitwick pointed.

Grey bilious smoke filled the end of the corridor.

They went forward cautiously.

As they peered through the smoke they could see the raging fire beyond; a burning gauntlet of flame and fiery horror.

"Fiendfyre!" Arthur gasped.

"Yes," Flitwick said darkly, "set and left to roam." He shook his head. "We'll need all wands to get through."

"TAKE COVER!" yelled a voice behind them and Arthur ducked as a bright blue spell hit the wall above him.

He turned and his eyes widened. Another group of vampires and mercenaries had flanked them at the rear.

Ahead of them was the fire…

They were trapped!

o-O-o

Moody reviewed the map with a grimace.

Albus was just about holding the Forest ward line with a group of werewolves, aurors and Unspeakables. The kids were still some way from the office but they were on their way. At least Longbottom had gotten his strays to the infirmary, but it looked though as if he'd decided to head to the Headmaster's office too. Flitwick was mid-battle with a second invading force and it looked like he needed reinforcements. The only ones available were right in front of Moody protecting the platform.
"Alpha!"


"I need you and your men here." Moody pointed at the map.

Gregor raised his eyebrows. "I will send my men but I will remain."

"No need." Moody said briskly. "I can take care of myself. Just take care of that lot!"

For a long moment it looked as though Gregor was going to argue and Moody wondered again at whether it had been wise to involve the Alpha in the fight. He had to be fighting his instinct to run things constantly.

Gregor gave in with a huffy under-growl. "Very well." He whistled and his men followed from the pitch.

Moody focused on his work; sending patronus messages to Flitwick to let him know help was on the way; to the Minister who required updating; to Albus…

He froze.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled and he grasped his wand firmly, silently casting a shield.

"Reveal yourself!" Moody ordered. "I know you're there!"

A shimmer in the air in front of the platform caught his eye and a moment later the disillusionment spell fell and Dennis Travers Junior stood in front of Moody.

"Well, well, well." Moody said brightly.

"You killed my father." Dennis said angrily. "I will have my revenge!"

"You're an idiot." Moody responded. "But if it's a fight you want…” he grinned, his magical eye whirling, "it's a fight you'll get!"

-o-O-o-

Hermione felt like she couldn't breathe. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her skin prickled with goose-bumps. She felt judged as Morgana's eyes swept around the room before they settled on Andromeda.

"You have summoned me, Andromeda of the House of Black." Morgana said sternly.

"We seek your help to protect our child, Morgana of the line of Le Fey." Andy bowed her head in respect.

"Harry of the House of Potter, of the House of Black is shielded by my blessing." Morgana returned evenly. "What other help would you have me give to the Raven who is Death's Champion, Master of Death's Hallows?"

Hermione swallowed the urge to jump in and speak.

"Riddle has stolen his blood this night to bring about his resurrection." Andy answered respectfully. "We believe with this act he has negated the shield of Lily and of yourself."
Morgana's strong features settled into thoughtful contemplation. "So you have said; so it is. The child no longer has my blessing."

"We wish only for you to restore what has been stolen from our child." Andy said.

Morgana tilted her head. "What is lost is not so easy to restore." She gazed at Andy. "I will ask but three questions, one to each of the witches who stands before me, and all must answer truly or the blessing will be forfeit. Do you agree?"

Andy sent a quick glance around the room and Hermione nodded along with the others.

"We agree." Andy replied.

"What is Harry to you truly, Andromeda of the House of Black, the House of Tonks?"

"He is hope and salvation of my family." Andy said quietly. "He is the Light that fights the Dark, but more than that he is the heart of our family. He is Sirius's son and heir and he is beloved, and it is for him that our family has been reconciled and renewed with love." Her eyes flashed to Narcissa. "Bonds that were broken have been healed," she glanced at Hermione, "and new bonds created with those who love us. He is our heart."

"And to you Narcissa of the House of Black, of the House of Malfoy, what is Harry to you truly?"

Narcissa's eyes glittered. "He is the hope and salvation for my children." She placed a hand over the heavy swell of her belly. "He is Sirius's reason for being; for him my cousin would tear down mountains and raise up fire; as any parent would for their child. He is the reason why I and my children have safety and shelter." Her eyes went to Augusta. "He is the reason why I would choose the Light and reject the Dark." She also looked at Hermione. "He is our shield."

Hermione wasn't surprised when Morgana turned to Dora next.

"What is Harry to you, Nymphadora of the House of Black, of the House of Lupin?"

Dora's chin came up and her shoulders straightened. "He is hope and salvation for my pack." She took a breath. "He is the reason for every action Sirius takes; for every action my husband makes. He is their reason for living; he is their North star and he shines with the Light so much it blinds me sometimes." Her gaze moved to Ginny. "He is the knight in shining armour little girls dream about," and she looked at Hermione, "and he is hero who chooses the girl strong enough to stand beside him." She looked back at Morgana. "He is our spirit."

Morgana hummed. "You have answered the first question truthfully."

Hermione gave a sigh of relief. One question down and one to go.

o-O-o

"NAGINI!" Voldemort hollered, batting away Snape's Sectumsempra spell as though it were a fly.

The snake sprang out of nowhere, striking Snape outstretched wand hand with deadly accuracy. Harry cast to banish her and his spell was also countered by Voldemort.

Voldemort spun to face Harry and cast a deadly purple curse. Harry shielded himself immediately, leaping away.

But there were pops around them; the cavalry arriving. Someone flung a sock at Snape and he
disappeared.

"MY PREY!" hissed Nagini outraged.

And from the sky Hedwig struck out at the snake, claws raking across Nagini's body before Hedwig evaded the strike back and took to the air again. Another bird, a small sparrow that Harry recognised as Caro's animagus form struck while Nagini was focused on Hedwig; claws raked over the snake's tail leaving bloody tracks.

Harry yanked his eyes away from the sight and focused on his enemy.

Voldemort and the loyal Death Eaters gathered to the right. Beside his Dark Lord, Pettigrew's eyes were round with fear.

Harry felt Sirius's hand on his shoulder; Remus to his other side. Around them stood the Rat Squad, Amelia and the Death Eaters who had cast Voldemort aside.

"Too much of a coward to face me alone?!" Voldemort sneered.

"I'm never alone, Tom." Harry replied strongly.

"Tom Riddle," Amelia intoned sternly somewhere to his left, "you are under arrest for terrorist attacks against the lawful government of Magical Britain, for the invasion of Hogwarts and the kidnapping and assault of Lord Potter." She gazed around his followers. "Pettigrew will be arrested for murder but so far none of the rest of you have actually committed a crime. Walk away now or you will face charges."

Someone at the back tried to apparate and failed.

Voldemort struck out without even looking and killed him. "Fight or die!" His eyes glittered with madness. "Potter is mine!" He cast a frightening dark maroon curse that would boil the skin from bones…

Harry responded, the Elder wand countering the spell immediately.

And the battle was begun.

o-O-o

Sirius transformed and leaped to charge Voldemort.

It had been absolute torture waiting for the signal to attack.

Lucius had been ordered to wear the beacon to allow them to get close. It was an invention of MI7 for use by their operatives. They hadn't been sure if the magic of the Fidelius would mask it but it had sounded through loud and clear. Sirius didn't regret the order regardless of what Lucius had endured because of it. The beacon had led them to the church, allowed them to be close…close enough to hear when Snape sacrificed himself to finally let them in.

Sirius spared a thought for his childhood nemesis; the snake's attack had looked brutal and he knew she was poisonous. He hoped Bill and Caro remembered that; as the treasure team they were on snake-killing duty as it remained a possible final horcrux.

Remus had declared dibs on Wormtail and Sirius wasn't going to deny Moony his chosen battle. Not when it gave him the chance to stay and fight with Harry.
Voldemort glowered and sent a spell his way. Sirius evaded and landed behind Voldemort. He went to move forward but before he could a blow to his side had him stumbling away. Sirius transformed immediately – only just in time to shield against another blasting spell. He scented something but nothing was there…

A hand caught his roughly around the wrist.

And suddenly the air in front of him shimmered and fell away to reveal a figure.

"You!"

"Me!" Crouch agreed tersely. "You took Rab from me and now you'll pay!"

"Bring it, Crouch!" Sirius said, his mind filling with every threat the wizard had made against Harry; every hurt he'd inflicted. He fingered his wand in his free hand and started to lift it. A stinging hex would free his wrist…

"Oh I'll bring it. But first," Crouch held up a cup which glimmered briefly with the name of Harry Potter, "PORTUS!"

Sirius's eyes widened with horror and the portkey hook took him, taking him away from Harry. Crouch's maniacal laughter sounded loudly in his ear.

O-O-O

Hermione watched as Morgana's assessing gaze moved onto Molly.

"Molly of the House of Weasley, you will be the first to answer the second of my questions. What is the true reason you wish me to bless Harry?" Morgana looked at her expectantly.

"Because he is only a child."

"Because he is only a child." Molly answered immediately. "He needs protecting no matter how much power or responsibility he has. Because if his own mother can't be there to stand between him and evil, we must."

Hermione smiled at Molly's blunt answer; it was so characteristic of Ron's mother to focus on Harry's youth.

"And you, Augusta of the House of Longbottom, what is the true reason you wish me to bless Harry?"

"Because he is more than a child."

"Because he is more than a child." Augusta responded. "He is the Light sworn to protect an alliance on every battlefield against the Dark. Because if we, like his mother before us, can stand beside him shoulder to shoulder against evil, we must."

"And Minerva, what is the true reason you wish me to bless Harry?"

"Because he is at heart only a teenage boy." Minerva replied, her voice rich with emotion. "He dreams of a future with a family who love him and who he loves; he dreams of nothing but peace and the chance to live a happy life. Because if he is to succeed, we must give him every chance."

Morgana moved her gaze to Griselda and asked her question.

Griselda lifted her eyes to the spirit of the most powerful witch in their history. "Because he is a leader of wizards and witches. He is the hope of our world and will shape our future with his magic. Because if he is to succeed, we must give him every chance."
"The second question is answered truly." Morgana declared.

o-O-o

Neville rounded a corner with extra care. He was sweating heavily; the air seemed warm – too warm. He wiped his brow and moved forward. They were only a couple of corridors from the Headmaster's office.

"This heat isn't right." Blaise commented quietly. His eyes darted to Hannah who was just in front of them. He'd kept his voice low enough not to carry.

"I think there's a fire." Neville agreed. "I'm thinking I'm glad we practiced that fire suppression spell with Harry."

"Who knew practicing for a tournament would work out so handy when fighting for your life?" quipped Blaise.

Neville shot him an amused look. He just caught a sound in the wall he'd just passed and quickly brought them to a halt. "Hannah!" He hissed.

She stopped, looking back at him with an irritated look which he remembered well from their final days together; it had been an almost permanent expression in the run-up to their break-up.

He waved her back to them and gestured for them all to take covering positions on the other side of the wall behind a statue and a suit of armour. He raised his wand.

A panel slid to the side and a dusty Fred emerged, cautiously, with his wand first. Fred's gaze scanned the corridor and stopped at the statue which hid Hannah. Neville came out of hiding and raised a hand for the others to join him.

Fred nodded and made some kind of signal behind him. The rest of the students involved with the Hogwarts spell trooped out of what Neville could see was a hidden tunnel. They all looked shell-shocked, weary and pale to varying degrees. The panel slid shut soundlessly behind George who was the last to exit.

"Neville!" Ron grasped his shoulder tightly. "Neville, do you have a map? Dad had ours! I need to check on my Dad and…"

"We got attacked." Natalie explained, brushing her hair back from her eyes. She was maintaining a calm façade but her eyes were filled with anxiety. "Viktor stayed back with Mister Weasley, Lord Bones and Lord Abbott."

Hannah frowned heavily and paced away from the group towards the other wall as though to examine the panelling.

Neville squeezed Ron's shoulder. "I've got the map. Let's get you and the others to the Headmaster's office and we can see where your Dad is."

Ron opened his mouth to argue but Natalie shook her head.

"Neville's right." Natalie said authoritatively. "We need to get to the office and do the spell. If they're still in danger us activating the defences will help them."

"At least we have a Hufflepuff now." Draco commented.
"I don't think we have her." Luna said in a strange tone that made them all stop and look at her before following her gaze.

Hannah stood there with her wand pointed directly at them. She smiled. It was a nasty smile; cruel and smirking.

"What the…?" muttered Ron under his breath.

"You're all going to slowly put your wands on the floor." Hannah said tersely. "NOW!"

Neville tried to see an opening but he couldn't. He put his cherished wand on the floor. The rest all quietly obeyed.

Hannah smiled again. "There. That wasn't so hard, was it?" she said mockingly.

Neville swallowed hard. "Crouch?" He asked roughly.

"Seriously?!” Ron spluttered. "I was right? She's Crouch? I mean, he's her?!"

But Hannah was shaking her head. "I'm not Barty."

"Barty." Draco repeated dryly. "You sound like you know him well."

"He's my lover." Hannah said simply.

"For how long?" asked Blaise.

"Since the Summer, right?" guessed Theo before Hannah could answer. The Slytherin had his usual 'I've worked this out' look on his face.

"Uncle Amos brought Mister Crouch round for dinner just before the World Cup." Hannah agreed. "Only it wasn't him but Barty. He says it was love at first sight for him." She sighed, giddiness written across her beaming face. "He left me love notes for months and his elf would pick up my messages to him in return…"

No doubt the same damn elf that had left the threat in Neville's home for Harry. Anger stirred in Neville's belly. Hannah had been giving Crouch information all year – which meant…

"The Yule Ball." Neville snapped out, interrupting Hannah's ramble on Barty's romancing of her. "You set me up to get kidnapped."

Hannah glared at him. "He just wanted to talk to you and you threw it in his face!"

"His perverted colleague tried to kill me!" Neville yelled back. "Do you get that?! If it hadn't been for Sirius…"

"Black is a maniac!" Hannah retorted. "He's evil! He's turned the entire world against Barty…"

"Because Crouch is sociopathic criminal!” Neville retorted. "He's trying to kill us all! And you? He's just using you!"

"He's not using me!" Hannah said a touch hysterically.

Behind her the panel slid open noiselessly.

A figure stepped out and raised a finger to her lips.
Neville kept his focus on Hannah. "He is."

"He's not."

There was a nearby vase – heavy and ornamental. The figure levitated it with surprising ease.

Neville knew he had to keep Hannah's attention on him. "He is using you! He's using you to do his dirty work!"

"He's not!" Hannah said again. "Take it back! You take it back!"

She went to take a step forward and the vase dropped on her head. She went down like a tonne of bricks.

"Take that, you bitch!" Sue Bones said fiercely, and then she burst into tears.

Neville picked up his wand and a moment later Hannah was bound in ropes and stunned for good measure. The others grabbed their wands; Fred handing Natalie and Luna theirs – they were trying to console a crying Sue.

"Sue," Neville said seriously, "thank you."

Sue nodded. "She stunned the Creevey brothers on the stairs and then…she must have stunned me. I came to in a broom closet! Luckily Aunty Amelia taught me a few tricks and Hannah," her voice broke on the name, "she was stupid enough to leave my wand so I could get free." She swiped at her face. "I'm so angry! She betrayed us!" She said. "She betrayed us all!"

"She did." Neville agreed. "But now we have to get you guys to the office and do the spell. Don't let her win."

Sue nodded. "Where's Ced?"

"Ced…" Ron blanched under his freckles and the office group exchanged looks of concern.

Neville sent a questioning look to Blaise who shrugged; he didn't know what was up either.

"Cedric didn't make it." Natalie said softly. "We were attacked – he saved Viktor's life and gave his own."

Sue's face crumpled again but suddenly she shook off her upset, determination written in every line of her body. "Then I'll finish what he started. Let's do this!"

"What do we do with Abbott?" asked Blaise.

"Bring her." Natalie ordered.

"Right-o!" chorused Fred and George. They levitated Hannah's stunned form between them.

They all set off up the corridor but they'd barely taken four steps when a spell came from behind them.

It missed, taking out the bust of former Headmaster Dippet and they all ducked.

Neville's eyes narrowed at the sight of the Death Eater and the group of stalking vampires and mercenaries just behind him. "Get to the office and raise the defences! NOW!"
"GO!" Natalie ordered. "We'll cover you! GO!"

Fred looked at George.

"I'll take her." George agreed as though they'd had a conversation. "Just…"

"Don't get dead." Fred grinned back at him and ducked again as another spell impacted the wall beside them. "GO!"

"Come on!" Draco pushed Ron up the corridor, Sue and Luna running ahead of them. George followed with Hannah.

"Cover!" Neville called out.

Theo came to stand at Neville's left shoulder; Blaise was at his right. Natalie and Fred took flanking positions either side. They fired back providing the cover for the others; shielding each other.

The Death Eater finally held up a hand and everything stopped for a moment. He unmasked.

"Carrow." Neville said identifying the pock-faced man immediately from the old photos he'd been shown.

"Longbottom." Carrow grinned hideously. "Do you honestly think your rag-tag group of students will last long against us? Do the right thing and surrender!"

Neville glanced around the rest of the group, around his friends.

Blaise grinned back at him. "Looks like I'm joining you in reckless Gryffindor acts, Nev."

"Hey," Fred commented almost cheerfully except for the strain in his voice, "I resemble that!"

Theo snorted. "I'm making a perfectly well-informed Slytherin choice."

Natalie smiled sadly. A silent 'we're with you' in her eyes.

Neville turned back to Carrow. "My parents defied Tom Riddle three times. If they can do that; I can defy you, a mere servant of his, this one time."

Carrow's eyes narrowed with anger. "Then so be it." He flicked his wand toward them –

Neville shielded them immediately from the corrosive acid spell –

And the vampires attacked.

o-O-o

"SIRIUS!" Harry almost didn't duck Voldemort's spell in time but he made it, rolled and came up swinging with one of his own.

But his mind was on Sirius. From the glimpse he'd caught – Bartemius Crouch Junior holding Sirius at wand-point and raising –

he dodged another spell –

and raising the tournament cup.

The cup that was a portkey between Hogwarts and the cemetery.
Harry sent back a blasting spell but it aimed it at the gravestone next to Voldemort. The stone exploded sending shrapnel everywhere.

Voldemort hurriedly shielded.

There was no guarantee that the cup led back to Hogwarts.

But it was a good bet.

So all Harry had to do was defeat a Dark Lord and get to Hogwarts to save Sirius.

A Hogwarts which would have its ancient defences raised.

Although not yet if Crouch had managed to yank Sirius there.

Voldemort sent another spell in Harry's direction and he batted it away. He sent a volley of rocks and dirt back at Voldemort.

There was a window of opportunity then.

But Harry needed some way into Hogwarts.

He frowned and dropped to avoid a deadly yellow curse.

He'd managed to send all his friends back to Hogwarts from Saint Mungo's; when Harry had thought Sirius was dead and had just needed them to be safe.

He just needed to do that again; send himself and everyone to Hogwarts.

But in a controlled way.

He fingered the Elder wand speculatively.

O-O-o

Remus had cornered Peter by the edge of the churchyard.

Wormtail had tried to change into his animagus form but he hadn't practiced for his new metallic hand and the transformation had failed.

Remus stalked Peter as he backed up against a low wall.

"Please, Moony…"

Remus sent a stinging hex at the snivelling wizard who shielded against it only at the last minute, fumbling with his wand. "Don't call me that! You lost all rights to call me that!"

"I'm…" Peter shook his head, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?!" Remus snarled, his wolf surging to the fore. "Sorry was last year, Peter. Sorry was when all you had on your conscience was spying on us! Sorry was before you betrayed James and Lily! Before you murdered people and had Sirius locked up for your crimes!"

"I was scared…"

"You were weak." Remus continued to stalk him down the length of the wall. "You ARE weak."
"I'm on your side!" Peter said, shielding again against another stinging hex.

"You're on your own side!"

"I sent you the letter warning you about Greyback!" Peter exclaimed almost babbling in his urgency to get the words out. "I sent you the letter warning you your wife and child were targeted!"

"And you did that with your master's blessing!" Remus countered.

"Please, Remus!" Peter grovelled again. "Please!"

A dark shape peeled away from the shadow of the wall and loomed up behind Peter.

Peter gave a horrified cry and curled up in a ball, wails of agony spilling from his lips as the Dementor descended upon him.

Remus froze.

He didn't need to do anything.

The Dementor would Kiss the rat and wasn't that justice?

He'd thought of nothing but putting down the rat for hours but…

But that had been when his mind had conjured up images of Peter fighting him; raising a wand against him. Not this cowardly, quivering sobbing mess that reminded Remus far too much of the shy and timid boy he'd befriended years before.

He couldn't help but remember Harry in the Shrieking Shack talking Remus and Sirius out of murder; telling them his parents, that James wouldn't have wanted that. Remus hesitated to just walk away…what would he tell Harry?

"Remus!" Peter shrieked weakly. "Help me! Please, please! I beg you!"

Remus grimaced. He lifted his wand…

o-O-o

Bill kept quiet.

Hedwig and Caro in her animal form were doing a marvellous job of herding the snake towards his position.

The position he'd been in for hours. It had been hell.

Hell when the Fidelius had kicked in and he'd lost focus; his memory and mind confused. Luckily he'd tied himself to the tree and left himself a note telling himself to remain tied to the tree no matter what because their target was the snake.

He had heard her slithering past his hiding place a few times. He had cast scent-neutralising spells and warded the tree against predators but he had no way of knowing whether that would have been enough to keep her away until he was in a position to kill her.

Because he'd barely been coherent with the Fidelius; barely made out when he'd heard voices because the Fidelius had acted there too – muffling the sound into vague murmurs. It hadn't been until he'd heard Snape's voice suddenly; crisp and loud and speaking the secret.
Then, the world had jumped back into focus.

He'd quickly untied himself and scrambled out of his hiding place in the hollow tree to join the fight, to find and eliminate the final likely horcrux of the snake.

She was angry now, hissing and spitting venom at the two birds as they dive-bombed and harried her away from the main fighting to the darkened corner where Bill was waiting.

They almost had her…

"Come on, little snakey," Bill whispered, "come on…"

o-O-o

Ron yelled the password at the gargoyle which moved aside with surprising speed. A moment later they were all running up the stairs and into the Headmaster's office.

George shut the door behind them and locked it for good measure. He set Hannah down in a corner.

They stooped and pulled back the heavy rug in front of the Headmaster's desk. The plain wooden floor underneath had a faded crest painted upon; the crest of Hogwarts.

Ron stood immediately on the Gryffindor part; Draco took a breath and joined him. A moment later Sue was on the Hufflepuff and Luna had completed the four joining them on the Ravenclaw.

They pointed their wands to the centre so all four were touching.

Ron looked around the group. "Ready?"

Draco gave a decisive nod. "Ready."

Sue nodded.

Luna smiled at him. "It's time."

"We all remember what to do?" Ron asked anxiously. "Sue?"

"I'll be fine." Sue said firmly.

"For Merlin's sake, let's just get on with it, Weasley!" Draco snapped.

Ron raised his hand and counted down with his fingers; three, two, one…

"Magicae vocationem nostrum, alumni audire vocem tuam!" They said together in harmony.

"In nomine Gryffindor, mandabo draconi excitare!" Ron said loudly.

Sue cleared her throat. "In nomine Hufflepuff, mandabo draconi excitare!"

"In nomine Slytherin, mandabo draconi excitare!" Draco intoned, his voice shaking.

"In nomine Ravenclaw, mandabo draconi excitare!" Luna completed.

"Draco surge et defendere castellum!" They all said together.

There was a grinding sound and the wall behind the Headmaster's desk disappeared to reveal another stone wall almost completely covered with a painting – a picture of a ginormous dragon sleeping.
"Well," George remarked dryly, "you don't see that every day."

"Look!" Luna pointed with satisfaction. "It's waking up!"

Sirius might have been taken by surprise by Crouch's portkey move but he hadn't been a hit wizard for nothing. He nailed the landing while Crouch stumbled. Sirius sent a stinging hex at the madman and was free, and in a fighting stance in a second.

He barely paid attention to the fact that they had landed on the platform where the Champion would have ended up, but he couldn't miss the exchange of spell fire nearby where Moody and another wizard were engaged in battle. He pushed them out of his mind; he needed to focus on his own fight…

He shielded immediately as Crouch went on the offensive.

Sirius countered every spell looking for his own opportunity to attack.

He needed to get back to the cemetery; he needed to get back to Harry…

Harry knew he needed Voldemort distracted. He switched in a quick move to his holly wand and thrust it out in front of him. He knew it didn't matter what spell he used…

"Expelliarmus!" He shouted as Voldemort let loose another bone-breaking curse.

The spells collided in the space between them and the wands connected.

Instantly there was a golden dome surrounding them cutting them off from the rest of the graveyard. Phoenix song filled the air; lifting Harry's spirit.

Voldemort's red eyes were wide with shock.

Harry saw the bead of light where the wands connected and willed it into Voldemort's wand. It moved slowly but surely towards Voldemort.

Voldemort regained himself. His face contorted into a mask of determination and Harry felt when he started to push back.

But Harry had the advantage and he wasn't letting it go. He gritted his teeth and pushed with everything he had.

The bead suddenly zipped down the spell beam and smacked into the end of Voldemort's wand.

Immediately a smokey shadowy figure of the cowering Avery emerged. "He killed me!"

"Lord Potter." Nott was the next and he gave Harry a proud nod. "Tell Theo I died bravely."

An old muggle man emerged. "Killed me he did!" The man declared. "You hold on, lad!"

A woman next who cried and sobbed out her distress.

A small boy; giggling and babbling – the baby Voldemort had possessed.
And then…

His mother.

Harry's heart pounded at the sight of her but he'd seen her before; seen the spirit of her guarding and protecting him in the family magic; seen and spoken with her ghost in another cemetery. He knew what he was looking at was nothing more than afterimage – like a portrait or a picture.

"Hold on, Harry!" His mother said warmly. "Your Dad's coming."

And he was.

His Dad emerged from the wand and drifted over to Harry as more figures continued to spill out the wand.

"Break the connection and use the stone!" His Dad said urgently. "For a moment we'll be real again and can distract him while you make your move!"

Harry nodded. He slashed his wand down…

The dome and song disappeared…

The stone was in his hand and the wand images became corporeal – a mass of the dead surrounding Voldemort…

Harry pointed the Elder wand at the ground. "PORTUS MAXIMUS HOGWARTS!"
The world shook as the Master of the Hallows invoked the power of the Elder wand…
a wand that would always cast true for one of Peverell blood…
a wand that would always cast true when it was used in concert with the cloak and the stone…
a wand that would make the impossible happen for its Master even when the spell should not have worked…

Above the graveyard a portal opened…

o-O-o

Neville took another step backward and another as spell after spell hit his shield…

He was aware that further down the corridor Theo and Blaise were fighting against a mass of vampires while Natalie and Fred were going toe-to-toe with mercenaries…

Carrow had targeted him though and Neville was grimly holding his own. He'd landed a couple of good hits – Carrow had a cut across his eye that was bleeding profusely and he'd taken to holding his left side where Neville had caught him with a blasting hex…

That had been when Carrow had gone on the defensive and…

Hogwarts shook, sending them all tumbling…

o-O-o

Remus kept his eyes on the Dementor terrorising Peter and knew what he needed to do; he lifted his wand with a sigh. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The wolf sprang from his wand and charged at the Dementor.

Peter scrambled out of the way…

And the ground beneath Remus heaved, tossing him backwards and…

A hook behind his stomach yanking him…

The world disappeared.

o-O-o

Bill landed a slashing spell to the snake's neck but his heart sank when it was simply absorbed. Magical resistance, he thought absently as he twirled his wand and went for his knife…
Nagini whirled around and lunged…

Caro transformed behind her, wand raised…

And the graveyard disappeared in a swirl of portkey travel…

o-O-o

Sirius dived across the platform as Crouch’s Fiendfyre spell targeted him again. The platform burst into flames…

The ground shook beneath his feet as he landed and he tumbled to the grass, Crouch's spell going wild and hitting the stands…

o-O-o

Power slammed into them; raw and emotive and singing of Harry…

Ron grabbed Luna, holding onto each other desperately because they couldn't move or the spell would be broken…

Next to them, Draco and Sue followed their example and frantically held onto each other as they tried to keep their balance…

A bookshelf shifted and George only just managed to throw up a shield as it fell upon him…

And the dragon roared…

o-O-o

Harry landed close enough to Sirius to touch him.

Which was good because it was exactly where he wanted to be.

Sirius's face went slack-jawed with shock before it transformed into a mix of joy, exasperation and determination.

"SHIELD YOU BLOODY MORONS!" Moody's yell barked out at them.

Light sparked in their peripheral vision and they shielded hurriedly.

Crouch stood to the right, glowering at them in mad fury. Voldemort stood the left, a snarl on his newly created face as he fought against the ghosts surrounding him. Beyond them, Moody was duelling with another wizard Harry vaguely recognised – Travers.

But it didn't matter.

They were together.

Harry took a breath. "Ready, Padfoot?"

Sirius smiled dangerously. "Ready, Pronglet."

And they attacked…

o-O-o
Remus reappeared into blazing heat, landing heavily on his back. He gave a startled pained yelp.

In front of him, there was an agonised scream as the Dementor materialised in the middle of the Fiendfyre…

Peter landed a moment after and Remus lifted his wand to yank him down the corridor out of the way of the flames.

Peter stared at him wide-eyed. "You saved me!"

Remus gave a low growl of frustration and grimaced. "As much as I…"

Peter's eyes suddenly went wider and he squealed.

Remus turned just in time to block the vampire's attack. He forcefully pushed the undead creature away from him and lashed out with his wand, a whip of flame erupting to take the head off the vamp.

Remus's heart sank as he gazed at the five vampires at the other end of the corridor. He was outnumbered…

Suddenly there was a presence beside him and Peter stood there. His wand was held in a trembling hand but he was there just as he had been in all of the years of their schooling.

"Like old times, Moony?" Peter said tremulously.

Remus rolled his shoulders and nodded tersely; there was no time to reminisce or regret. "You take the ones on the left, Wormtail."

o-O-o

Neville coughed and climbed to his feet. Whatever had happened the shockwave had thrown them all around…

He grimaced at the sight of Carrow; the dark wizard had been crushed by a suit of armour; a mace had caught the back of Carrow's head, smashing it into a bloody mess.

Neville frowned. He'd lost his wand…his eyes fell to the ground and…

The eldest Weasley materialised right next to Neville – and then a really massive snake right in front of them and –

Hedwig was there, striking at the snake like the bird of prey she was.

A woman appeared, lashing out at the vampire who had gotten hold of Fred…

Neville wished he had a weapon, any weapon; his wand or maybe the sword Harry had used…

And the Sword of Gryffindor was suddenly there, a heavy weight of metal in his grasp…

Neville swung as the snake struck out again and the sword cleaved the reptile in two.

o-O-o

"WHO DARES?" The dragon roared.
"You can speak?!" Ron steadied Luna and turned to face the dragon. He cast a horrified look to where George lay crumpled under a large wooden bookcase. He hated that he couldn't leave his position to check on his brother but he knew the spell called for them to remain in place on the Hogwarts' shield. It had been touch and go whether they'd kept their feet with whatever had happened to shake Hogwarts.

The dragon's head swivelled toward them and pinned them with a fierce gaze. "Who wakes me?"

"We really don't have time for introductions!" Ron snapped. "We're in trouble! Harry and our friends and the whole school!" He pointed at his unconscious brother.

"As much as I don't want to agree with Weasley, he's right." Draco asserted. "We need you to do whatever it is you're supposed to do to protect the school."

Sue nodded. "We've been invaded by dark wizards and vampires and…"

"I'm Luna Lovegood." Luna said brightly. "Of Ravenclaw." She looked expectantly at the others.

"I'm Susan Bones." Sue gave in grudgingly. "Of Hufflepuff."

Draco huffed. "Draco Malfoy, Slytherin."

Ron rolled his eyes at the three of them and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ron – Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor. Now can we get on with this?"

"I, little wizard, am Hogwarts." The dragon arched an eyebrow. "Four students have woken me. The need must be great. You are prepared to pay the price?"

"Price?" asked Draco sharply. "Nobody said anything about a price."

"You will be bound to me." Hogwarts stated bluntly.

Ron's mouth went dry and he exchanged uneasy and anxious glances with the other three.

There was a price.

Of course there was a price.

But wouldn't it be worth it? He thought of his father, of Fred, of George. He thought of Percy helping with the evacuation and Charlie at Saint Mungo's; of Bill in the cemetery with Harry; of his mother and sister.

Was there really any other choice?

"When you say bound," Sue said, breaking the silence, "do you mean we can never leave?"

"You may leave," Hogwarts responded, "but you will always feel the bond and the call to come home."

Ron blew out a breath. "Fine. I'm in."

"Me too." Sue confirmed bravely.

"I'll be Head of Ravenclaw one day." Luna said.

They all turned to Draco.
Ron tapped his foot impatiently. "For Merlin's sake, Malfoy! Do you want Harry to win or not?"

Draco grimaced. "Yes, fine. I'm in too."

Hogwarts stood up and flexed her wings. They were iridescent; a startling shimmer of bronze, gold, blue, red, green, silver, black and yellow – the colours of the school, of Hogwarts. "Then so shall it be. Prepare to be tested."

She roared again; a flash of light swept over the room and out…

Ron felt her search his mind and soul; examine his flaws and show him his weaknesses. He resolved to do better; be better.

He felt drained suddenly as though all his energy and his strength were gone. He wobbled, dizzy, and sat down hard. The others followed him to the floor, only Draco managing to make the fall look anything close to graceful.

"I'm jus' goin' to rest a bit now." Ron managed to say before his eyes closed and he knew nothing more.

o-O-o

Bill watched open-mouthed.

Neville almost dropped the sword in shock as the snake fell to the ground.

Bill snapped his mouth shut only to open it again to say something, anything…

Light swamped the corridor, racing from one end to the other…

The snake shrivelled into nothing but husk.

The vampires shrieked, an inhuman sound that chilled Bill to the core; that caused the goose-bumps to rise on his arms and neck…

They fell to dust.

The last of the mercenaries fell to a spell from Caro's wand.

Caro – and Neville recognised the woman with the danger gone – patted Natalie's shoulder on her way over to them. "Alright there, Neville?"

A pale Neville nodded. "I killed the snake." He lifted the sword hesitantly. "I just…I think I dropped my wand."

Blaise grinned at him from further down the corridor. "Just as well you Gryffindors can magic up swords when you need to fight snakes then."

Theo snorted beside him.

"You boys alright?" Caro asked as she started gathering up the snake.

Theo and Blaise both nodded even though they were sporting a variety of scratches and bruises.

Bill looked over to his brother and frowned. Fred was bleeding, his left ear had been torn away, but Natalie looked as though she was tending it well enough. The Head Girl was administering basic
first aid.

Fred grimaced. "George is going to kill me." He grumbled. "Mum'll be able to tell us apart now."

Bill grinned and shook his head. He noted Neville had put the sword aside and was searching for his wand, casting worried glances at the floor. Bill raised his wand to summon Neville's…

"BILL!" Fred's frantic yell had Bill turning…

Carrow was lifting Neville's wand, a vicious grin on his bloody face...

The purple flame shot out towards Bill…

There was no time to shield…

Suddenly a form shot into the space between him and the spell…

Caro met Bill's eyes.

The spell hit her full force.

Bill retaliated with a severing charm that took Carrow's head from his shoulders. He shifted to catch Caro as she fell…

Caro slumped against him. "Worth it." She whispered. Her hand lifted weakly and touched his cheek.

Bill gently lowered her to the ground, keeping hold of her in his arms, dimly aware of the shocked silence around him. He ran a diagnostic spell and felt his breath catch in his throat.

She was already gone.

He gave a sob and lowered his head to hers.

She'd saved him and she was gone.

o-O-o

Remus panted for breath and spun to avoid the flames biting at his ankles as the vamp in front of him fell to dust…

Light appeared out of nowhere, suffocating the fire into nothingness.

It swamped him. Pins and needles erupted all over his body before the light moved on leaving him a shaking mess in the middle of the corridor.

He watched as it moved away, eliminating the remaining vampire who had managed to corner Peter.

Peter struggled to his feet. "It's over?"

"The defences have been activated." Remus said. That was a relief. It meant the kids must have made it to the office and were safe.

Peter nodded hesitantly, nervously. "What now, Moony? I…" he gave a cry and his silver hand suddenly struck out, aiming for his own throat…

Remus immediately cast a cutting charm across the corridor.
The silver hand fell to the floor but it leapt again for Peter…

A smelting charm saw it turn to slag.

Remus hurried over to where Peter had collapsed against the wall. He was whimpering with pain, holding his bleeding limb. Remus cast a couple of spells to stop the bleeding, to start healing.

He grimaced as he sat back.

Peter had passed out.

He added a sleeping charm for good measure; wrapped Peter in tightly bound ropes; cast a hex that would prevent Peter from assuming his animagus form.

"REMUS!" Arthur's call from the end of the corridor had Remus turning to the harried father with alacrity.

"Arthur."

"What's happened?" demanded a bloodied Arthur as he hurried over, Flitwick and a group of werewolves just behind him.

"I don't know." Remus admitted. "One minute we were in the cemetery and then we were here." He glanced around him. "The defences are up."

"Yes." Arthur said and Remus saw the vast relief that his children were safe written all over Arthur's face.

Remus patted his shoulder and looked past him. "Gregor."

"Remus." Gregor beamed at him. "It appears you have caught a rat."

Remus nodded. "I need someone to watch him or get him to the infirmary – both." He shook himself. "I have to find Harry."

Flitwick brandished the map. "He's on the Quidditch pitch with Riddle. Moody, Sirius, Dennis Travers and Crouch Junior are there too, and oh – Director Bones and the Rat Squad are fighting the Death Eaters. We should join them and help."

Remus gave a nod of thanks. "Then…"

"Go." Gregor agreed, gesturing for him to move. "My pack will watch your rat. Go help your pack, Remus."

Remus didn't wait; he ran.

o-O-o

Breathing had become something of a luxury but Albus didn't let the shortness of breath stop him as he turned to face the latest wave of Dementors; to finish off the last wave of vampires.

He would stand between these monsters and Hogwarts for all eternity if he had to…

Light raced out and over him, along the ground to the ward line…

It raced up forming a dome that encased Hogwarts in its protective cage. It glimmered brightly in the
dark; a beacon. Tendrils shot out towards the forest; tentacles that chased the retreating vampires and Dementors…

Unholy cries erupted as the light caught up with the dark creatures.

Albus bent double, hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. Fawkes landed on his shoulder with a trilling cry of triumph.

It lifted Albus's heart.

Shacklebolt approached him; the auror looked wan and tired. They had all been magically exhausted from the fight. "Do you know what this is, Headmaster?"

"Hogwarts."

"Can't argue with that." Kingsley muttered, wiping his brow.

Hagrid approached; half of his clothes had been torn from him; he was bleeding from a bad wound to his cheek, one eye badly bruised but he was alive. "Figure we've seen the last of ’em, Headmaster."

"Now," Albus said, gathering his authority around him like a cloak, "we must go and help Harry."

He took a step and a sharp pain in his chest arrowed through him. He stopped and gasped, lifting a hand to his sternum.

"Headmaster?" Shacklebolt asked urgently.

Albus waved him and a worried looking Hagrid away. "Just winded. I will be fine momentarily."

Fawkes trilled sadly and Albus lifted a hand to his phoenix to comfort them both.

He did a wandless, silent healing spell and straightened, taking on the mantle of the indestructible elder wizard; the Defeater of Grindelwald. He would stand between the Dark and Hogwarts for as long as he needed.

"Well," he said brightly, "what are we waiting for?"

Sirius ducked under one curse, shielded another and responded with his own barrage of spells. He slid across the grass as Crouch screamed his defiance and shot out a blasting hex.

They were well-matched. They were both bleeding; both were bruised. Crouch was favouring his left leg; Sirius's left wrist was painful in a way that spoke of a broken bone.

Crouch was inventive and obsessed with beating Sirius.

Sirius was talented and obsessed with beating Crouch.

Mostly Sirius was obsessed at winning because as soon as Sirius put the rabid dog down, he could help his son. He was desperately keeping his mind on his own fight and not watching Harry.

Or at least he was trying.

Harry was holding his own though. He was inventively using the Hallows; the Elder wand casting
true against anything Voldemort could send against Harry; ghosts would appear to distract Voldemort mid-fight; and if things got hairy, Harry would just disappear and reappear in a better position.

But Harry couldn't keep that up forever and it made Sirius even more determined to finish his own fight fast and hard.

Sirius was more used to ignoring Moody; the old auror was still fighting a pedestrian Travers who was proving tenacious. Like a tiny terrier against a snarling Alsatian. Similarly, the sounds of the Rat Squad and Amelia, who were competently taking down the rest of the Death Eaters, were almost nothing more than background noise.

Finally there was an opening as Crouch lost his balance defending against the same liver curse he'd once almost killed Bill with.

Sirius immediately cast the ice spell; cold blue icicles sprang across the ground and underneath Crouch sending him to the ground. Crouch dropped his wand and it slid away across the ice. Sirius banished it immediately leaving Crouch wandless. He raised his wand and fired a stunning spell but Crouch moved.

The mad wizard ducked and dived spell after spell; slipped and slid against the ground before he found his footing and with an inarticulate cry ran for Sirius.

Sirius stepped into the attack and slammed his fist and wand into Crouch's face even as he blocked the knife that Crouch tried to stab him with. His left wrist screamed as it met Crouch's forearm but Sirius ignored it.

He spun and caught hold of Crouch's arm and held onto it as they wrestled for possession and position.

"Why won't you just die?!" snapped Crouch. "Why won't you just die?! You killed Rab! You deserve to die!"

Sirius managed to get the knife away from his skin and pointed at Crouch; their hands were both around the hilt. "Rabastan got what he deserved."

Crouch gave an angry howl and pushed with all his strength, he sent Sirius sprawling. He immediately threw himself after Sirius, the knife came down in a fatal arc…

Sirius kicked out and caught Crouch's hand – the knife went spinning away…

Crouch howled and came at Sirius again, his hands aiming for Sirius's wand. They grappled, rolling around on the ground over and over as they fought; fists landing punches, hands tugging on hair, fingers scratching faces and skin, legs kicking out…

It felt endless before Sirius gave a cry as Crouch pressed hard on Sirius's wrist and snatched the wand from him…

Crouch punched him hard and stumbled backwards, getting to his feet, panting, eyes wild with glee…

Sirius scrambled away and his hand knocked into something; the hilt of the knife…his fingers clamped around the hilt…

"This is for Rab!" Crouch declared with satisfaction. He raised the wand…
Sirius propelled himself off the ground without a sound and thrust the knife into Crouch's belly and up.

The wand fell to the ground.

Crouch's mouth fell open in shock; his eyes wide on Sirius's. They were as close as lovers...faces mere inches apart.

Blood spilled warm over Sirius's fingers as he drove the knife in further.

"Well, who knew you had that in you?" Crouch gasped.

Sirius stepped back and Crouch fell to his knees, hands coming up to futilely flit around the hilt of the knife.

Sirius summoned his wand silently.

Crouch grinned, his teeth bloody and smeared. "This is not the end."

"It is for you." Sirius said. He lifted his wand and cast.

Crouch crumpled to the ground; the piercing charm to his brain killing him instantly.

Sirius wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and cast a bracing spell on his wrist.

Crouch was dead but the fight was not over.

Hermione repressed the urge to fidget. She wished she had been able to answer one of the questions; her answers filled her head and heart.

"My final question to the final three," Minerva turned to Vivien, "Vivien of the House of Lumiere, the eldest of those gathered, who is Harry?"

Hermione watched as the brown eyes sharpened with fierce intelligence.

"He is Magic." Vivien replied. "Because he is one touched by prophecy and Fate. He is the Raven sent by Death as his Champion; Master of the Hallows; the last of the Peverells and the heir to the legacy of the Lumieres." She smiled softly, fondly. "He is the son of the child I never bore."

Hermione waited impatiently as Morgana nodded at Vivien. Surely it would be her next...

"Ginevra of the House of Weasley, the youngest of witches gathered, who is Harry?"

Ginny blushed red and she glanced at Hermione almost beseechingly. Hermione willed her to answer and answer truly.

Ginny gave a sigh. "He is Magic." She avoided her mother's startled gaze. "Because he is a little girl's dream hero, her storybook prince and her happily-ever-after king. He's the real life hero who saves us from evil snakes and," she glanced again at Hermione who smiled back at her, "trolls; who fights dragons. He stands up for what is right and who never gives up." She smiled almost sadly. "He is the boy I dream about marrying still." Her chin came up at the last; defiant and brave.

Hermione felt a flash of irritation; a young girl's annoyance at another's expressed interest in her boyfriend. But she pushed it aside. Ginny had spoken truthfully and that was all that was important.
Petty emotions had no place in securing the blessing for Harry.

And it was finally her turn.

Morgana's weighty gaze settled on her. "Hermione of the House of Black, of the House of Granger, closest to Harry of all those gathered here…"

Her heart jumped at that.

"…who is Harry?"

Hermione's mind raced but she took a deep breath and calmed herself. She touched the necklace she wore. "Harry is Magic." She began. "Because he is the most human of us; flawed and imperfect, reckless and brave; loving and perfect, smart and strong enough to bear every hurt and wound he carries. He loves us so much…he'll stand between us and pain and death." She bit her lip wondering if she'd said enough; if she'd said too much. Maybe there was one thing more to share. "He's my first friend and my first love." Her cheeks heated a touch at the last but they all knew even if she hadn't said it out loud before.

"You have answered truly." Morgana allowed. "You have proven worthy for my blessing. But my blessing can only be bestowed with a sacrifice…"

"Then you shall take me." Vivien asserted strongly. "I have lived my life."

"Peace," Morgana held up her hand before the rest could speak and Hermione pressed her lips together to prevent the offer of her own sacrifice from escaping her anyway, "the sacrifice I seek is not a life; this I promise you." She turned again to Hermione. "You have a token of love which Harry has cherished."

Hermione lifted a hand to her necklace and nodded.

"I have need of it." Morgana said not unkindly.

Hermione didn't hesitate. She could always make Harry another necklace. Her hand lifted to remove it but before she could, magic had the necklace disappearing from her neck and appearing in Morgana's hand.

Morgana traced the rune on the necklace. "I, Morgana of the line of Le Fey, bless thee Harry of the House of Potter, of the House of Black. Thou has challenges ahead and choices to make but you have spirit, heart and shield to fight with honour, love with patience, and choose wisely to protect all."

The necklace flashed gold and silver.

And Hermione felt Privet Drive fade around her…

o-O-o

Harry mentally let the invisibility fade again, becoming visible just behind Voldemort. "Over here, Tom!" He called out brightly.

He was breathing hard; his lungs and chest aching with the need to stop and rest. His body shook faintly; tremors running through his muscles whenever he stopped moving. He hurt everywhere; scratches stung like they'd been rubbed with salt. It had taken a lot of energy to bring them to Hogwarts and Harry was tired.
But the light that appeared a moment before, racing out from the castle and over its grounds had left him with hope in its wake. It kept him on his feet fighting.

Just as the brief glimpses of the fights around him kept him going. Of Amelia exchanging volley after volley with two wizards…

Of Sirius fighting with Crouch…

Moody with Travers…

Voldemort whirled and lashed out with a dark fire curse. Harry sent a perfect ice flame to counter it with the Elder wand. A pain curse was met with a neutraliser; a lightning strike with another that caused a blinding flash across the pitch.

Storm clouds rolled in overhead.

Another blasting hex headed toward him and Harry went invisible. He changed into Snitch momentarily flying away from the explosion and setting down behind Voldemort again, changing back and becoming visible.

"Haven't got me yet, Tom." Harry called out.

"Trickery!" Voldemort shouted angrily. "You should face me like a man!"

"But I'm not." Harry pointed out with ruthless logic. "As everyone keeps reminding me, I'm a teenager. I'm meant to be rebellious and disrespectful." He sent his own blasting hex across the pitch and wasn't surprised when Voldemort batted it away and destroyed half the Hufflepuff stand with it.

"What's your excuse?"

Voldemort lifted his wand but instead of sending a spell at Harry, he slashed his wand down to the ground.

Harry frowned and a moment later gave a yell as the ground gave way below him. He changed to Snitch immediately and darted out of the way of another spell. He changed to his wolf form landing and charging Voldemort…

The blunt blow of a piece of wood came out of nowhere and sent him tumbling.

Harry changed back but before he could make himself invisible Voldemort sent another spell towards him...yellow and sickly…

And suddenly Hermione was between him and the spell – it bounced harmlessly off a shield which sparked with silver mere inches from her…

Voldemort's eyes were wide with confusion.

Harry got to his feet and walked to Hermione's side. "Hermione?"

"Hello Harry." Hermione said and offered her hand.

Harry took it. She was real. She was there.

Voldemort lashed out again.

His spell splashed harmlessly against the silver shield; Morgana's blessing was in full force.
Sirius snapped out a containment spell as he ran towards Harry.

Travers toppled over, bound and gagged.

Moody harrumphed. "I had it under control!" But he tossed a portkey at Travers that would take him to the Ministry holding cells.

Amelia had her opponents unconscious and hog-tied; another portkey took them away.

She jogged over and joined them. They slowed as they came up behind Voldemort who was staring down Harry and –

Sirius's mouth dropped open a touch before he snapped it shut. Hermione stood next to Harry; her white robe gleamed brightly in the dark, reflecting the light of the stars and moon; her skin glowed with the touch of another world; of Wiccan magic; strong and true.

Voldemort suddenly swung around as though he sensed their approach and he sent a barrage of spells to keep them at bay.

And in the distance Sirius could see Remus and Arthur; Bill and Neville. They were running from Hogwarts to join them.

"It's over, Tom!" Harry called out.

Hermione watched as Voldemort's eyes darted around and took in the truth of it. Harry's friends and allies were converging on him, surrounding him.

He saw the pitch empty of his followers; Crouch dead. He tried to apparate, to escape and failed. He staggered as he got back to his feet and whirled around, looking for any opening. But Sirius, Amelia and Moody were behind him; Albus, Hagrid and another auror walking up to fill the spaces between them. Hermione glanced behind her and found Arthur and Bill; Neville and Remus.

It was time for the second spell.

Hermione cleared her throat. "The House of Black stands in the stead of Lily of the House of Potter." She said strongly. "Return to us what you have stolen. Return to you what you took for granted; a mother's blood."

Her voice echoed with the voices of the other women. She could hear Narcissa, Andy and Dora; Molly and Minerva. Hermione knew she might be physically present but she was tied in spirit to the ritual, to the heart of the ritual.

She slashed her hand sharply with a cutting curse and the blood fell to the ground. "So have I said; so mote it be."

Voldemort laughed cruelly. "You think that will harm me, mudblood!" He took a step toward her. "I'll peel the skin from your face and…" He doubled over with a harsh cry before another wave of pain sent him to the ground, seizing.

Hermione took a shaky breath and turned to Harry. "Friendship, bravery and…"

"Love." Harry smiled back at her.
She stepped away to stand behind Harry, and fell in beside Neville who welcomed her with another smile of relief.

o-O-o

Voldemort got back to his feet in less time than Harry had anticipated. He wiped the blood from his nose and glowered at Harry. "Parlour tricks."

"Wiccan magic." Harry retorted. "Your blood is your own again. We've taken mine back." And Harry was protected. His body buzzed with his protection; his mother's spell powered by the Potter family magic his father had gifted to her; all wrapped up in their love for their son.

Voldemort paled but he sneered impressively. "Even if you had, it won't stop me from killing you."

"It stopped you once before." Harry pointed out bluntly. "It's over, Tom."

"It will never be over!" Voldemort smiled, evil and cruel. He spread his arms wide. "Kill me today and I will come back again tomorrow!"

Harry shook his head. "No." He said. "You won't." He smiled sadly. "Your horcruxes are all gone."

Voldemort reared back as though Harry had struck him. "You can't…"

"I destroyed the diary when I was twelve." Harry said. "We found the ring you left in the shack. Sirius was able to claim the cup from the Lestrange vault. Bill found the tiara here at Hogwarts. Regulus left his brother the locket." He glanced behind him and Bill nodded. "Your snake is gone."

Voldemort was shaken. Harry could see it in his pallor; in the way his eyes still searched frantically for an escape.

"You're still trying to flee but there's nowhere to run to, Tom." Harry said, ignoring the chilly bite as the wind blew around him. "You're alone. Your followers are captured or dead."

"And you believe you are the one to vanquish me?" Voldemort retorted.

"You believe it." Harry said. "You believed it when you marked me." He lifted a finger and traced over the faint line of his scar. It ached; an echo of pain. "And you're right; I was declared Death's Champion centuries ago. It's time to meet your fate, Tom." He kept his wand down. "Take your best shot."

Voldemort's eyes glittered with hatred; with anger; with fear. But he lifted his wand. "You're just going to stand there and let me kill you?"

"I won't die." Harry smiled confidently. "I'm protected with the one power you have never understood, Tom."

"But they are not." Voldemort spun, a spell shooting out toward Sirius.

And they all shielded Sirius; every one of them who stood beside him – Albus and Amelia; Moody and Shacklebolt; Hagrid raised his club to block it, and batted it away into the Slytherin stands which burst into flame briefly before crumbling to dust.

"But they are protected." Harry called out as Voldemort realised he was thwarted again. "They stand together." He paused. "They stand with me."

Voldemort turned back to him.
There was silence.

The moment had come.

Fate and Time hung in the balance...the weight of the prophecy between them...

Voldemort raised his wand. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The Killing curse flew towards Harry but he could see it; the protection he carried slowed it down. He reached out with one outstretched hand and it slowed its flight even more. Harry took a breath and gathered his power; he thought of Sirius, of Hermione, of the House of Black, of his family and his friends...

One final strike...he sent a pure shockwave of magic back at the spell...

It shot back toward its owner...

Voldemort's eyes met Harry's, a strange acceptance simmering in their depths as the green curse hit him.

And in the space between breaths, Voldemort toppled to the ground, dead.

o-O-o

Sirius wasn't truly aware of moving.

One moment he was holding position behind Voldemort watching as his son faced down an evil monster with grace and courage (which would have had Sirius almost bursting with pride if it wasn't for the fact that he'd been so damned worried at the time), and the next he was gathering Harry into his arms and hugging him tightly.

Harry hugged him back just as fiercely.

Sirius pressed a kiss to the side of Harry's head.

Harry was safe.

Harry was safe.

It was a litany that repeated over and over in his head, even as his hands stroked over Harry's back, his fingers through Harry's hair as Sirius held his son and reassured himself that he was real.

"It's really over." Harry whispered, his voice low and so filled with relief it almost broke Sirius's heart.

"It's over." Sirius confirmed, whispering the words back into Harry's ear. "It's over."

Remus cleared his throat but Sirius ignored him. He was dimly aware that others were sending patronus messages; the castle's doors were open and people were converging on their position. He knew he'd have to stop holding Harry soon if for no other reason than to ensure he got medical treatment...he could feel Harry shaking, muscles trembling.

"For Merlin's sake!" Remus exclaimed and suddenly there was a third person in the hug; Remus's arms around them both.

"Oh, why didn't I think of that?" Hermione pressed herself against Harry and Sirius wasn't surprised
when Harry shifted to accommodate her immediately, drawing her in so she was sheltered between Harry and himself. She was shaking almost as badly as Harry, Sirius realised.

Sirius managed to free a hand from Harry to clasp Remus's shoulder without looking and squeeze it, silently acknowledging the relief he had that Remus had also made it through the battle.

"Lord Black." Helen Jordan's dry greeting had Sirius finally raising his head. The Healer stood to the side at a respectful distance but she was clearly determined to be heard. "I need to see to Lord Potter and you."

Harry lifted his head and met Sirius's gaze. He nodded his acquiescence. They shifted out of hold. Hermione held onto Harry's hand though as though she couldn't bear to let go. Sirius couldn't blame her, he kept his good hand on Harry's shoulder; it kept him anchored to the reality that Harry was there and had survived.

"We should make our way to the infirmary." Remus said. "I think there are quite a few of us who need to be checked out."

Sirius nodded. He finally looked around properly.

Moody, Albus and Amelia stood in one huddle over the body of Riddle; Pomfrey was there too running the official diagnostic which would certify Voldemort's death. Sirius shuddered delicately. He was all for burning the body, salting the ashes and distributing them to the four corners of the Earth.

Arthur and Bill stood to the side with Neville; waiting to speak to them, Sirius realised. There was a grim air around them that suggested their news wasn't good.

Flitwick and his group had rendezvoused with Shacklebolt; they were directing the aurors, Unspeakables and werewolves into protective patrols. The threat looked as though it was over but they were taking precautions.

"We should probably go." Harry agreed, meeting Sirius's eyes.

Sirius nodded his agreement. "Helen, we'll make our way to the infirmary."

"I'll follow you there." She said.

Harry glanced back at Voldemort and shook himself.

They started back towards Hogwarts.

It was slow progress.

Sirius had an arm slung around Harry who had an arm around Sirius's waist; they may or may not have been leaning on each other. Remus was on Sirius's other side, guarding him. Hermione was holding onto Harry's hand still on his other side and nobody was going to argue about her right to be there.

Arthur, Bill and Neville fell into step beside them.

"Your boys come through alright, Arthur?" asked Sirius gently, casting a glance toward Bill who looked devastated.

"Fred's lost an ear." Bill replied before Arthur could speak. "But he's fine. George and Ron are in the
Headmaster's office but we couldn't get in there; it's locked down."

"Molly and Ginny are fine." Hermione rushed to reassure them. "They were both still in the circle when I, um…" she gestured vaguely around her, "got transported here."

Harry turned and gave her a comforting smile before he looked over at Neville. "Nev?"

"Hannah Abbott's been under the thrall of Barty Crouch since the Summer." Neville stated bluntly without preamble.

It brought them all to a stumbling halt.

"What?!" Harry's shock gave way to anger. "She…"

"She betrayed us. My…it was all a lie so Crouch could kidnap me at Yule." Neville confirmed. "Sue knocked her out and tied her up. George has her."

"That's not the only bad news." Arthur said quietly. He looked over at his eldest son.

"Caro died saving my life." Bill gestured at his father.

"And Cedric and Amos Diggory were killed in the first attack." Arthur sighed. "Cedric saved Viktor."

Sirius felt his heart sink and he hugged Harry close. He knew Harry would take the deaths hard. "It sounds as though they all died heroes."

Harry nodded jerkily and Sirius caught the gleam of tears in his eyes.

"HEADMASTER! HEALER JORDAN!" Pomfrey's call echoed across the pitch and they all turned to look at her.

She was bent over the body of Crouch, her wand waving furiously. Sirius wasn't surprised when Helen took off immediately. Albus abandoned Voldemort's corpse to investigate Pomfrey's yell.

Harry looked at him and Sirius shook his head.

"He's definitely dead." Sirius said confidently as they watched Albus and the Healer converge on Crouch's corpse.

"LORD BLACK!" Helen's call sounded frantic.

Sirius was half-tempted to ignore the summons, to keep them walking towards Hogwarts, but his sense of responsibility surged up. He nudged Harry towards the castle. "Go on up to the infirmary. I'll be there in a minute. Moony, go with him."

Harry frowned but Remus slid into place as Sirius stepped out.

Sirius took a couple of steps back towards the pitch when Pomfrey and Helen suddenly sprang back from Crouch – Albus grabbing them as they did and pulling them away urgently…

And Crouch was glowing…

"BOMB!" Pomfrey yelled. "RUN!"

o-O-o
Harry frowned as Sirius began to walk back towards the pitch. But Remus was nudging him firmly in the opposite direction with enough of his werewolf strength that Harry knew it would be futile to challenge it. It wasn't as though he didn't need the infirmary either. He was looking forward to pain relief potions. And a bed. And maybe some of that numbing salve Pomfrey liked to use right across the worst of his scratches…

"BOMB!" Pomfrey's panicked yell brought them all to a stop.

Harry took advantage of Remus's shock to slip his hold.

"RUN!"

For Harry, it seemed like the world moved into slow motion…

Crouch was glowing with an eerie white light.

Pomfrey and Doctor Jordan were being pulled clear of Crouch by the Headmaster, Fawkes flashing in above them to carry them to safety…

Moody was reaching for something Amelia held out…

Sirius stood between Harry and Crouch…

His father's terror-stricken gaze met Harry's and Harry knew…he knew what Padfoot meant to do…

"It's an easy choice when it's between you and your kid. I didn't even have to think about it."

His Dad's words echoed in his head.

And Harry knew this was the challenge Regulus had spoken about; it was the choice his grandfather and Sirius's grandfather had told him he'd face…

The world hovered in the split-second…

Harry felt his heart seize in his chest as Sirius mouthed words of love and turned away to shield them all; to shield Harry…

Harry suddenly knew the shield wouldn't be enough; that Sirius's sacrifice wouldn't be enough. The only thing that could stop it was…

There had to be another way…

There had to be some other option.

A third way his Dad had counselled him to find but…how?

Crouch burned like a small sun and Harry could sense time ticking away...there was no more time…

Harry dodged away from Remus and went invisible…

In a second he was Snitch and he flew like a bullet across the space, past Sirius, past the afterimage of Fawke's fire as he carried the healers and Albus away…

Harry transformed and went visible as he reached Crouch, landing beside him softly. Crouch was a brilliant white, light streaming from his skin in a continuous glow…
"HARRY!" Sirius's anguished cry ripped through the silence.

Harry met Sirius's gaze, an apology and a plea in his eyes. He raised the Elder wand to the sky…

"FAMILIUS MAGICUS PROTECTUS!"

He called all the magic.

It would take all the magic to save Sirius; to save Hermione and Remus and Neville; to save everyone at Hogwarts and ensure the resulting ripple effect from the explosion didn't destroy magical Britain in its wake…

He needed all the magic to protect his family and his world from Crouch's evil…

And it came.

Gold and silver rained down from the wand and rushed around him like a hurricane, blurring everything beyond Harry and Crouch…

There was a moment of hush; of silence.

Harry swallowed; tears at the back of his throat, stinging his eyes.

His time was up.

The world exploded into white heat.

o-O-o

Sirius coughed and coughed again as he staggered to his feet. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and desperately sought the last place he'd seen Harry – beside Crouch's body…beside the bomb Crouch had made of himself…

Sirius's eyes scanned through the white haze of smoke and fog; he cast a spell to clear it and it parted obediently, revealing…

There was one crumpled figure on the ground; unmoving.

"HARRY!" Sirius ran, slipped and slid and ran…he almost fell to the ground as he reached his son.

Harry wasn't moving; his face was white as milk, marked heavily with the bruises and scratches of his battle. There were rope marks around his wrists and his hands were scratched to ribbons. He was…

Breathing.

Barely.

Harry's chest rose and fell in shallow movements.

Sirius placed a hand on Harry's forehead and watched astounded as Harry's eyes opened slowly to meet his. He gave a thankful sob and clutched at one of Harry's hands, enfolding it into his, holding on tightly. He wasn't going to let go. He wasn't going to let go ever again.

Others were approaching – running to them; frantic calls and cries that Sirius ignored to keep his eyes on his son. He kissed Harry's knuckles; cupped his cheek softly.
Harry coughed weakly. "Padfoot…"

"Don't try to speak." Sirius soothed him. "It's going to be alright, Pronglet."

Remus slid to a halt beside him, kneeling and examining Harry with frantic amber eyes. Hermione was a heartbeat behind him; her face drenched with tears at the sight of Harry. She turned and buried her head in a devastated Neville's shoulder.

Behind them, the children who had defended Hogwarts arrived; faces anxious and horrified. Ron immediately moved to help Neville comfort Hermione. The rest of the Weasleys moved to surround them. Albus hovered beside Draco; Moody and Amelia beside him. Hagrid was a looming presence; a bulwark against the rest coming closer.

"Let us through!"

Helen and Pomfrey were suddenly beside him, casting wands in frantic diagnostics.

"He's alive but…he needs immediate medical attention. The damage to his internal organs is extensive." Helen said briskly.

"More help than we can give him here." Pomfrey said.

"We can take him to the Valley." Helen pulled her necklace free of her clothing. The portkey to her home; to their salvation.

Sirius nodded, unable to speak. He swallowed hard on the lump of emotion that had settled in his throat. "Anything." He said roughly.

The air chilled suddenly though.

Helen frowned as the portkey didn't work. "What…"

And everything around them froze.

Mist surrounded them, cutting them off from Hogwarts, from the sight of the destruction of the Quidditch pitch; from the world that existed beyond them…

Albus lifted his wand as a figure emerged. "Who goes there?"

It was a wizard; old fashioned open robes covered his arms and fell to the ground in a sweep of material; rough leather trousers rode low on his hips; his chest was bare; a hank of his hair was braided to the side of his head, the rest fell in a dark sweep to his shoulders. His body shimmered with magic, sparking gold and silver.

"Merlin." Remus breathed the name reverently.

Sirius shifted, placing more of his body between Harry and the spirit. "No." He said forcefully. "No, you can't take him!"

Merlin smiled sympathetically but his eyes were resolute. "There is a sacrifice to be borne for the magic."

"And so you seek my Champion, Emrys." Another figure emerged on the other side of Harry and everyone stumbled back to give him a wide berth.

The black cloak shrouded the figure but Sirius could take a guess at who it was. "Death."
Merlin bowed his head. Sirius wasn't surprised when the others followed suit.

"You can't take Harry." Sirius simply reiterated. "He just…he needs medical care. He's alive and…" he stopped abruptly aware he was babbling. "If there is to be a sacrifice, take me."

"Yet he lives only because he is tethered to you, my Grim." Death interjected firmly but kindly.

Sirius's eyes widened. "I don't…I don't understand…"

Death waved at Harry. "The Master of the Hallows. He tied your life to his in the cemetery on the eve of the New Year. A child's wish for his father never to leave him. And you never will. Your heart will beat with his until he undoes what was done."

It was astounding and shocking and Sirius was more than content with it. It made perfect sense to him that his life would only last the length of Harry's because how could he live for one more moment after Harry was gone from him. He wouldn't.

"Sorry." Harry's rough whisper dragged Sirius's attention to Harry.

Harry looked up at him with eyes filled with guilty regret.

"Hush." Sirius smoothed Harry's fringe away from his forehead. "I'm not…you are my life, Harry."

"But I…I used the Hallows." Harry argued weakly. "I can't…"

"Peace, my Raven." Death spoke, drawing their attention. "You are my Champion and all you did was make a magical reality of what already is."

"And Harry is tethered to life while Sirius lives." Remus said out loud. "That's why the family magic hasn't already taken his life as its sacrificial due?"

"A choice then." Harry croaked.

"A choice then." Harry croaked.

"There is no choice." Sirius said gently. "You can undo the tether and I'll…"

Harry's hand tightened on his almost painfully. "No!" His eyes filled with pain and tears as he struggled to sit up. "I can't lose you and…" he gasped.

Sirius hushed him again, easing him down and gathering him into his arms. Harry pressed into him, his cold face against Sirius's neck.

"Dad…" Harry whispered roughly, "Dad said there'd be a third way."

"Then we'll find it." Sirius promised, kissing Harry's forehead. "We'll find it."

"How?" hissed Remus beside him. "The family magic can only be called by the most powerful in a generation, one considered a guardian for all. Sirius, you are arguably that for our generation and Harry…Harry is in a league of his own in his."

"Then perhaps I might be able to offer a solution?" Albus stepped forward. He smiled sadly as they all turned to look at him. "I believe I am the most powerful of my generation."

"Albus…" Sirius began but stopped unsure what he could say. He had no words.
Merlin gazed at Albus for a long moment. "If Harry accepts the sacrifice…"

Sirius brushed a hand over Harry’s hair. "Harry?"

Confusion was written over Harry's pale face as he looked at Albus. "Why?"

"I made many mistakes with you, Harry. Through my own arrogance and stubbornness, I kept you from your godfather and I kept him from you through inaction and negligence to my duty as his leader and as Chief Warlock. I consigned him to a hellish torture and you to an unloving home because I thought your safety was more important and I was wrong. I should have found another way," Albus shook his head. "Now, there is another way and I have a…a chance to redeem myself. I can give you your godfather and I can give him you."

"But you'll die." Harry pointed out plaintively and Sirius fought the urge to push, to tell him to say yes and take Albus's offer, because his argument wasn't wrong.

"I am ready for my next great adventure." Albus said softly. His hand touched his chest for a moment. "My time is ending and yours is just beginning. Let me do this for you, Harry."

Sirius felt the sob that Harry refused to give voice to; the catch and shudder of Harry's body as he fought his emotions.

Harry gave a quick nod. "Thank you."

It was barely audible.

Death held out his hand. "Come to me then, Albus of the line of Dumbledore. Your family awaits you."

Albus nodded. Fawkes trilled sadly as Albus petted him one last time. "You'll stay with Hagrid now until Harry is of age. He'll take care of you."

Hagrid was openly weeping but he held out his arm and the phoenix flew to him.

"Alastor…” Albus smiled at his old friend. "I have a favour to ask of you…”

"I'll look in on Severus." Alastor promised immediately.

"Name the magical Heir to the House of Dumbledore, Albus." Merlin instructed gently.

"I name Harry James Potter my magical heir." Albus announced firmly. He smiled widely at Sirius's frown. "Guard him well, Sirius."

Sirius nodded his agreement, tightening his hold on Harry.

Death gestured and Albus went to his side.

Sirius stared as Death gazed fondly at him and Harry. "I will see you both when you return to me, my Grim, my Raven."

Sirius shivered, the words resonating within him at a visceral level. Harry's hands clutched at him and Sirius wrapped his arms around his son and held him close.

Death and Albus walked away, disappearing into the mist together.

"The sacrifice is satisfied." Merlin said. His spirit dissolved into the shape of a golden hawk and
disappeared.

Time resumed. The mists disappeared leaving Albus's body in their wake, a crumpled form a few steps away.

Rain broke over them; pouring down from the sky in sheets.

Harry gave a cry of pain and he slumped, unconscious at last, against Sirius.

"We have to go now!" Helen reached for Sirius and he clasped her hand as the portkey spun them away.

They landed in front of the clinic and there was already footsteps running towards them.

Sirius looked up as Noshi reached them and remembered his words from their first visit, of how Sirius would bring Harry to be healed.

Sirius pressed one more kiss on Harry's head.

It was finally truly over.
Chapter Notes

Mention of sexual contact by an adult with a minor; general discussion by characters on grooming/abuse.

Part 13: Happy Ever After with Pronglet (The Living Well is the Best Revenge Prank)

25th June 1995

Ron set aside the copy of the Daily Prophet on the picnic table and sighed at the headlines.

The Boy Who Lived to Save Us Again

Albus Dumbledore Dies in the Battle of Hogwarts

Harry was going to hate it. He was going to hate the adulation and the increased fame; the sycophants who wanted nothing but to say they were friends with The Harry Potter.

He considered the dream the dragon had given him of a Ron who had walked away from Harry at the beginning of the tournament – jealous and envious and stupid.

Ron blew out a breath.

He knew his flaws and he was working on them. He would never walk away from Harry.

He shook his head, swung around on the bench away from the house, and stared out at the Weasley back garden.

Home.

They'd come home after the battle, retreating into the Burrow and simply holding each other as a family; grateful to come through mostly uninjured and alive. But they'd been hurt.

Bill had wept on their mother's shoulder for long minutes; crying out his pain and grief at the loss of his partner. Ron had felt so helpless watching him. He wanted to take away his brother's pain; wanted to tell him that he was so grateful to Caroline for ensuring that his big brother had survived. He wished he could have been there; that he could have helped comfort Bill when it had happened but he'd been passed out in the Headmaster's office. He sighed again and rubbed his forehead tiredly.

The four students in the spell had woken up after the battle. They had waited anxiously waiting for the all clear – pulling George free of the bookcase and tending to him while they did. Then the alarm had sounded and the dragon had told them there was a bomb. But almost as soon as the alarm sounded it was all over. Harry saving them all, Ron thought tiredly.

George had ushered them out as soon as the door had unlocked and Ron had run to find his friends and his father…

The dragon was still awake. It would need four Heads of Houses to put her to sleep again and who
knew when that would be? Dumbledore's death had thrown Hogwarts into turmoil although there was a brief note in the paper which announced Professor McGonagall had been appointed Headmistress. At least Sprout and Flitwick had come through unscathed but Snape was in some kind of coma and it wasn't looking good by all accounts.

He shook his head.

He couldn't see anyone returning to Hogwarts to close out the school year. The damage the invaders had wrought was extensive. The Quidditch pitch didn't have an intact stand on it.

"Ron?" His mother sidled up to him and sat down on the bench next to him. She gave a huff at the sight of the papers before she nudged his shoulder with her own. "You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep," Ron admitted gruffly. "I was thinking about Harry." His face crumpled. "He was so...he was so injured."

His Mum nodded slowly. He'd found out the night before that all the women who'd taken part in the ritual had seen events through Hermione's eyes so he knew she knew just how bad Harry had been; how broken he'd looked as Sirius had held him as though he was the most precious thing in the world.

"He's in the best place to get better and Sirius is with him." She said reassuringly.

"I know," tears pricked over Ron's eyes, "I just...I just wish he was here."

His Mum put an arm around him and he sank into her comforting embrace with just a smidgeon of shame as the tears leaked out and down his face.

"Harry will be back with us by the end of the week. He'll be healed and healthy and we'll all be there for him." She said comfortingly.

"I need to talk to him." Ron said. "I need to tell him...tell him about the dragon and..." he sighed, "what we had to agree so she'd help us." He mumbled the last part, knowing his Mum wouldn't like it.

"What?" Her voice was sharp. "What did you have to agree?" She sounded like she was ready to march down to the school and have it out with the dragon painting. He wouldn't put it past his Mum to do it either.

Ron swiped at his nose; she huffed and handed him a handkerchief. He blew his nose noisily before answering. "We had to agree to be bound to the school. I mean, not that we have to be there all the time but we'll have to live there eventually."

His Mum was quiet for a long moment. She sighed heavily. "I guess that's not so bad. Teaching's a respectable profession."

"I want to manage a Quidditch team!" Ron retorted before his brain caught up with his mouth and pointed out that he had sworn never to tell his mother his career ambitions. "And Harry would be my Seeker, you know?" He hastily added. His face fell. "Not that anyone will want to play where You-Know-Who died."

His Mum hummed. "Maybe you can organise a game when the pitch is repaired and reclaim the space back."

Ron nodded. That actually sounded like a good idea. "You don't mind?" He asked. "About the
"All I've ever wanted is for you all to grow up healthy and happy." His Mum said firmly.

He'd dispute that since he remembered the colossal row she and Charlie had had when he'd told her about Romania, not to mention the blow-out over Bill and Egypt, but he figured silence was the better part of valour.

His Mum tousled his hair. "Besides, Quidditch Manager will be a good job for you before you end up teaching. It'll allow you to travel and see something of the world before you end up back at the school."

Ron was truthfully rendered speechless.

"Now," bustled his mother getting up from the bench, "I'd best see to breakfast and check the twins haven't decided to take George's ear off in the middle of the night so they match again."

It was a possibility; Ron had overheard them talking about it before he'd fallen into his own bed.

"Do I have time to write to Hermione and Neville?" Ron asked, getting up himself to follow her inside.

"If you're quick. It's just bacon butties this morning." His Mum agreed, a hint of a question in her tone.

Ron shrugged. "Harry will go mental if I don't check on Hermione and Neville said something about the alliance getting together to go over what happened and make sure everyone's taken care of."

His Mum caught his arm as they reached the back door and Ron thought he saw the shadow of someone retreating back into the house. "Ron," she held his gaze forcefully, "we're very, very proud of you."

Ron felt his face go bright red but he accepted the words with a nod.

His Mum smiled at him and pushed him gently in the direction of the stairs. "Give my best to Hermione and let Neville know he's always welcome here."

Ron nodded again and took off for the stairs. He had letters to write and things to care of to make it easier for Harry when he returned. And, Ron thought with anticipation, a Quidditch match to organise.

\[O-O-o\]

Time Bubble – 30 th June 1995

Harry looked out on the beautiful valley through the window without truly seeing it. He was pressed up against the window pane, the glass was cold against his skin and it helped anchor him into reality. He'd been in a healing coma for three days, bedridden for two more, and the healers had only just allowed him to get up. He still felt exhausted; sore.

He should have died.

He had been at ground zero when Crouch exploded. He had felt the heat and the force; had felt the pain rip through him. He was sure he had died.

There had been a moment – white all around him and the sense of his Mum and Dad, of Death – and
then he had been on the ground and Sirius had been there…

"Harry."

As though he had conjured him into being with the thought of him, Sirius was suddenly there. He hadn't left him until that morning…hadn't left him…

Guilt suffused him again. He hadn't known about the tether; hadn't realised what he'd done. He couldn't regret it. It had kept Sirius alive; kept him alive. He wouldn't ever lose Sirius. So, he couldn't regret it but he had done it unknowingly, and without Sirius's consent – and for that he was apologetic (and thank Merlin Death didn't see it as some kind of usurping and forced him into promising his first born son or last remaining descendent as a champion).

"Cold?" Sirius asked softly.

Harry shrugged.

Noshi had somehow managed to finagle Sirius away a couple of hours before – probably to a mind healer since the instance he'd been left alone, Healer Fay had arrived in Harry's room. The painting he'd started was unfinished on the easel. He'd lost interest only a few minutes after he'd started and he really, really wasn't interested in talking.

He hadn't talked since he'd woken up.

Sirius wrapped a thin cotton robe around Harry's shoulders and helped Harry manoeuvre his arms into it as though he was a small child. "There." He rubbed Harry's upper arms, warming them. "Why don't you come and sit over by the fireplace and I'll start a fire."

Harry let Sirius help him off the window seat. He still felt shaky, like a new-born colt trying to find his legs. He leaned heavily on his father until he was safely ensconced on the comfy sofa. Dobby popped in – he'd arrived with an insistent Hedwig within hours of Sirius and Harry's arrival apparently. Harry was comforted by their familiar presence. Sirius wrapped the blanket Dobby provided around Harry's pyjama-clad legs while the elf got a blaze going.

Sirius sat down next to him. He was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt; leather flip-flops on his feet. His hair was down. He looked as tired as Harry felt. Guilt swamped him again. He knew Sirius was worried about him.

"Healer Fay said you didn't want to talk." Sirius said quietly, brushing a strand of hair away from Harry's face.

Harry shook his head. He curled into Sirius and Sirius wrapped an arm around him tightly. There were tears pressing up against the back of Harry's eyes, clogging up his throat, and he couldn't…he couldn't…

He'd killed Voldemort.

He'd taken a life. And yes, it had been fated and necessary and it had even been weirdly in a way self-defence, but at the end of the day he'd still killed Tom Marvolo Riddle.

He felt monstrous.

He felt relieved.

Relieved it was all over. Relieved that because Tom was dead, Harry could live. Finally. He could
live.

Unlike so many others.

_Benjamin Nott_; a Death Eater who had given up his life to give his son a better future.

_Caro_; bright beautiful Caro who was smart and funny and who had helped him train; who had helped him defeat Voldemort.

_Cedric_; his friend who had helped him through the tournament, who knew its trials and challenges in a way only the four of them who had faced Voldemort's tasks could know. They'd been looking forward to playing Quidditch against each other; looking forward to being friends without the weight of the tournament and politics. Harry was going to miss him.

Dumbledore.

God.

_Dumbledore._

He was responsible for the Headmaster's death.

Hot tears ran down his face.

Sirius held Harry as he wept out his grief and Harry pressed tightly into the cocoon of Sirius's embrace; listened to the reassuring beat of Sirius's heart underneath his ear, the comfort of his breathing.

The Headmaster had given up his life so Harry could live; so Sirius could live. And Harry couldn't, couldn't feel any regret for finding a third way; for keeping his promise to Regulus; for standing up for Sirius. But he felt guilty because his choice had led to a death; because when all was said and done, he wouldn't change it; he would always choose Sirius alive and well.

And there was a true sense of loss; mourning for a wizard who had been something of a mentor, a grandfatherly figure who Harry could remember with affection for all Dumbledore's mistakes and flaws.

He also knew he should be bothered about what was happening back in England; the guilty tug of responsibility nagged at him.

There was so much he didn't know about what had happened. He had no idea if Snape had lived or died; had no idea if Hogwarts was still open; how everyone was dealing with the aftermath.

He knew the alliance needed them. They had taken losses and hurts. There would be visible and invisible scars for those who had stood beside him.

_Theo_ who had lost a father.

_Bill_ who had lost a partner.

_Neville._

His godbrother would need a friend in the aftermath of learning about Hannah. And they would need to deal with the problem of Hannah – and Merlin Harry couldn't quite believe that it had been Hannah who had betrayed them…
He knew the House of Black needed them.

Lucius lived. There was enough of a sense of him still in the family magic to know that. But he could sense the turmoil in the House; the concern they had for him and for Sirius. He couldn't even think about Hermione…

The storm of weeping passed and Harry felt his eyes grow heavy; his head ached dully. Lethargy descended like a smothering blanket.

Sirius stroked a hand through his hair and Harry leaned into the touch.

"Listen to me, Pronglet." Sirius whispered softly. "You've been through a lot – more than anyone should have to go through and you…you were brave and courageous and merciful. I'm so very, very proud of you, Harry."

Harry let the rush of warmth at Sirius's words steal over him.

"You don't worry about anything. You'll talk when you're ready and we'll deal with the rest when you're ready. Just…just focus on healing. That's all you need to do right now; heal." Sirius murmured.

Harry's hands clutched at Sirius's t-shirt, holding onto him.

"I'm not going anywhere, Pronglet." Sirius promised roughly. "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere."

It comforted Harry; eased the worry and fear that lurked within him that he hadn't been quick enough, strong enough; that Sirius had died and it was all a dream.

He listened to Sirius's heartbeat and drifted to sleep.

O-O-O

26th June 1995

Remus watched as Andy greeted Augusta with a warm hug as she exited the floo and wondered at what had happened between the women who had taken part in the ritual. They all seemed more connected. Andy and Dora had been inseparable since they'd arrived at the Black Estate in the hours after the battle.

The past couple of days had been chaos.

Moody had taken control at Hogwarts until Minerva had arrived back at the school. She had been heartbroken at the death of Albus and dismayed at the news about Snape but had rallied and accepted the wards. She was overseeing the repairs to the school assisted by Filius and Pomona, and a particularly talkative dragon painting in her new office.

The students and their families had been sent home from the Black Estate. Some needed to deal with the heartbreak of losses and changed circumstances; some to simply absorb the reality of what had happened.

Remus had retreated that first night to the Black Estate; to his wife. He and Dora had slept together tightly holding onto each other, their hands resting over the precious gift of their unborn child.

He'd spent much of the previous day with his pack. They'd lost two members to vampires and his
beta, Patrick, had lost a leg. He'd spent time with those grieving; with Patrick who was surprisingly upbeat and being looked after by an attentive Sian.

And the whole time he'd worried about Sirius and Harry.

It had only been after dinner that he'd had a chance to look at the mail and seen the notice of Nott's surrender and remembered the way Nott had died. Which dragged his mind back to the present and the reason why they were there; to see Theo who had gone home with the Longbottoms and Blaise Zabini after the battle and the news of his father's death.

"Thank you for welcoming us, Augusta." Andy said. "We only got the official notice last night that Lord Nott had surrendered to the House and with Sirius and Harry…” her voice caught and she had to take a breath, "well, things are at sixes and sevens."

"It's only to be expected." Augusta said diplomatically. Her eyes were clear if tired as they met Remus's. "Have you heard anything from Sirius?"

"Not from Sirius but Helen Jordan was able to send a message to say that they had arrived safely and they were healing. Harry's injuries are very serious though and she was certain that they'd probably spend a fair amount of time at the clinic before returning." Remus confirmed.

He expected that Sirius and Harry would only return when Harry was well enough to deal with the aftermath in England. It was comforting to know that they could take the time they needed but also that Remus and the others only had to survive a week without them thanks to the magic of the time bubble. Although, Remus mused dryly, the absence of them was already all too noticeable.

"Any news on Lucius? Narcissa's elf informed me they were still at Saint Mungo's when I enquired this morning." Augusta asked as she led them through the house.

"They saved his leg but the nerve damage was extensive." Andy replied. "He'll need a cane for actual use rather than vanity in the future." She paused. "How is Theodore?"

Augusta's eyes dimmed with sadness. "He's been quiet since he heard the news. I was granted temporary custody yesterday by the Wizarding Orphan Office until the will reading and the matter of custody could be established, but of course the notice of surrender changes things."

She led them through the house to the conservatory.

The three boys were gathered around a table; Neville and Blaise were playing cards whereas Theo was reading. All three looked wan and pale. Remus made a mental note to talk to Augusta about mind healing before they left.

Theo set his book aside and stood immediately as soon as he realised who had entered. "Madame Tonks. Mister Lupin."

Neville scrambled to greet them properly and the next few moments were a haze of greetings.

Augusta cleared her throat. "Neville, Blaise; why don't you take your card game to the library while our guests speak to Theodore."

"That's alright, Madame Longbottom." Theo said quickly. "They can stay."

Augusta nodded regally. "Tea then."

They all sat at the table as a house elf popped in with a tea-tray.
"Our apologies, Theodore," Andy began once the tea was poured and Remus had updated the boys on Harry and Sirius after a quiet enquiry from Neville. "We only received official word last night that the House of Nott had surrendered to our House."

Theo inclined his head. "I had wondered if Father hadn't been able to make the declaration before Voldemort killed him."

Remus frowned. "Your father planned this?"

"He..." Theo paused, collecting himself and Remus watched as the teenager visibly wrestled back his grief. "We'd talked about it at Easter and in letters. Father didn't want to even pretend to be on Riddle's side anymore and he knew Riddle wouldn't just allow him to leave. He expected to die and...we have no close family left." He pressed his lips together as his eyes shone briefly with tears. "He wanted to make sure I would have a guardian...he admired Lord Black a great deal and the way he'd dealt with the Wenlocks."

"Well, your situation is a bit different." Andy said and glanced over at Remus silently handing him the baton.

"Magic recognised the motivation in your father's action. The House surrendered but it is magically in the care of the House of Black until you come of age. I believe, and Gringotts agree with me, that you'll be able to claim your Head of House ring once you've completed your service to the House of Potter." Remus explained.

Theo breathed in sharply. He absently touched the Heir ring he wore. "Father had some old diaries from his grandfather. He theorised a voluntary surrender – that the intent would make a difference. Wenlock acted against the interests of the family magic but my father acted in my protection and the wider wizarding world's. We were hopeful but it's good to know it worked."

"Which brings us onto the matter of custody." Andy said briskly. "The WOO acknowledged that the surrender means you are automatically a ward of the House of Black. In Sirius's absence, Simeon and I spoke about your circumstances this morning. We can wait until Sirius is back, of course, but you're a young man and we'd like to take your wishes into consideration."

"My Father and I discussed it." Theo confirmed, reaching for his cup. He took a small sip of tea and set the crockery aside again. "My Father ideally wanted Lord Black to raise me but..." he grimaced, "he knew Lord Black's priority is Potter – Harry, and he knew that I would never want to...impose on that relationship." He gestured vaguely, stopping them all from speaking. "Look, I'm sure if I insisted on it, Black would take me in and Potter would welcome me, and they'd both do their best to make me a part of their family. How could they not? They're honourable and good people."

"But?" prompted Remus gently when the pause went on slightly too long for comfort.

"But they shouldn't have to." Theo said bluntly. "And Harry deserves better than having to share his father with someone just when he needs him the most. I won't be the one who forces him to do that. I want to build a good relationship with Harry for the future and this...this could harm that."

"Then you have another solution." Andy said before anyone else could comment.

"Yes," Theo said taking a breath and meeting Andy's eyes across the table, "I would be honoured if you would undertake my ward-ship on behalf of the House of Black, Madame Tonks."

"I would be honoured to have you as my ward, Theodore." Andy said fiercely.

A brief look of relief flitted across Theo's face.
It was a good solution, Remus mused.

He couldn't deny that Theo had hit on Remus's own concerns; Harry needed Sirius's whole attention, deserved it after all he'd gone through at the Dursleys and with the events of the last year. And Sirius instinctively knew that. He'd made Harry his whole world and Harry thrived with Sirius's love. Perhaps when Harry was older, he'd feel more comfortable sharing Sirius. Remus hoped so because Sirius deserved to find love and have more in his life than simply Harry, who would grow up and live his own life in time.

Just like Dora was a grown woman, married and about to have a child of her own. She wouldn't view Theo's presence in her family as usurping her own position. In fact, Remus had an idea Dora would love the addition of a pseudo little brother to tease – moreso than Draco who was still adjusting to the imminent arrival of his unborn sibling and who would resent the presence of another boy in the Malfoy household.

Andy and Ted were the best option for Theo. Sirius and Harry would also be very much appreciative about Theo's thoughtfulness in his choice, so it was one which served the young Nott well.

It was an elegant and Slytherin solution.

"Thank you, Theo." Remus said softly.

Theo inclined his head. "Will I…the will and…" he shot a quick look towards Augusta, "Madame Longbottom and I were due to go to Gringotts today and see about the…the funeral."

Remus nodded. "I can take care of the logistics as steward."

Another fleeting look of relief crossed Theo's face.

"I suggest we go to Gringotts now." Andy said. "We can get the access to your house sorted out. Ted and I can always move in with you…"

"No." Theo shook his head. "I'd prefer to…I'd like to go home with you."

"Then that's what we'll do." Andy said firmly.

Augusta rose from the table. "Let me show you to Theo's room; we can pack up the few things he has here."

Remus watched quietly as Theo left the room, sandwiched between the two formidable women.

"Remus," Neville sat forward with intent eyes, "I was wondering if you'd heard anything from the Abbotts?"

Remus repressed the urge to sigh and nodded. "Hannah was admitted to the care of Saint Mungo's after the battle. It's been established that she was subjected to potions and compulsion charms to make her compliant and receptive to Crouch but the extent of that is not known. She was thoroughly brainwashed by him either way."

It wasn't the worst of it though and Remus would rather have cut his own throat than tell Neville the rest; that Crouch and Hannah had been physically intimate and there was a possibility of a child. Hannah had invoked the last Heir protocols on her committal to the hospital. Her parents were forbidden from interfering if there was a child.

"So it was all a lie." Neville said despondent.
"She was sweet on you earlier in the Summer, I'd swear on it." Blaise countered, patting Neville on the shoulder. "Just…"

"Crouch got his hooks into her." Neville sighed heavily and looked up at Remus again. "Do they… please can you convey that if they need anything at all, the Abbotts only have to ask?"

"I will do." Remus promised.

"How's Sue?" asked Blaise.

"Amelia said she was upset but coming to terms with everything with the help of her family." Remus said.

"Sue said she was going to need a tonne of mind healing." Neville noted. He rubbed his forehead. "I feel like I could do with some myself."

Remus nodded slowly. Probably everyone who had been involved with the battle required some – including himself. His own confrontation with Peter had left him confused and bewildered the more he thought about it. And then seeing Harry… "We could all do with some."

"All do with some what?" Augusta asked as she rejoined them.

"Mind healing." Remus said. "The battle was traumatic for everyone involved."

Augusta glanced at the two boys at the table. "Your thoughts, Neville?"

"I think it would be a good idea, Gran." Neville admitted without prevarication. "Harry speaks well of Healer Allen."

"Then I will owl him to make an appointment for you and for Blaise."

Blaise looked startled. "I, uh, I don't think my mother will…"

"Nonsense." Augusta cut in briskly. "After all, your mother was clear in her letter yesterday that until her return from the Continent she is content to leave all matters of your care in, what did she say? Ah, yes; my capable hands." She smiled sharply. "I believe this falls under my jurisdiction at the present moment."

Blaise snapped his open mouth closed and smiled brightly.

Neville beamed proudly at his grandmother.

Augusta nodded. "Why don't you boys head up and change your clothes? We'll go to Gringotts with Theodore and show him some support."

Neville and Blaise both jumped to follow her order.

Augusta sighed, and with their departure her demeanour changed. She looked tired and drawn. "They're good boys." She frowned. "I was thinking of petitioning Nora Zabini to allow Blaise to remain here this Summer."

"I think that would be a good idea." Remus said. Neville would appreciate his friend's company and Blaise would benefit from actual parental care.

Augusta nodded slowly. "I know Harry was injured and I know they need the time away but I wish Sirius and Harry could be with us."
Remus sighed. "Me too, Augusta, me too."

O-O-O

Time Bubble – 2nd July 1995

Harry knew he was dreaming.

It was King’s Cross but it wasn’t. Just an empty station; the platform of nine and three-quarters completely deserted. There was no Hogwarts Express.

There was a small room off to the side; a waiting room filled with benches and Harry entered it a touch self-consciously. He sat down on the bench and waited.

He wasn’t surprised when a moment later Dumbledore sat down. The former Headmaster looked well; venerable and old still, but he looked at peace.

"Hello, Harry." Dumbledore’s blue eyes twinkled at him. "You wanted to speak with me?"

Had he wanted to speak to Dumbledore? He’d had a stray thought before he’d gone to sleep…

Harry nodded sharply but didn’t speak. He had yet to talk out loud again and it didn’t feel right to talk to Dumbledore – even if the whole thing was in his head.

Dumbledore’s twinkle dimmed. "You need not feel guilty about my passing, Harry. My heart sustained a tear in the battle. Poppy might have been able to heal the worst of the damage but my time was coming to an end. Minerva will tell you when you are back in England."

Harry felt relieved at the news.

"It is a difficult thing, Harry, to defeat a Dark Lord."

Harry nodded sharply but didn’t speak. He had yet to talk out loud again and it didn’t feel right to talk to Dumbledore – even if the whole thing was in his head.

Dumbledore’s twinkle dimmed. "You need not feel guilty about my passing, Harry. My heart sustained a tear in the battle. Poppy might have been able to heal the worst of the damage but my time was coming to an end. Minerva will tell you when you are back in England."

Harry felt relieved at the news.

"It is a difficult thing, Harry, to defeat a Dark Lord." Dumbledore said. "I did not have to kill Gellert. He…he surrendered to me once I held his wand. I like to believe that there was enough fondness for me from our youthful love affair that he refrained from forcing my hand. Or perhaps he simply did not wish to die."

Harry thought the latter was more likely and was glad he had decided not to speak. He wasn’t sure he would have been able to comfort the Headmaster.

"There is nothing I can say which will make killing Tom better. And more, the aftermath of the battle…” Dumbledore sighed deeply. "War is a terrible thing." He shook his head. "I lost friends; loved ones. People were hurt; injured by more than spells. It took…it took a long time to recover and through it all I suddenly had a world looking to me for guidance and counsel. It was…overwhelming." He smiled sadly at Harry. "You must take as much time as you need, my dear boy. The world will wait."

Harry watched as Dumbledore settled into a more comfortable position on the bench and Harry settled in beside him.

He woke with a start.

His eyes adjusted to the semi-dark. It wasn’t even daylight.

Hedwig hooted from her perch. There was a soft whine of enquiry from the foot of the bed and Harry gestured for Padfoot to stand down. He’d woken his father up every night with nightmares but this was different.
He closed his eyes again.

Padfoot lay his head against Harry's foot; a warm solid presence.

Why King's Cross, mused Harry sleepily. It seemed like a strange location for his mind to choose to meet with Dumbledore.

But there was a waiting room and maybe that was the point. His mind hadn't chosen the location because it associated it with Hogwarts. It chose it because Harry was waiting.

And maybe waiting wasn't so bad.

o-O-o

27 th June 1995

Hermione stared out at the road beyond the front garden. It was raining. The type of weather that people joked about when they talked about Britain; grey, wet, cold. Cars drove by, their muted growl almost inaudible behind the double-glazing.

She touched the necklace she wore, twisting the leather around her finger before letting go without even thinking about it. She had been surprised to find it intact; surprised to be handed it by her mother after the battle was over and she'd returned home, throwing herself into her mother's arms and…

Harry had almost died.

He was seriously injured and, apart from a couple of messages Remus had managed to receive from the clinic, she had no way of knowing how he was. She was beginning to understand the frustration Harry had shown about not knowing about Sirius's condition at Yule much, much better.

She missed Harry.

She hoped he was alright.

There was so much he had to deal with.

"Hermione?" Her mother's voice startled her and she twisted round from her place at the window to look at her.

Her mother had taken a week off work; her father covering her patients where they couldn't reschedule. Hermione couldn't remember the last time her mother had specifically taken time off to look after her. Not that her parents didn't love her – they did – and they always took holiday during Hermione's own school breaks to spend time with her and for a family vacation. But…but she remembered having flu in her final year at primary and her mother had still gone to work, leaving Hermione in the care of her usual babysitter, Mrs McGaskill. Hermione wondered whether the ambient magic of the ritual had affected her mother despite her being safe in the kitchen with the elves rather than in the ritual circle.

"Healer Allen is here."

The Healer.

Right.

Andy had mentioned that she had arranged a session with a mind healer for everyone in the House of
It made sense.

Hermione squirmed inwardly at the inner surge of resentment because logically she knew it made sense for her to talk to a mind healer – and God knew she would be the first one arguing that everyone else she cared about needed to talk to one – especially if they'd gone through half of what she had experienced since she'd started at Hogwarts, never mind the battle she'd just gone through.

She sighed and got up to follow her mother into the small study her parents had on the ground floor.

She'd met Healer Allen before – Harry had introduced them. She shook his hand briefly before taking the seat opposite him.

Her mother cleared her throat. "Would you like me to stay, Hermione, or…"

"I'll be fine." Hermione said firmly, despite the nerves rioting in her belly.

Her mother nodded. "I'll be in the kitchen." She departed but didn't shut the door behind her and Hermione realised it was part of her mother's protection – she would be able to hear immediately if Hermione shouted.

"Your mother cares for you a great deal." Healer Allen said, his brown eyes warm and friendly.

"Yes," Hermione nodded, "she's been great about everything." And she had – in a way that Hermione would never have believed the year before. Being sponsored by the House of Black and her mother's friendship with Andy and others had gone a long way to enabling her mother to understand.

"Where would you like to start?" asked the healer.

"I don't know." Hermione admitted, adjusting her position a touch to get more comfortable. "Everything still seems unreal."

Healer Allen nodded. "What's your biggest concern right now…"

"Harry." Hermione talked over him and blushed. "Sorry. It's just…he went through so much."

"And what about you?" Allen stated pointedly.

Hermione shrugged, her fingers playing with the necklace. "It's not really…I mean, compared to Harry…"

Allen smiled at her gently as she stuttered to a halt. "Do you believe that because Harry went through a traumatic experience that it negates any other traumatic experiences suffered by the other people who took part in the battle?"

"No," Hermione immediately replied, "of course not! I just…" she sighed and tried to gather her thoughts into a coherent sentence. "I know it's not a competition and that his experience doesn't mean that I didn't go through something…terrifying, but Harry…he's had this madman after him, and he's had to cope with knowing he had to kill him to get away from him and that…it hurt him a lot."

"You said you found your experience terrifying." Allen stated.

"I didn't really expect to end up right beside Harry in the middle of the battle." Hermione admitted a frisson of guilt curling in her belly. "I thought…it was safe where we did the ritual. It's under Fidelius Black."
and it's protected by a lot of wards and it was safe. I was supposed to be safe."

She paused, hearing the tremor in her voice and took a breath.

"The other times Harry's faced him, it's always just been him really. I mean, in first year, we had the traps but they were…just obstacles. It was scary going after the thief but I didn't ever actually confront anyone." She smoothed her hands down her denim-clad legs and bit her lip. "And I was scared about the basilisk but then I got petrified so I didn't really know what Harry faced down in the Chamber of Secrets."

She tucked a hair behind her ear. "Last year…last year was different. I mean, both Ron and I were both with Harry when he confronted Sirius but we won't alone for long and then Remus was there and when they confronted Pettigrew it made so much sense and…it was scary but I knew we were safe? Even when we…when we helped Sirius later, I was…it was scary but I needed to focus and I realised that everything worked out; that it was meant to happen the way that it did and I had Harry with me all the time and that…it made me feel safe."

She sighed and slumped back in her chair. "And that makes me sound as bad as Ginny when she was in fangirl mode and that's not…Harry just makes me feel safe. Not because he's this hero just because he's Harry."

And that was why everything seemed so wrong because Harry wasn't there.

"So when I ended up on the battlefield…I was right beside Harry and I was glad because even if I was supposed to be safe somewhere else, I was with Harry and I could help him." Hermione frowned. "But it doesn't mean it wasn't terrifying confronting Voldemort. I was scared, really scared. But, I knew Harry was there and I was focused on doing the spell to change out Voldemort's blood so it helped me."

"How do you feel about being instrumental in Voldemort's defeat?"

The question took her by surprise and she had to think about it for a long moment.

"I guess I don't think about it like that." Hermione said. "I might have spoken the words on the battlefield but that was because Morgana sent me there; the spell was powered by the coven and Morgana herself." She tilted her head. "It was just…necessary, and I was the…the one who was there."

"What do you think made Morgana choose you?" Allen asked.

Hermione wet her lips. "Everyone in the coven loves him but I think…she came the first time when we were linked with blood in the blessing ceremony and maybe, maybe she remembered that connection." Or saw just how much Hermione loved him.

"But it's true to say that she used the necklace to send you to the battlefield and invoke the blessing." Allen pointed out, gesturing at her neck. "A necklace which is once was a gift from you to him to protect him; something he holds as precious."

Hermione blushed again. "You think she chose me because I gave Harry the necklace originally?"

"Maybe she chose not the person who loves Harry but the person who Harry loves." Allen suggested gently.

Hermione felt her cheeks heat again with another blush. She really wished the healer's theory was correct but she didn't want to jump to conclusions.
"How did you feel when Harry reacted to the threat of the magical bomb?" Allen asked softly, changing the subject and surprising her into looking at him again.

"Just…it was just so like him to save everyone." Hermione shook her head, her hair bouncing. "I…I wanted to be angry at him but I was just terrified he was dead and then…” she fingered her necklace again, "seeing Merlin and Death, that whole conversation was…it was…it was really good of the Headmaster to volunteer and I was so relieved…"

"It didn't bother you seeing Merlin and Death?" asked Allen, a curious glint in his eyes.

"Not really." Hermione said. "I mean, we'd just called the spirit of Morgana Le Fey to help us protect Harry and Harry explained about the family magic and the Peverells so it…it seemed right?” She bit her lip. "I was more concerned about Harry. He was so hurt."

"You and Harry are close." Allen commented.

"He's my best friend." Hermione said without thinking about it.

"I understand he's also your boyfriend." Allen prodded.

Hermione blushed. "Yes, but we'll always be best friends first."

"That's commendable." Allen said with a smile. "You don't think your relationship with Harry will last?"

Hermione brushed back her hair and sighed. "Statistics prove that people rarely stay with their first boyfriend or girlfriend."

Allen hummed. "But the statistics aren't about you and Harry."

Which was infuriatingly true.

Hermione dropped her hand away from her necklace as she realised she was touching it again. "I just…I just want to be realistic."

"Because then it won't hurt so much if it ends." Allen completed the thought that was in her head.

Hermione nodded, looking down a little shamefaced. "It's…I didn't have a lot of friends growing up. Harry was my first friend and if I lost him…"

But she almost had.

He'd fought a madmen for them; protected them from a magical bomb.

Her eyes filled with tears and suddenly she was crying.

Her mother was suddenly just there. Hermione felt her mother wrap her arms around her and draw her into an embrace and she sank into the comfort.

It seemed like forever before she stopped crying. Her mother shifted to sit on the arm of the chair. Healer Allen hadn't moved but his eyes held a wealth of empathetic understanding.

"I really wish Harry was here." Hermione whispered.

Allen nodded. "If he was here what would he say?"
"He'd tell me I was brilliant and he'd hug me and everything would feel right again." Hermione swiped at her face again and blew out a breath.

"You're not alone in that wish." Allen commented. "I believe the House of Black and its allies are feeling the absence of Lord Potter very keenly."

"Has there been any further news?" asked her mother before Hermione could.

"Not yet today." Allen held up his hand. "Miss Granger, I'd like to propose that you and your family move into the Black estate for the duration of the rest of the week, along with some of your closest allies. While I believe your immediate family," he acknowledged her mother with a nod, "is a wonderful support, I think you and others would benefit from being close and sharing your worry."

Hermione looked up at her mother who looked at the healer as though assessing his sincerity. Her mother sighed. "I'll agree on the proviso I go too."

"Of course." Allen stood up. "I'll let Steward Lupin know your decision. I'm sure he'll be in touch shortly."

Hermione thanked the healer as he took his leave and headed upstairs to pack while her mother showed him out. It was a relief to know she was going to be staying with Remus and the others. It was the only way she could be certain to find out exactly how Harry was as soon as everyone else did.

Her mother knocked on her doorframe. "You alright packing?"

Hermione nodded. Before she could change her mind she crossed the room and hugged her mother. "Thank you."

Her mother hugged her tightly. "You know Harry's not the only one who thinks you're brilliant."

Hermione gave a laugh and continued soaking up the maternal comfort.

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*Time Bubble – 8th July 1995*

Sirius was talking.

Harry shifted in the bed and frowned at the murmur of voices coming through the open bedroom door. They'd been given their old cabin back once Harry's physical injuries had healed enough for him not to need the immediate care of the clinic. He had physio, check-ups and mind healing sessions scheduled but they didn't mean he and Sirius couldn't live in their own space.

It was almost nostalgic coming back to the cabin. It was familiar and Harry automatically associated it with Sirius. He snuggled further into the bed and let himself drift.

"...and I'm impressed at your own commitment to your health."

It was Noshi talking with Sirius.

Harry frowned a touch. Had Sirius been badly injured? He'd been close to the bomb explosion but Harry was certain that he had contained that. But then Sirius had been in a fight for his life with Crouch for long minutes before Harry's showdown with Voldemort. And Crouch had been a sadistic bastard.
Concerned, he started listening intently.

"...it's important that I'm healthy for Harry." Sirius said.

It was the end of a sentence but Harry knew it summed everything up; Sirius was going to heal so he could be there for Harry. Not that Sirius hadn't been there already. His father had barely moved from his side for the past two weeks. Which explained why Sirius was having a consult with Noshi in their cabin with Harry only a few feet away in bed.

"Physically, you simply need rest. Your wrist has healed well." Noshi advised. "You are doing the physio with Harry?"

"Yes, every day." Sirius confirmed.

"Your scan shows you are following the nutrition plan." Noshi commented.

Sirius gave some kind of positive noise which Harry could barely hear. "It encourages Harry."

Harry frowned. That explained why Sirius had actually eaten the grilled banana thing the other night. Sirius wasn't against bananas but as a side-vegetable...he had made a disgusted face but had soldiered on anyway and now Harry knew why. Harry really didn't have much of an appetite and wasn't all that bothered about eating but Sirius insisted they be together for meals and Harry couldn't bear the disappointed look Sirius would aim his way if he didn't eat at least half of his meal. He hadn't insisted Harry eat the banana things.

"...concerned you're not getting the time you need with the mind healer." Noshi's voice travelled low into the bedroom.

"I talk with you." Sirius replied.

"I am not a mind healer." Noshi reminded him.

"No, but it's the talking that's the point, isn't it?" asked Sirius.

Talking which Harry still didn't want to do.

"Then I am at your disposal, my friend." Noshi said warmly. And Harry loved him for that; for just being there for Sirius.

"Harry's my biggest concern right now but you know that." Sirius said matter-of-factly. "But I know I need to deal with my own...baggage so I can be there for him."

Harry felt his eyes sting at the reminder of just how much Sirius loved him.

"Where would you like to start?" asked Noshi.

"That's the question, isn't it?" Sirius murmured lowly. "Because it's not just what happened on the solstice eve." He sighed heavily – loud enough that Harry could hear it. "This whole year has been both the best and worst of my entire life in some ways."

Noshi made some kind of humming noise.

"I loved James and Lily and I'll always treasure my memories of them; there are a lot of very good, very special memories. But being Harry's father...it's the very best thing I've ever done." Sirius continued. "I didn't have the best childhood. My father and mother...they were examples of how not to be parents and there are days when I think I'm getting it horribly wrong but it's still...seeing him
grow and learn and flourish…it's incredible and I wouldn't want to give it up. And I don't care if it was...if Death sent me to him or if it was Fate or...anything like that. I just love him and he's...he's my world.

Harry felt a tear trickle from his eye and he brushed it away.

"I feel guilty sometimes that James doesn't get to be here, that my choices and suggestions even led to him not being here, but...but he's forgiven me for that part and I know I'm doing what James asked me to do; to take care of his son and for every time I feel guilty I try to remember that." Sirius said. "I spent a lot of years where I didn't fulfil my promise because I was an idiot but I made things right and I think I can be proud of that."

"So this is why this has been the best year." Noshi said. "But you also said it was the worst."

"Losing James and Lily was awful but...is there anything more terrifying as a parent than your child being in danger?" asked Sirius after a long pause when Harry wondered idly if Sirius would ever answer.

"I do not believe so." Noshi replied.

"All year..." Sirius stopped, his voice thick with emotion. "Riddle was...the prophecy was one thing. It was terrifying on its own because Riddle targeted Harry because of it and Harry wouldn't ever be safe from him until it was resolved one way or another. And finding that out...realising that...it was heart-breaking."

He sounded so tired, Harry mused.

"I tried everything I could all year so he wouldn't have to face him and it wasn't enough. In the end...Harry still ended up having to kill the bastard." Sirius made a sharp sound – somewhere between a yelp and a bark. "I hate that I couldn't save him from that."

"You hold a lot of rage about this." Noshi commented.

Harry frowned.

"Not so much with the holding, and more with the rage," Sirius responded brusquely. "I'm furious. I want to dig up Ignotus and punch his face for putting himself in the position where Death could exploit him. I'm angry at Death because he dealt with Riddle using an innocent boy. I hate that someone made a prophecy about it all and someone overheard it and Riddle decided to act on it. I could throttle Albus for all the years he just sat on his dumb arse waiting for Harry to act when he could have been doing something. I'm so angry that even with all we did to help, Harry still had to face the bastard."

Wow.

Harry had never heard that amount of anger in Sirius's voice before.

"But I know my being angry doesn't change anything." Sirius said finally. "Harry was in danger and it was terrifying but...I know we might not have been able to stop it from happening but I made sure he had everything he needed at the end to survive it. And he did. And that's what I have to focus on; that he's alive and Riddle is dead."

"Riddle wasn't the only threat." Noshi commented. "He is not the reason Harry is here."

"No," Sirius's voice was rough, "that's on me."
That was…that wasn't right.

It wasn't Sirius's fault.

"You blame yourself." Noshi said softly.

There was a long silence and Harry waited anxiously, torn between wanting to hear Sirius's reply and wanting to run into the room and hug Sirius, tell him it wasn't his fault.

"I was eleven when I first met Rabastan Lestrange. He came to the Estate for the Summer, he and his brother, because they'd petitioned to be part of the House and Grandfather wanted to assess the family." Sirius said tersely. "He was actually a nice kid in a way that his brother wasn't; quiet, intellectual. He liked the piano. He'd read to Regulus and he'd help Narcissa pick flowers for her mother." He paused. "And I killed him."

"Because he was a Death Eater." Noshi pointed out.

"Because I wanted him dead." Sirius contradicted. "The Lestranges were Riddle's best Death Eaters. They were brilliant, powerful and the reason why Riddle was able to make the headway he did. They were fervent in their beliefs, in their devotion to Riddle. If they'd lived, they would have been a threat. More of a threat than Crouch on his own and he was...he was their legacy."

Harry listened as though he was spellbound; he'd never heard Sirius talk about the Lestranges in such a way before.

"They would have hunted Harry." Sirius continued. "And I couldn't let them have that opportunity. The family magic...calling Judgement on them gave me a politically correct way of killing them, of taking them out of the picture early. I don't regret it. After what they did to Frank and Alice, it was a better death than they deserved."

"But?" prompted Noshi.

"But it made Crouch target Harry because he wanted revenge on me." Sirius concluded. "I'm not saying Crouch wouldn't have targeted Harry anyway – he fell in with Riddle easily enough, and was happy to do his dirty work but...if Rabastan had already been dead by someone else's hand when Crouch was liberated from his father's basement, do I think he would have come after Harry so fiercely? No." There was another heavy sigh. "That was to get to me."

"And he succeeded." Noshi said quietly.

Harry wanted to deny that, wanted Sirius to deny it...

"Yes." Sirius said making Harry's heart hurt with the plain simplicity of it. "Because there's nothing more terrifying than watching your child in danger and Crouch knew that."

"You've been tortured for an entire year." Noshi summarised.

"That's one way of putting it." Sirius allowed. "But it's over and in the end Crouch lost. Harry's alive; I'm alive. And maybe we survived because we had a lot of luck with the way things played out despite Crouch's best efforts to burn the world down, but...Crouch is dead, and we're not so I'm going to count it as a win."

It was a practical way of looking at it, Harry mused. He wasn't sure he could be that sangfroid about it because if Sirius had been tortured by Crouch using Harry, Harry had been tortured too knowing he was Crouch's way to hurt Sirius.
But wasn't Sirius right?

Did it really matter how much hurt Crouch had inflicted on both of them? How much hurt Riddle had inflicted.

They had survived it.

They were alive.

And maybe that was all that mattered.

He snuggled into the warmth of his covers and between one breath and the next fell asleep again, the sound of voices fading into nothingness.

o-O-o

28th June 1995

Minerva wasn't surprised she was the last to arrive in Remus's office. She had spent the morning at Hogwarts overseeing what seemed like two hundred things before she had been able to make her way to the hastily called War Council at the Black Estate.

It would have helped if they'd held the meeting first thing in the morning or last thing in the evening, Minerva thought grumpily. She was staying at the Estate after all. She had moved herself and her remaining staff there the day before on the advice of the healers. It had been a relief.

Hogwarts was in disrepair and quite frankly the dragon in Albus's – in her office was enough to freak anyone out.

She allowed Remus to show her to a chair and ply her with a strong cup of tea – Merlin knew she needed one, and only wished it could be a shot of whiskey.

She glanced around the room, acknowledging the other attendees with a firm nod; Amelia, Cornelius, Bertie, Augusta and a very grumpy looking Moody.

"Thank you all for coming," Remus said, his soft tone commanding the room instantly, "I realise we're all very busy but we have news of Sirius and Harry and I wanted to make sure you all received it. Furthermore, we've had no official debriefing since the battle and the Minister has agreed we should not wait any longer."

"Shall we begin with the news from Lord Black?" Amelia asked before anyone else could say a word.

Remus nodded. He picked up a parchment from the mantle and cleared his throat. "Sirius writes, 'Harry woke from his healing coma last night.'"

Minerva felt the rush of relief so keenly she briefly closed her eyes.

"Physically the healers are assured he will recover. But I can't say I'm not concerned. He's quiet and withdrawn. He waged a war that would take its toll on any seasoned fighter and there is a lot for him to come to terms with; his actions, the actions of others; grief and betrayal; hope and sacrifice. We may need some time at the Valley." Remus continued, his own tone shaking with emotion. "Of course, thanks to the time bubble we'll be home on the first of July. I need you to ensure Harry returns to a world in control and normal, if still with the final threads to weave on dealing with the aftermath. He needs a solid ground underneath him and I need you and the others to make sure he
gets it."

Minerva found herself nodding and realised she wasn't the only one.

"Give our thanks to all. There are no words which could adequately express the gratitude that we have for those who fought beside us, whether that was through wands, words or prayer. We are honoured by the sacrifices of all. Take care of each other; we'll be home soon." Remus concluded and lay the parchment back down.

"Well said." Cornelius said a touch pompously, raising his cup in silent salute.

They all followed his example; a toast to Sirius's words of thanks, to the news of Harry's recovery.

"I think I'm not the only one who thinks it's best they're not here right now." Amelia said, setting her cup down with a decisive click. "If they need a stable ground...we've a lot of work to do."

Cornelius nodded gravely. "Perhaps we should take one item at a time starting with the debrief and then moving onto what needs to be done now. Amelia, you were at the cemetery."

"Peter Pettigrew has been able to fill in some of the missing gaps for us. To give Snape credit he was able to activate the mirror soon after Harry arrived there but we don't really have a good picture of what happened without Pettigrew's testimony." Amelia began, rising and wandering over to the mantle to take centre stage.

Minerva glanced at Remus and wasn't surprised to find him scowling at the mention of the former Marauder.

The tale Amelia weaved seemed like a horror story; torture, a sickening ritual and at the end the call for the Death Eaters.

"Pettigrew has verified in his statement that the Ancient and Noble Houses held to the détente with the House of Black – and that's certainly what the evidence suggest and what those of us who listened heard." Amelia grimaced. "Nott died for his defiance; Selwyn was tortured; Malfoy was almost killed." She gestured. "Harry revealed himself to save Malfoy and Snape finally spoke the secret to bring in the cavalry. Snape was immediately attacked by the snake."

"What is his condition?" Cornelius asked.

Amelia looked over to Minerva.

"He was given an antidote to the snake venom but remains unconscious." Minerva reported crisply. "The healers now believe he will recover although that wasn't certain two days ago."

"Once we arrived at the cemetery, we engaged with the Death Eaters who were still under Riddle's banner." Amelia said tightly. "We lost Keith Brooks and Darren Chambers. Chambers was killed by George Goyle; Brooks by a Darius Stimpson. Stimpson was an auror in the last war; he retired ten years and he was never identified as a Death Eater until now. Eight others in the cemetery fall into the same category. We're doing veritaserum interrogations to ensure they tell us of any other named associates we can track down."

Moody snorted at the back of the room.

"At some point," Amelia continued, "we were all transported to Hogwarts. We have eye-witness testimony of Harry performing such a spell but don't know why."
"I'd say because Crouch yanked Black back to Hogwarts with the cup portkey." Moody said. "They arrived before you lot."

"Well, as that concludes the cemetery." Amelia said dryly. "Perhaps we should examine what happened at Hogwarts?" She looked at the former auror with a raised eyebrow.

Moody gave a huff and motioned for Amelia to resume her seat. He ambled to her previous position by the mantle. "Let's start with the successes."

Minerva sat forward, intent on listening.

"The evacuation worked like a charm. The drills worked. All non-combatants were off Hogwarts' grounds within twenty minutes of the alarm being sounded with the exception of one small group of students who were in the school." Moody said gruffly. "The infirmary was locked down and remained locked down; it wasn't breeched during the battle."

Minerva nodded. It was a blessing that it was intact but it was almost the only part of Hogwarts un-ravaged by the intruders.

"Albus held the frontline with the werewolves, elves, and a group of aurors and Unspeakables." Moody's magical eye whirled. "Before the defences were raised, we lost an indeterminate number of elves, three wolves, four men and two women. Five others sustained serious injuries."

Minerva closed her eyes briefly. She'd had no idea the losses had been so great.

"Is there anything the packs need, Remus?" asked Amelia quietly, breaking the sombre silence.

"Those wolves came from Gregor's and Robert's packs. Their bodies have been returned to them and they have already performed the funerals." Remus said. "Sirius left provision to aide any family they had left behind."

"Please convey our deepest sympathies and thanks." Cornelius murmured. He turned to Amelia and Bertie. "I know arrangements have been made for our own men and women."

The two directors nodded.

"Their families have been informed and the bodies released to them." Bertie said sadly. "I think a memorial day would be appropriate but we should allow the families their own mourning period first."

"Of course." Cornelius agreed.

"Our biggest weakness was the school." Moody continued brusquely. "We didn't find the cabinet Crouch was using to infiltrate it until well into the invasion. It was in the Divination classroom. We believe Crouch used the Abbott girl to open it and allow Riddle's forces into the castle." He looked over at Minerva. "Sybill Trelawney was killed."

Minerva hadn't liked the witch; she had a strong cynicism of Divination on a personal level and Sybill seemed to embody the fraudulent and scatty nature of the subject. But Minerva felt a moment's sympathy for Sybill's end; for the horror and pain she must have felt.

"Sybill's cousin has been contacted and she has asked Hogwarts to make whatever arrangements we feel are necessary." Minerva said briskly. "There will be a short funeral towards the end of the week for those wishing to remember her. The notice will go in the Prophet tomorrow."
Moody cleared his throat. "Letting the students raising the defences attend the tournament task and not having them in the office was a big mistake. The group were attacked on their way through the castle. The Diggorys were killed; the rest of the adults sustained injuries. The other kids luckily got away." He shifted his weight. "Flitwick and his crowd were able to get hold of the situation eventually but Crouch did a lot of damage to the castle. Five aurors were killed in total, two more wolves and eleven were injured."

"Several of the children have given statements in the last few days to explain what happened to them." Amelia added. "Neville and Blaise came across Hannah and she joined them proclaiming to have gotten separated from Susan. They headed to the Headmaster's office and met up with the others. Hannah revealed herself to stop them raising the defences at which point Susan turned up and managed to knock Hannah out. A group of them stayed back in the corridor to hold off an attack by Carrow and forces; the others managed to get to the office and raise the defences via a painting of a dragon."

They all turned to look at Minerva.

"It is quite the painting." Minerva confirmed dryly. "She admits it will take four Heads of Houses to send her to sleep – four Heads of Houses who have previously been the students who originally woke her."

"A problem for another day," Moody said, "the kids did good. The defences came up and we were solid. We were able to contain the rest of the forces." He paused and looked over at Bertie.

Bertie pressed his lips together, sorrow all too evident in his tired eyes. "Bill confirmed that Neville destroyed the final item in the treasure hunt; the snake. Bill, Caro, and the snake were all transported from the cemetery into the corridor where the students were holding off Carrow. Caro gave her life to save Bill." He lowered his tear-filled gazed. "She will be missed."

"Which brings us to the ritual." Moody said.

Minerva exchanged a brief look with Augusta and it was the Longbottom matriarch who stood.

"The ritual went well." Augusta confirmed. "Morgana tested us before she would reinstate the blessing and then demanded Hermione's necklace. As soon as Morgana had it, Hermione herself disappeared from the circle and we all saw events through her eyes."

"Namely, Harry defeating Riddle after you ladies changed his blood out." Moody said bluntly.

"Nifty little spell that, ladies."

Minerva smiled satisfied, sharp and vicious as any cat.

"Which brings us to the last of the reports from the battle itself." Remus said. "Sirius duelled Crouch; that much we know."

"He killed him." Moody confirmed. "He contained Travers and we all went to help the lad. Once Harry had his protection back, Riddle was toast; he fell to his own killing curse – Harry sent it straight back to him."

"And as we had dealt with the anchors he had to this life," Bertie added, "the curse acted as normal rather than disembodied him as it did in 'eighty-one."

"Everything was over we thought but when Poppy went to make the official notice of death for Crouch, she noticed a strange reading and it became apparent that Crouch had turned himself into a bomb." Remus finished.
"Examination of Poppy's brief diagnostic and the magical residue suggests Crouch imbibed a potion able to transmute the magical energy of spells into a reservoir in his own body's cells." Bertie jumped in. "It was ingenious. Every hit he took in the battle, whether physically onto his person or magically into his shield, or when Riddle called for his Death Eaters, all of it went to lay down the foundation for his energy overload post mortem. Having read Madame Pomfrey's diagnostic there was enough energy to have destroyed not only the school but the shockwave into the earth would have created earthquakes and devastation across Britain." He frowned. "A similar potion was invented by Albus to assist with replenishing magical reserves during battle. It's one of the uses of dragon blood and it contains Effafet feathers."

"The feathers that Crouch talked to Snape about?" asked Remus incredulously.

Bertie nodded. "Crouch must have been laughing himself silly at the time."

"According to Neville, Harry invoked the family magic to save everyone." Augusta said.

Remus sighed. "He did. I think he realised just what the explosion would do and decided it wasn't enough to transport us out or for only some of the magic to shield us." He cleared his throat. "He was obviously successful but he was also badly injured and this is when things got…"

"Unreal?" suggested Amelia wryly. She picked up her cup and put it down again. "I really need something stronger."

Moody handed her his flask.

"According to the reports, the spirit of Merlin appeared to demand the price for using the magic." Bertie said, stepping in.

"Death stepped in to tell everyone it couldn't be Sirius or Harry because of some magic Harry had done as the Master of the Hallows so Albus stepped forward." Remus agreed.

Minerva felt another rush of grief and had to lower her gaze, blinking furiously. For all his faults and flaws, Albus had been a good, dear friend and mentor to her for more years than she cared to remember. She would miss him.

"When his sacrifice was accepted…Helen Jordan immediately ordered Sirius and Harry to the Valley clinic and we began clean-up." Remus finished.

"How is Hogwarts?" asked Cornelius.

Minerva took a breath and steadied herself. "Most of the corridors and many of the classrooms sustained smoke or fire damage. The Quidditch pitch and stands are almost fully destroyed. The elves have begun work rebuilding and we expect to be complete by mid-Summer. I don't advise the children return until all the structural work is complete and that will be post the end of the school year. Fortunately only a couple of exams were outstanding and those can be sat at the Ministry."

"A sensible approach." Cornelius said. "If the Ministry can help with the rebuilding in any way…"

"Thank you, Minister." Minerva said. "I believe given that the Hogwarts defences remain in place that we will be fine. But I will keep your offer in mind."

"So talking of clean-up…" Amelia grimaced, "we have twenty-eight people in custody. Ten were identified as known Death Eaters including Peter Pettigrew and Dennis Travers. The rest are mercenaries."
Cornelius sat forward. "The Wizengamot is due to sit tomorrow. We propose to call for an emergency tribunal session to sit upon Lord Black's return to discuss the matter of how to deal with the trials." He spread his hands. "There is too much conflict for anyone to sit impartially and we'd rather have his oversight."

"The mercenaries should be a simple matter." Amelia said. "Those Death Eaters such as Goyle or Travers who actively fought against aurors are similarly easy to deal with. Pettigrew is a problem since he ended up assisting Remus."

Remus shook his head, his eyes glinting amber. "You know he only did that to save his own arse."

Amelia inclined her head. "Regardless we have a number who answered Voldemort's call but who then refused to fight for him; that's where we potentially have difficulty."

"Indeed," agreed Cornelius, "especially as most sit on the Wizengamot."

"So we have a political minefield to navigate and the tribunal to take place." Remus said making a note. "Augusta, can you and Daniel make progress organising the alliance?"

"Leave it with me." Augusta confirmed.

"Hogwarts is under control with Minerva in charge." Remus said giving her a small smile.

"We will need to deal with the fallout of the spell." Minerva asserted. "The dragon is very clear that the students pledged themselves to her. They and their families need to understand the specifics of that sooner rather than later."

Remus made another note. "Was there any fallout for the Wiccan ritual?"

"Apart from Hermione becoming Morgana's own avatar on the battlefield?" Minerva remarked sharp enough that Remus winced. "I'm not certain any of us can know what that will mean for Miss Granger in the long term."

"I can begin to research the matter." Bertie said.

Minerva nodded, grateful. Hermione was a brilliant young woman and deserved to understand the ramifications.

"On a personal level," Augusta added, "I believe each of the women involved has confirmed a sense of connection and a heightened maternal instinct."

"It is likely that we will continue the coven in some form." Minerva said. And in Minerva's view, it was very likely that Hermione would become the High Priestess for that coven in time.

Bertie caught her eye and they exchanged a brief knowing look.

"Then we also have the fallout for those impacted by Hannah Abbott's betrayal including Hannah herself." Augusta waved at Remus to make a note. "I'm at a loss how we can even begin to address that situation."

"In some respects it's a criminal matter," Amelia said, "but complicated by the fact that she was seduced and there is evidence Crouch used compulsion charms and potions." She rubbed her head. "But I can appreciate the complexity given Susan's friendship with her."

Remus made another note. "That leaves us with looking after the injured…"
"In hand." Amelia said. "All are at Saint Mungo's and receiving treatment."

With the exception of Harry and Sirius themselves.

"And the funerals." Remus finished. He coughed. "Theo Nott has confirmed he won't hold his father's until Harry and Sirius return but I don't see the need to delay any of the others."

"I think you and I both know Harry will want to attend the funerals." Minerva argued. "Albus's in particular but I know he was also close with Caroline."

"And from all reports Harry grew close to Diggory during the tournament." Augusta added.

Remus held up his hand. "Do we really want Harry to spend his first weeks back attending nothing but an endless round of funerals? Is that going to help him or simply place more pressure on him?"

"I suggest we allow most of the funerals to proceed to their families' wishes in the matter." Bertie said decisively. "Some may want to wait; some may not. Caro's father has already stated he'd like to place his daughter to rest within the next couple of days."

Minerva acknowledged that truth with a sigh. She nodded. "I can hardly argue with a family's right to bury their child."

Amelia glanced at her, sympathetic. "The Diggorys will be buried tomorrow. Amos's brother sent word this morning."

Minerva fervently believed it would upset Harry to return and discover the funerals had already taken place but she appreciated that they had no right to insist that the families waited. She hummed. "There is something with which the Ministry could assist..."

"Anything." Cornelius offered immediately.

"Albus's funeral." Minerva stated baldly, fighting back emotion once again. "I will need assistance. He is to be interred on Hogwarts' ground – that was agreed with the board of governors some time ago but his funeral should be about more than the school."

"Of course." Cornelius said. "I'll have someone from the Ministry contact you to assist later today."

"Well, we have a plan to get us back to normality." Remus lifted the parchment he had been writing on.

"We also need to get a hold of the press – not that it's been bad or inaccurate but we could do with setting their agenda rather than reading it in print." Cornelius said. "I'll liaise with Brian on a few articles to make sure the ground is laid for Harry's return."

The meeting broke up shortly after and Minerva waited behind as Remus showed the others to the floo.

Remus shut the door behind him on his return, and sighed at the sight of her. "Minerva."

Minerva stood. "What did Sirius say you didn't want the rest of them to know?"

He looked at her with narrowed eyes for a long moment before he caved and picked up the letter. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." He handed her the parchment.

Minerva watched as a hidden segment was revealed, written in Sirius's beautiful prose. She frowned as she read of Harry's unwillingness to speak, Sirius's concern that it wasn't a passing phase and
about Harry's mental health in general. She handed the letter back to Remus. "You can't be surprised that Harry is having difficulty dealing with everything that happened."

"No," said Remus defensively before he sat down with a heavy thump and nodded, "maybe? I just… he's just been so… ever since Christmas Harry's taken more and more of a leadership role and I guess I've managed to convince myself that he was coping."

"He was." Minerva said. "But now he isn't." She said simply. "If anyone was due for a meltdown, Remus, it was Harry."

And in some ways she was pleased. It meant that Harry was allowing himself to feel the effects of his traumas and deal with them. It was a much better scenario than him repressing it all and turning into a bitter old man down the line.

"You don't seem overly concerned." Remus remarked as though he'd read her mind.

Minerva gathered her purse and shook her head. "Harry's in the right place to receive the healing he needs and he has the one person with him who can help him through this, who he would want with him to help him. And I can't help but think it's best for everyone he's doing this there in relative privacy rather than when he returns here and will have the attention of our entire world once more."

Remus nodded. "You're right. I hadn't considered it in that way."

She sighed. "I wish I was there to support them through this but there is enough to do here and I believe we will help Harry best by ensuring things are not in chaos on his return as Sirius has directed."

Her words echoed in her head as she headed back to Hogwarts.

She made her way through the corridors to Albus's – her office. She had been avoiding it a lot, partially out of respect for Albus and partially because it was daunting; she was Headmistress and the school was her responsibility. And there was the bloody dragon who claimed to be Hogwarts on the wall.

She squared her shoulders.

She was a McGonagall.

The Regent Apparent for the House of Potter.

And the Headmistress of Hogwarts.

She took a deep breath and entered.

o-O-o

*Time Bubble – 15th July 1995*

Harry yawned and stretched atop his bed.

He cast a quick tempus spell and frowned when he realised it was early evening. He'd taken a post lunch nap as he was still prone to exhaustion and his post lunch flight around the Valley as Snitch had knocked a fair bit of energy out of him.

He clambered to his feet and headed for a warm shower. The past week had been better, Harry mused. He'd managed to physically regain some strength and doing something, rather than simply
sitting drowning in thoughts of everything that had happened, had helped him regain some perspective.

He still didn't want to talk about it, but he was beginning to accept his own actions and others.

The routine of his treatment helped. Every morning he was up early to do a Tai Chi class; that was followed by a jog and some gym time. He and Sirius exercised together just as they had the previous Summer and Harry enjoyed the faint competitiveness of sprinting the last distance to the gym or performing his exercises before Sirius; teasing Sirius without words about his age.

They'd return to the cabin and would have breakfast together. Harry had made efforts since overhearing Sirius talking with Noshi to eat more so Sirius wouldn't have to force himself into eating things he didn't like so Harry would eat. It helped that with Dobby there, the elf was feeding them their favourites most of the time and had stopped experimenting. Truthfully, with the resumption of his physical exercise regime, Harry was hungry; his body demanding the fuel even if his mind still wasn't in a place to enjoy food as anything other than that.

Late morning was spent in art therapy. Harry had four days before handed Sirius a paintbrush and an easel. He remembered the mural and how Sirius had been responsible for drawing and painting it. He figured if art therapy was good for him, it would be good for his father, and Sirius was happy to indulge him.

Sirius had already completed two paintings; one of James and one of Lily. Both of them as school children, smiling and happy. They were stunning pictures. Sirius had gifted them to Harry who had immediately displayed them in the den.

Sirius was working on a picture of the Marauders; the Forest in the background, Hogwarts in the periphery with the four Marauders front and centre.

Harry didn't have to be a mind healer to realise the paintings were an act of mourning; of remembering the good times and grieving their loss.

His own paintings were more abstract, mainly a confusion of colour and splatter without form. Healer Fay seemed pleased with them noting that Harry was using the paint to express his emotions and the confusion he was feeling.

Confusion was probably apt, Harry thought as he left the shower and went to put some clothes on. He wasn't sure what to feel and his moods had a tendency to swing from apathy to anger within the space of a thought.

Spending time in his animagus forms helped.

It had been Sirius's suggestion. Animals ran on instincts and needs; things were much simpler for them. Padfoot was Sirius's retreat when the world got too much to deal with because as much as he kept his own brain, he could let himself sink into the animal's world for a while.

It was another way to gain perspective, Harry mused as he pulled on a t-shirt. Because his animagus forms could see he was safe, fed and warm; that he was loved. They didn't wonder if he'd done the right thing; didn't feel guilt over the death of Riddle only an animalistic satisfaction at the elimination of a threat; didn't feel guilt over the death of Dumbledore only a sense of rightness that the elder had gone before the youth.

He glanced at himself in the mirror and was pleased; he looked better. He grimaced at his hair and went to find Sirius.
His father wasn't too far away; bustling in the kitchen with Dobby. He was humming off-key some tune they'd heard at the clinic's gym that morning.

Harry watched for a long moment, drinking in the sight of his father. Sirius was alive and healing.

And so was he.

Sirius finally caught sight of him, smiling widely. "Hey. I'm making tea. Noshi finally got a delivery from London so proper tea and not that awful stuff they usually serve. I was thinking it would be nice with some scones and jam."

"Sounds great." Harry winced at how hoarse his voice sounded after weeks of disuse.

Sirius froze and darted a look at him before he casually went back to making the tea, although Harry didn't miss the flash of relief that crossed his face. "Let's go on the deck. It's a nice evening."

Harry watched as Dobby arranged the tea-tray and rolled his eyes when Sirius levitated it through to the outside rather than just letting Harry carry it. They settled at the table and poured the tea.

Sirius regarded him thoughtfully as Harry sipped the tea enjoying the soothing liquid against his squeaky throat. "Good?"

Harry nodded. He tightened his grip on the cup. "Do you…do you remember when we were here last year and we promised we'd talk about our school years every year?"

"I remember." Sirius said.

Harry set his cup down, his hands beginning to shake. "I think…I think I'd like to talk about my fourth year now."

Sirius reached out a hand and Harry grasped it, holding it tightly. "Whenever you're ready, Harry."

Harry took a deep breath and began.

o-O-o

Time Bubble – 5 th August / Real time 1 st July 1995

Sirius smiled softly as Harry finished saying goodbye to his friends. He'd reconnected with Noshi's grandchildren once he'd gotten back on his feet and spending time with them had helped Harry's recovery. He could be normal with them; just another teenager.

Sirius was pleased that the six weeks they'd stayed at the Valley had helped Harry heal, not only from the physical injuries he'd sustained, but also from the emotional and mental trauma of the previous year.

Harry wasn’t completely recovered though.

Physically, he still tired easily after spell-work, but he had regained the weight he'd lost and he looked fit and healthy. Emotionally, Harry was also still prone to mood swings and hours where he'd retreat again into silence. But there was a steel core inside of his son which had helped him survive for years and Harry had made strides in his therapy - enough that the clinic was supporting their decision to return to England and the aftermath of the war.

"Noshi." Sirius took the healer's outstretched hand and shook it warmly. "Thank you again."
Noshi shrugged away his gratitude. He let go of Sirius's hand. "I will not see you here again, my friend."

"You won't mind if I think that's a good thing, right?" Sirius asked, pleased at Noshi's words. He remembered all too well the previous year when Noshi had forewarned of their return to the Valley.

Harry stepped up beside Sirius and reached out to shake Noshi's hand. "Thank you, Noshi."

Noshi clasped his hand and hummed.

Sirius's heart sank.

Noshi let Harry go and smiled at him. "Your daughter will bring her husband here after a potions accident freezes his hand. She will be carrying their child."

Harry's face brightened with happiness. "I'm going to have a daughter?"

"Please tell me she isn't named Quaffle." Sirius begged.

They all laughed.

Sirius checked the time. "Come on. The portkey Amelia sent should activate in a few moments." He held out the shoe to Harry who grimaced and grasped it.

"Why can't they just use something normal?" grumbled Harry as they nodded a final farewell to the medical staff.

"A shoe is normal." Sirius pointed out.

The hook and swirl of the portkey travel prevented Harry from replying and a second later they stumbled into a landing in Amelia's office. Sirius managed to steady Harry with one hand and rebalance himself all at the same time.

Harry pulled a face. "I really hate portkey travel."

"Harry!" Remus pushed his chair back and bounded over to hug Harry.

Sirius smiled at a beaming Amelia. "Thank you for the shoe home."

Amelia rounded her desk and surprised him with a hug. "Welcome home, Sirius."

Remus finally let go of Harry and Sirius found himself released from Amelia's embrace and swept into Remus's. "Moony."

"Padfoot." Remus sounded like he was blinking back tears.

Sirius patted him carefully on the back. Remus's hold loosened and he stepped away, surreptitiously swiping at the corner of his eye.

"I'm just so glad to see you both." Remus said. "When you left…"

Sirius put an arm around Harry's shoulder. "It was tough but we got better."

Amelia waved at the chairs in front of her desk and the tea service she had set out. "Remus and I thought it might be a good idea to bring your up to speed before you ended up back in the thick of things."
Sirius nudged Harry into one chair, took one for himself and Remus slipped into the one that was left. "That's a good idea."

"How long has it been for you since the battle?" Amelia asked.

"Six weeks." Harry replied as Sirius had just taken a sip of his tea.

"You need to keep in mind for most people only seven days have passed." Remus cautioned.

Sirius frowned because he didn't think Harry needed the reminder. He nodded at Amelia. "Why don't you fill us in?"

And she began.

It was a long debrief. Harry was pale by the end of it and Sirius noticed white lines of tiredness and tension around his mouth and eyes when Amelia finally came to a halt and requested a fresh pot of tea.

Sirius waited until Harry's hand were wrapped around his tea, the warmth of it comforting his son. "What's on your mind, Harry?"

Harry's lips quirked sideways into an unhappy frown. "Mostly?" He shrugged – a distinctly teenage variation of studied disinterest. "I know there are bigger things to talk about but all I keep coming back to is Hannah."

"Understandable." Remus said soothingly. "She was a friend and she betrayed you; she broke her oath of fealty ten times over."

"She betrayed everyone." Harry corrected firmly. "I'm not even the person she betrayed the most." He looked over at the Director of the DMLE. "How's Sue?"

Amelia winced and sat back. "Pretty much as you expect her to be; angry, upset, struggling to understand what happened to Hannah."

"What exactly did happen to her and what's going to happen now?" asked Harry bluntly. "I mean, you kind of skimmed over that."

Sirius wasn't surprised when Amelia glanced in his direction for permission. Sirius gave it with a quick nod. Harry deserved to know the truth of why.

Amelia sighed heavily. "What happened was that Barty Crouch Junior groomed her."

"Groomed?" questioned Harry.

"It's a term used to describe how abusers approach and seduce their victims." Sirius explained crisply.

"Well, Crouch was classic in his grooming technique. To begin with, he courted her with love notes that flattered her; told her how important she was, how special, how pretty and grown-up she was for her age." Amelia said. "She had kept all of them and most of the early ones only have a compulsion charm to read them and keep them secret, nothing more. He used his elf to send her letters once Hannah started back at Hogwarts and so they began exchanging letters." She tapped the side of her cup. "His letters...I suspect that there is more truth in them than perhaps he even realised. His heartbreak at losing his first love certainly rings true. He coaxed her into telling him her secrets; convinced her that she was the only guardian of his secrets. He set up an intimacy between the two
of them in their correspondence, effectively cutting her off from her parents and friends through creating this…this secret club between them."

"Which left her isolated." Remus added. "She came to view him as the only person who understood her; who truly knew her."

"Why didn't anyone notice?" Harry wondered.

Sirius reached across and squeezed his shoulder. "Because he was clever. And he had her pretending to be in love with Neville which distracted everyone."

Amelia nodded. "Susan said to me the other night that she wonders in hindsight how much of Hannah's love-struck comments which she assumed were about Neville were really about Crouch." She sat forward clasping her hands on top of her desk. "After Yule Hannah must have had second thoughts because then he potioned her for over a month with a suggestibility potion and the letters had stronger compulsion spells on them including one to fully believe the content." She sighed. "Eventually, he met her disguised as a Durmstrang student in late January and progressed their relationship further. We think they were secretly dating through most of this year. Susan's depression after the second task gave Hannah an excuse to pull away from Neville without suspicion, and a ready excuse for her changed behaviour when people did notice."

Harry gave a nod of understanding.

"Unfortunately, by the end of February it looks as though Crouch was confident enough in Hannah's feelings for him that he was no longer potioning or compelling her." Amelia said a touch bitterly. "Even now, she's utterly convinced Barty was a misunderstood, witty, intelligent man who was victimised by you, Sirius. She confessed she agreed to act as his agent in Hogwarts when he decided to in her words 'get rid of the traitorous elf who'd kept him prisoner' and break his cover in the school."

Sirius shook his head. Poor Leonard and Karen. The couple had to be distraught over what had happened to their daughter.

"They met in secret the night before the task and…and their relationship became sexual." Amelia continued brusquely. "She stated very firmly it was consensual but as she's fifteen and legally cannot consent, was thoroughly manipulated into it to boot, it's considered statutory rape. She still doesn't see that Crouch did anything wrong. She's fervent in her belief that she was the one to convince him to have sex; she was the seductress."

"It's not unusual for abusers to manipulate their victims into feeling that they are responsible for tempting them into inappropriate behaviour, or into believing the contact is about them being special and beautiful, even into believing they want it." Remus commented.

"That's awful." Harry stated bluntly.

"It is," Amelia agreed, "and unfortunately Hannah is so thoroughly entrenched in that mind-set that it may take many years for the damage Crouch has wrought to be undone."

"The mind healers could help her though, right?" asked Harry.

Amelia nodded slowly. "However it may be too late." She gestured across the desk. "Hannah was confirmed as mentally sound yesterday by the senior mind healer on her case. She is completely aware of right and wrong; she isn't legally considered insane or incompetent."

"So she'll face criminal charges." Sirius deduced immediately.
"Yes." Amelia pointed at a folder on the desk. "By her own admission, Hannah knowingly conspired to have Neville kidnapped at Yule. She opened up the vanishing cabinet and allowed vampires, mercenaries and Death Eaters into Hogwarts. She did so knowing that they intended harm to the students, teachers and tournament visitors. She conspired to commit murder and destruction in a terrorist act."

"I guess there are also charges pertaining to her attack on Susan." Remus murmured.

"And her attack on the Creevey brothers and Lavender Brown." Amelia confirmed.

Harry frowned. "What attack?"

"Hannah upon entering Hogwarts stunned the Creeveys and Susan." Amelia explained. "She imperiused the brothers to attack Miss Brown for no other reason than to keep them occupied and out of her own way. Luckily the Patil twins interrupted the attack before Miss Brown suffered anything more than bruises from being grabbed."

"Merlin." Harry muttered.

"All of that group were traumatised." Amelia confirmed. "And now she has been ruled as mentally competent, I can no longer refrain from formally charging her and arranging for her trial. I was holding off until the results from Saint Mungo's were known." She sighed heavily. "Unfortunately there is a very good chance she might be carrying the Crouch heir."

Harry blanched. "Seriously?"

Sirius had never felt less like drawing attention to the inherent joke about his name. He ignored it and focused on Amelia.

"They found a fertility potion in her system." Amelia said succinctly.

Sirius repressed the urge to sigh. "What do you intend?"

"She'll be remanded to a holding cell this afternoon, charged and her trial set for a date after we can verify whether she is pregnant or not." Amelia confirmed briskly. She gestured at the folder. "The Wizengamot may apply leniency to the sentencing given her age and that as the victim of Crouch, she was manipulated into performing the crimes and potentially does have a case for diminished responsibility. She'll end up in Azkaban either way especially now the Dementors are no longer a consideration."

Sirius frowned before he remembered how Remus had explained Hogwarts had killed the remaining Dementors as part of her defence; Cornelius had approached the goblins about a guard contract and it would be reviewed and hopefully approved in a special Wizengamot session. In the interim, a group of aurors and hit wizards were performing the duty of securing Azkaban.

"Of course, if she's pregnant, there will be arrangements made to ensure she receives care until the child is born." She continued. "Leonard and Karen will then need to make a decision on the care of the child." She looked at Sirius. "You could call Judgement on her; she took the fealty oath as Heir before Crouch got his hooks into her."

Sirius felt another pang of sympathy for the Abbotts. It was a mess. "Let's hope she isn't pregnant. I think we'll hold off on Judgement either way."

Harry gave a slow nod. "How much of this does everyone know?"
Amelia sighed. "Only the barest details; that she was seduced by Crouch and her known crimes. I've kept everything else under wraps to protect Leonard and Karen but some, if not all, of it will come out at trial." She picked up her tea. "I'm honestly not looking forward to explaining this to Susan."

Harry nodded. "Or Neville."

"I think they've been a good support for each other." Remus said. "I've noticed they tend to gravitate towards each other during meals at the Estate."

Sirius looked over at him in confusion.

Remus's cheeks went a touch red. "Ah, I guess I forgot to mention that the House of Black and its allies are currently in residence at the Black Estate? The healers thought it would be beneficial for us all to be together."

"Yes, you forgot to mention that." Sirius said dryly. He nudged Harry. "You still want to head home?" They had planned to go straight to Griffin House.

Harry bit his lip as he thought but he ended up shaking his head. "Let's go to the Estate. We should be there with everyone else."

"Is there anything else we need to know immediately?" asked Sirius, turning back to Amelia.

She shook her head. "I will need to interview you for your official statements at some point though."

Sirius reached into his robe and drew out two rolled-up parchments. "Our written statements. Let us know when you want to meet."

Amelia smiled at him. "Thank you, Sirius."

Sirius waited until Harry was on his feet before he moved them to the floo.

It was time to go home and begin rebuilding with their allies.
Harry held Hermione's hand tightly as they watched Theo walk inside the mausoleum carrying the urn with his father's ashes. Only a small group of adults accompanied Theo; Sirius in his role as Lord Black, and Andy and Ted as Theo's foster parents. The rest of the family funeral party remained outside of the white edifice at the far corner of Nott's estate.

A brush of wind swept through the small family graveyard and Harry shivered despite the warming spell.

Hermione pressed closer in response and he leaned into her gratefully. She had been a rock since his return. After hugging him tightly enough that he had trouble breathing, the pair of them had spent most of their waking hours together, both within the alliance group of heirs gathered at the Estate and alone. They'd talked about their experiences in the battle; shared how terrifying it had been; shared their fears for the other. They'd come through it closer than ever.

Harry wore the necklace Hermione had gifted to him at Christmas again. She had given it back to him and when he'd touched it he'd felt how it sang with Morgana's magic. The necklace was imbued with Morgana's blessing. He'd tried to give it back to Hermione but she had been adamant it was his. Instead, Harry had created a similar necklace; he'd imbued it with the family magic protection and gifted it to her. She had immediately put it on.

It made him feel better to know she was protected especially as the DOM was still investigating the implications of Morgana choosing Hermione as her avatar. Hermione would be spending part of her Summer helping the DOM research and she was very excited about it.

Harry let his gaze wander.

To his right, a heavily pregnant Narcissa sat on a conjured bench. Lucius sat beside her. He would never walk without a limp again and he would always suffer pain. Harry felt it was poetic justice given Lucius's previous crimes. The Malfoy patriarch was family and had helped them but it didn't negate that Lucius had only done so because he had been trapped into it by primacy and vows securing his compliance.

Draco hovered by his mother. The blond Slytherin was much more solicitous of her than of his father, Harry noticed. He had certainly taken on a maturity that had been lacking prior to the battle. Draco had admitted to Harry he had been given a wake-up call seeing Diggory die and taking part in the Hogwarts spell. His whole life had been rearranged for him in the space of a single moment. Harry wondered again at what the Hogwarts spell would mean for Draco – and for Ron, Luna and Sue. Minerva had agreed to allow a meeting in her office with the dragon once Hogwarts was approved as structurally sound enough.
The Hogwarts' Headmistress sat on another conjured bench with Dora; Remus stood beside his wife, their hands clasped together. They looked sombre and tired. Harry knew they'd already attended a number of funerals during the week Harry and Sirius had been at the Valley, and in the couple of days since their return.

Sirius had point-blank refused to let Harry attend every funeral, noting it would take its toll and it wasn't necessary. They would attend Lord Nott's because of Theo; Dumbledore's because it was right to honour the sacrifice he'd made for the two of them; and, they'd attend the Ministerial memorial service for all the men, women and magical creatures who had been killed or injured in the battle. Harry hadn't argued, grateful in truth and relieved not to have to attend every funeral. He'd felt regret over missing the Diggorys – although Remus had informed him that had been kept to close family only – and Caro's.

Bill was absolutely heartbroken. Harry could appreciate why. He knew the pain of having a loved one sacrifice themselves for you. He and Hermione had spent the previous evening just sitting beside the eldest Weasley in the drawing room doing nothing more than simply providing a comforting presence.

Theo finally emerged from the mausoleum, flanked by Andy and Ted. The Slytherin looked pale but composed. Harry had spent some time with him that morning and knew Theo was grieving deeply for his father, no matter the mask he wore for the rest of the world. When Theo had asked Harry to tell him exactly how Benjamin Nott had died, Harry hadn't been able to refuse him, especially not after the sacrifice Nott had made to protect his family.

Harry couldn't help be grateful his own father had survived and he watched comforted as Sirius left the mausoleum and helped Theo seal it. He squeezed Hermione's hand. The reception would be held back at Nott Manor and everybody would be waiting for them.

They walked slowly up the path to a small shed. It was actually a magical lift that would take them back to the manor.

Sirius and Theo went first along with Narcissa. When the shed flashed empty, Lucius, Draco, Dora and Minerva were ushered into it next. Remus accompanied Harry and Hermione.

They exited out of a broom closet in the hall of Nott Manor.

Remus pointed them towards the left. "There's been a room set aside for you young people. Theo will join you once he's made the rounds with Sirius."

Harry nodded. Hermione tucked her arm into the crook of his and they made their way into the room.

It was crowded.

One corner of the room was filled with the heirs who had Houses which held détentes with the House of Black. With Harry's testimony of how the likes of Selwyn and Wilkes had defied Voldemort, and after holding talks with them, the Ministry's emergency tribunal had declared them free of all charges. Sirius had told Harry he'd supported the decision. There was no evidence that they'd acted criminally and, rightly or wrongly, they'd been cleared from their activities as Death Eaters at the end of the previous war. They'd all received an official warning for showing up in response to Voldemort's call in the first place but otherwise they'd been exonerated.

Harry turned his attention aware from that corner as Hermione tugged him over to the side of the room where the alliance heirs had settled. There was a flurry of greetings. Although he'd seen those
staying at the Black Estate, there were a few who hadn't actively been involved with the battle and
who'd remained in their own homes such as the Sapworthys and Inglebees. They finally settled onto
a large settee.

"Merlin, this is depressing." Draco commented as he took the chair next to Harry, glaring at Lydia
Inglebee who had been creeping closer and closer.

"It is a funeral." Neville commented dryly from beside Hermione.

Sue tucked up between Neville and Ron gave a snort of agreement.

"I know that." Draco said tersely. "I'm just…"

"Stating the obvious." Blaise chipped in, sitting down beside him.

"Theo seems to be holding up." Sue sighed heavily. "Bad enough that Ced didn't make it, but I don't
know what I would have done if…I mean, Dad's ankle is still giving him gyp but at least he's alive."

"At least he'll walk without a cane eventually." Draco pointed out.

"We all came a little too close to losing our Dads," Ron said.

Neville ducked his head and Harry shot Ron a look for his insensitivity, because it wasn't like
Neville's Dad was going to ever recover. The redhead winced but he shrugged helplessly even as
Hermione gave him an exasperated glare.

"Hey guys." Lavender greeted them in a subdued voice and Blaise sprang up to make room for her
and the Patil twins to sit.

Blaise darted a look at Padma. "Would you like a drink?"

"Thank you." Padma blushed. "I'll come with you."

Harry's eyebrows rose a little as they walked away. "When did that happen?"

"When they rescued me." Lavender said with a small smile.

"Blaise really likes her." Neville confirmed, a hint of mischief entering his gaze. "Especially since he
finally realised she's not a Gryffindor."

"Well, at least something good came out of the whole thing." Lavender said brightly.

Parvati rubbed her arm soothingly.

"How are you doing, Lav?" asked Ron a touch awkwardly.

Lavender shrugged but Harry saw the pleased glint in her eye at the question. "Better." She fidgeted
with a button on her skirt. "Colin wrote to me and apologised. He's offered for him and Dennis to
transfer schools."

"That was good of him to offer." Hermione said quietly.

"I told him not to be daft." Lavender said baldly. "It wasn't his fault." Her eyes flickered to Sue
briefly. "I refuse to let that little bitch win."

Sue flushed red before she paled. "If you're expecting me to defend Hannah, don't." She tossed her
"She's a victim too though." Hermione remarked, wincing as the other girls turned to glare at her. "Look, I'm not defending what Hannah did but Crouch did seduce and manipulate her. She was effectively brainwashed."

Sue shook her head. "The Hannah I knew would never have allowed that to happen. She was smart. Merlin, she used to tell me off for being too gullible and trusting!"

"Crouch was incredibly clever." Harry said before Hermione could respond. "Hermione's right; we shouldn't forget that he used her even if it doesn't excuse the actions she took."

Sue glared at him. "You can remember all you want. Personally, I'm never forgiving her!" She shoved off the sofa and stormed away.

Neville sighed and waved everyone else back. "You're not wrong, Harry, but neither's she. I'll go talk with her."

Harry rubbed his head tiredly. "That could have gone better."

"I can't say I blame her." Lavender said a touch coldly. "What Abbott did was unforgiveable."

"No argument." Harry raised his hand in surrender and glanced in Hermione's direction with a silent plea for her to let it go too.

Hermione subsided and Lavender shifted in her chair.

"At least they've finally brought charges against her." Parvati said, jumping into the silence. "Do you know when she'll stand trial?"

"All the trials will take place this month." Harry said. The Ministry was keen to hold them early to enable the wizarding world to heal as much as it could and move forward.

Blaise arrived back with Padma, carrying drinks. A crease appeared between his brows as he noted Neville's absence. "Where's…"

"Harry and Hermione upset Sue by defending Hannah." Lavender said bluntly. "Neville went after her."

Blaise raised an eyebrow at Harry.

"We were not defending her!" Hermione said fiercely, jumping to defend Harry. "We were just pointing out that Hannah's a victim in this too."

Blaise gave an exaggerated wince. "Well, I can see why that would have gone down like a lead balloon."

"Harry and Hermione are right though." Padma said settling into a chair.

"Padma!" Parvati looked at her sister outraged.

"No," Padma said firmly. "Hannah is a fifteen year old girl who had an evil predator target her." She stared down her twin. "If you had an attractive man flatter you with compliments and tell you that you were beautiful and adored and the best thing that had ever happened to him, how long do you think you would hold out before believing it and falling under his spell?"
Harry was impressed at Padma's argument. He could see it hit instantly with Lavender and Parvati. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Sue and Neville approaching behind Padma.

"Of course, she should have told someone but she didn't." Padma continued. "And because she didn't, she ended up more and more under his control to the point where he was able to convince the sky was green and the grass was blue; that her family and friends were wrong and he was right. She made her choices under that delusion and the choices she made were horrible and criminal."

Harry cleared his throat; he should attempt to curtail Padma's lecture before Sue erupted – she'd grown steadily red-faced behind the other girl. Blaise was sending a pale Neville a frantic questioning look and Neville shook his head in response.

"She should be punished for those choices but…" Padma sighed and pointed at her sister beside her. "You don't blame Creevey for attacking Lavender, do you?"

"Of course not!" Parvati said. "He was imperiused!"

"And so was Hannah really." Padma argued. "Only because he manipulated her without a spell, she'll face the full weight of the law instead of being acknowledged as a victim of Crouch herself." She grimaced. "Really, Crouch would have been kinder to her if he had imperiused her."

"I hadn't thought about it like that." Sue said, drawing everyone's attention.

Padma flushed bright red, turning to face her. "Sue, I'm…"

Sue shook her head. "Don't apologise." She inched around the group and retook her seat.

Everyone settled back into position.

"It's…it's easier to stay angry with her." Sue admitted. "Because if I'm angry I don't think about how much I miss her. She was my best friend."

Harry gave her a sympathetic smile. "I think Sirius and Remus have some understanding of how you feel. Pettigrew did the same thing to them; to my parents."

"Sorry for storming off before." Sue said. "I just…"

"You're entitled to your opinion and your feelings." Hermione replied gently. "Hannah was your best friend."

Harry nodded. "Look, there's going to be a lot of decision making over the next month about the people who hurt us, who were on Voldemort's side of this. We're probably not going to agree about everything especially when it hits close to home." He looked around the group, determination shining from his green eyes, unaware that most of the room had stopped to listen. "But we didn't go to war for them to win by us tearing each other apart in the aftermath. Let's not give them that. We can disagree and we can feel angry and hurt and…and whatever we need to feel but no matter what, we stand together."

"We stand together." Sue repeated decisively. "I agree."

"Sounds good to me." Blaise said raising his glass.

They all followed his example in a silent toast.

Harry handed his drink to Hermione. "I think I'd better go wrangle Theo out of the main room."
"I'll come with you," Draco said, already moving, "I want to check on Mother."

Harry exchanged a softly affectionate look with Hermione and fell into step beside Draco.

o-O-o

Sirius was relieved when Harry turned up and shepherded Theo out of the ballroom and into the room they'd set aside for the kids. Theo had done a sterling job of stoically accepting condolences but Sirius knew it had worn on the Slytherin's control of his mask. Regardless that Theo acted the part of a consummate politician, he was at the end of the day still only a fifteen year old boy who'd just lost his father.

His lips twitched with amusement as he saw Draco checking on Narcissa. The baby was due to be born within a couple of weeks and Draco was determined to ensure his mother received the best care. It hadn't escaped anybody's notice that he was also frigidly cold to his father who was battling with a crippling disability. Sirius wondered at the schism. His eyes caught Narcissa's and she tilted her head in acknowledgement. He'd leave it with her to sort out. He didn't want to become the type of Head of House who poked his nose into everyone's business.

"Lord Black." Stewart Selwyn sidled up to him.

Sirius turned to face him. "Lord Selwyn."

"Good to see your boy take Theo out." Selwyn said raising the glass of whiskey he held almost as a toast to Harry's action.

"I was just thinking the same thing." Sirius admitted.

"Ben was a very clever man." Selwyn said. "You know he manipulated this whole scenario? He dies, lauded a hero for standing up to Evil, and his son is now entrenched into the heart of the most powerful political and magical Houses." He sighed. "A remarkable play."

Sirius hummed. He couldn't argue with Selwyn's summary of Nott's plan. "He was a father who loved his son very much."

Selwyn inclined his head. "He was a good friend who advised the rest of us well. I will miss him very much."

The grief was genuine and Sirius kept quiet allowing Selwyn a moment to regroup.

"I wanted to thank you." Selwyn said, changing the topic. "For your help with the DMLE yesterday."

Sirius wanted to shrug but settled for a subtle head tilt instead. The meeting to determine what would happen to the Death Eaters who had answered the call but then stood against Voldemort had taken almost three hours longer than necessary in his opinion.

"I didn't do much." Sirius demurred.

"Please," Selwyn said dryly, "you and I both know that if you had taken Moody's side and requested a full investigation of past crimes that it would have happened."

Sirius considered what to say carefully. Selwyn might not have had Benjamin Nott's intelligence but he was no slouch. "I'm not Dumbledore." He stated bluntly. "I'm not interested in doing what he did and giving free passes and second chances all the while turning a blind eye to the reality of the
crimes that happened simply to stabilise our world quickly."

"Then…"

"You and your cohorts have already been tried and pardoned for the crimes you committed; the imperius defence accepted." Sirius said slowly. "I even think for some of you, the family and peer pressures added to the context of the political entrenchment of that time, might even substantiate the argument that there was no choice but to comply with Riddle, even if the absolute truth is that there was no imperius spell involved."

"That's…quite a concession." Selwyn noted gravely.

"Hmmm. The world isn't black and white." Sirius said. "There's a large amount of grey in it. It serves no purpose reopening old wounds." He held Selwyn's gaze. "You made a choice this time and it was the right one."

"Even so, you could have left us in the cold." Selwyn said. "Supported a ban from political activity or placed restrictions." He gestured in Sirius's direction. "You know allowing us into the Wizengamot will mean a continuation of the traditionalist side against the Potter alliance."

Sirius lifted an eyebrow. "Laws are better when they're balanced. I may not agree with every argument you make but countering your argument makes mine better."

Selwyn gave a short laugh. "Ben admired you greatly; I think he may have been right."

"He admired my Grandfather more." Sirius replied, amused.

"Who are you planning to nominate for Chief Warlock?" asked Selwyn, switching topic. "I hear rumours that Cornelius is trying to put your name in the frame."

"I hope not." Sirius said fervently. He really didn't want the role. "I was thinking of nominating Griselda. A Chief Witch would make a nice change of pace."

Selwyn's eyebrows shot up. "With Griselda it would be entertaining if nothing else." He glanced to his left and smiled. "I see the formidable Augusta is coming in this direction so I will make my goodbyes. I look forward to working with you, Lord Black."

"Lord Selwyn." Sirius shook the outstretched hand and wondered if Selwyn would emerge the leader of the traditionalist group.

It might even be a good choice.

o-O-o

8th July 1995

Harry shivered as he walked down the corridor towards the Headmaster's – Minerva's office to speak with the dragon portrait. It seemed strange to think that it was no longer the domain of Albus Dumbledore. Sirius's hand on his shoulder was comforting and Harry didn't protest it.

Harry's eyes had darted about registering that the ongoing repairs as they had walked through Hogwarts; the corridors with scorch marks and signs of spell fire; the broken stairs; the pieces of masonry that still littered the place. There was evidence of the battle in torn portraits and broken statues. Harry had to remind himself that in real time it had only been two weeks since the battle. There was still a lot of repair work to be done. Indeed, the floo was down for repairs, portkeys
banned until a full review of the wards could be undertaken, and the group had been forced to walk from the gates.

Behind them Ron walked between his parents, pale-faced and subdued. Draco walked stiffly beside a limping Lucius – Narcissa was far too close to her due date to attend. Sue was accompanied by her father who was also grimacing at the walk on his newly healed ankle, and Luna by hers.

The gargoyle sprang to the side before they gave a password and they all silently trudged up the spiral staircase.

Sue was accompanied by her father who was also grimacing at the walk on his newly healed ankle, and Luna by hers.

Sirius tapped perfunctorily on the door and waited despite Lucius's mutterings behind him for Minerva to call out to enter.

The first real difference was the change in layout.

The back wall was given over to the painting of the dragon. Minerva had moved the desk to the right wall and the portraits of the former Heads had moved to live behind her; a portrait of Dumbledore startled Harry for a moment before he realised it was still sleeping. In front of her, the windows were open with the sunlight streaming in to highlight the wooden floor and the Hogwarts shield. The wall behind them had new floor-to-floor shelving with every inch covered in books, except for one shelf which was given over to the Sorting Hat. All the other knick-knacks were gone.

"Come in." Minerva welcomed them in with a sweep of her arm and in its wake a semi-circle of chairs popped up all facing the dragon painting.

Harry greeted Minerva almost absently his eyes on the picture. Ron had described it to him but his first real glance at it was breath-taking.

She was reminiscent of the Hungarian Horntail he'd faced; a strong lizard-like face, sinuous neck and sturdy body with its wings folded back. She was quietly watching their progress into the room with yellow reptilian eyes.

Harry took a seat. He wasn't sure why he and Sirius had been invited along. He raised curious eyes to Minerva who had walked over to stand beside the dragon.

"For all of you who have not yet met her, this is Hogwarts." Minerva introduced the dragon briskly.
"She has requested your presence here today to discuss the ramifications of using the spell to wake her." She looked over at Harry and Sirius. "As you were the one to provide the spell, Harry, and the one to defeat Riddle, she wished to meet you too."

The dragon rose elegantly to a sitting position. "You are the wizard who protected the world."

"Yes." Harry said. "I'm Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you." He motioned to his left side where Sirius sat. "This is my father, Lord Sirius Black."

"Where did you learn the spell to wake me?" Hogwarts asked.

"I was visited in a dream by the Founders." Harry explained. "They told me the spell."

Hogwarts huffed and a small puff of smoke emerged from her snout. "But they did not tell you all?"

"The time we had through the veil was limited." Harry admitted.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Are you able to explain further? While none of us would change what happened, I know all of us parents have concerns."
Hogwarts stared at him for a long moment before lowering her head in acquiescence. "My story begins many years ago…"

Hogwarts was weary.

The last of her brood had flown away from the cold hillside where she had nested for all her life. Her mate had died a month before, his death echoing through their bond as he fell to the blade of one of the humans. With Marrick dead, she would have no more children. Elina had wished to stay but Hogwarts had sent her on her way. Best her child seek out a mate in the lands to the East where dragons still flew. Too many of their kind had fallen in recent times; their numbers slowly decimated as they were hunted by the human folk.

There was a small magical village below, nestled into the foot of the hill and it was beginning to thrive. It was only a matter of time before some precocious youth decided to fight the dragon that lived above them.

It was her time.

She was ready to go.

It didn't take long.

One wintry night, Hogwarts heard the creep of footfalls against the ground. She roused herself from her warren of caves and emerged into the twilight, her wings unfurling.

"Who comes?" Hogwarts demanded.

There were a group of four; two witches and two wizards – magic wielders like the Emrys.

The dark male grabbed his redhead companion as he made to draw his sword. "Godric, she speaks!"

"She's intelligent?" asked the brown-haired witch. "Fascinating."

"Well, we can't kill her if she is." The blonde replied firmly.

"We only have Salazar's word that she speaks!" The redhead male argued.

"I speak." Hogwarts said, narrowing her eyes.

"I think she understood you." The blonde said wonderingly.

"The language of the serpents!" The dark haired wizard shouted. "I can understand her because I speak the language of the serpents."

"But how does she understand us?" His male companion questioned.

"Magic." Hogwarts said tersely. "You came to kill me; you should proceed. Be warned it is in my nature to fight."

The dark-haired wizard translated for the others.

"Wait!" The brown-haired witch stopped the redhead from drawing his sword again. "You know of magic?"

Hogwarts lowered her head. "All magical creatures know of magic. It has existed for many years..."
before the humans came and it will exist for many years more after you have left this life."

"Then you could teach us." The brown-haired witch stated. "We're scholars."

Hogwarts looked toward the redhead who even then was fingerling the hilt of the sword at his hip.

"He's retiring from fighting." The blonde assured her. "We want to build a school." She gestured at the hillside and the lake. "Lord Black gifted us this land when we petitioned the Wizard's Council, although he was very amused when he did."

"And now we know why." The dark-haired wizard said only to realise he wasn't speaking in his own tongue when the others looked at him blankly. "I said, 'and now we know why.'" He repeated. "It is not so much of a loss for him to give us land that we cannot use because there's a bloody dragon on it!"

"Salazar." The brown-haired witch snapped out frostily. She turned back to Hogwarts. "What say you, dragon? Will you teach us and allow us to build a school here?" She gestured further to the North. "We could plant a forest where you could live and help defend us."

"And so the bargain was made." Hogwarts said.

Harry let out a breath, surprised to realise he had been holding it. Everybody looked spellbound by the dragon’s – by Hogwarts's story. It was actually the story of the founding of the school. Hermione was going to furious not to have come with them, Harry mused ruefully.

"For many years, we lived in harmony." Hogwarts said. "The four became my friends, my children. They learned of magic and I learned from them of humans, learned to speak their tongue as well as my own. They used my colours in their school and named it in my honour. It was a time of peace and goodwill. Many creatures came and settled within the forest and lake."

Hogwarts stretched, her wings extending before folding back into her sides. "But the world outside was growing darker. An evil wizard heard of the school and raised an army to take it. I defended her and killed him but I almost died in the attempt, and my friends were afraid. What would happen the next time if I was gone or if the school was attacked beyond their own lives? Rowena had glimpses of a future where battles raged at the school."

"And so they came up with the spell." Minerva said quietly.

"We." Hogwarts corrected. "A willing sacrifice of my own magic, life and spirit; and a willing sacrifice of their own for in performing the magic they bound themselves to me and to the school to which I am bound."

"Which I guess brings us neatly onto why we're all gathered." Richard Bones said.

"Indeed." Lucius commented.

"You asked our children to pay a price; to bind themselves to the school." Molly asserted, capturing Hogwarts' attention. "We need to know exactly what you meant."

"The original spell took my magic and my four friends to enact. It was powerful, difficult magic. We did not realise that it would take so much." Hogwarts replied, shifting to lie down. "When we examined the arithmancy in the wake of the spell we realised there was a permanent link between my four friends and the magic of the school; between their lives and my own spirit." She lowered her head. "Rowena eventually derived the truth; when my four friends died, my spirit would sleep. I needed their magic to anchor my spirit and provide the protection which was needed. It was then we
created the spell you used to wake me."

"So, our magic woke you, and because you needed the magic to continue to protect the school, you needed us to agree to our binding ourselves to you." Sue said matter-of-factly.

Hogwarts' eyes flickered to her. "Indeed, Witch of Hufflepuff."

"But what does that mean?" Richard asked again, jumping in before an annoyed looking Molly could do the same. "You say they are bound to you; how? What does it mean for their lives? For the rest of their schooling?"

"They will be connected to me and the connection will grow while they learn here." Hogwarts answered. "They may leave but the bond will draw them back eventually. It may take one year or many more."

"I'll be gone for twenty." Luna replied dreamily.

"And so you will, Witch of Ravenclaw." Hogwarts said, her tone coated with fond amusement.

"When they return to the school," Minerva asserted herself into the conversation deftly, "they will become staff?"

"Yes." Hogwarts said. "All times before the four were honoured with the position of the Head of House."

"Which is when they can put you to sleep again?" Arthur spoke up. "We understand from Minerva that you've said only they as the Heads of Houses can put you to sleep."

"And if they do, does this mean they won't be bound anymore?" asked Molly.

Hogwarts rose and stretched out her wings. "There is no spell to make me sleep."

Sirius frowned and sighed suddenly, as though he'd just worked it out. "You slept when the four who woke you died."

Hogwarts inclined her head.

"Blimey," muttered Ron, "does this mean we have to die before you go back to sleep?"

"In essence." Hogwarts confirmed.

"But natural deaths." Arthur said before anyone else could say something. "You're talking about natural deaths."

"The death that will come to them." Hogwarts said. "Godric died in a duel; Rowena in her sleep. Salazar met his fate attempting a mate for the basilisk he'd raised; Helga from a nasty infection she'd caught helping the centaurs in the forest."

"There must be some way to break the binding." Lucius said silkily, his hand smoothing over the top of his cane.

Harry frowned and opened his mouth to speak…

"I don't want to break the binding." Draco said tersely. "I gave my word and I have accepted my future is with Hogwarts."
"You are a Malfoy. You cannot bind yourself to…" Lucius began frostily.

"You did." Draco snapped. "You bound yourself to the monster. I bound myself to a school to defend against him. I'm not changing my mind."

Harry shifted inching closer surreptitiously to Draco to offer him some support.

Lucius rose from his seat. "I believe I am not needed here."

Harry watched as he limped out; nobody protesting his exit.

Sirius cleared his throat. "Lucius."

Lucius stopped with his hand on the doorknob. He turned back with an inquisitive sneering look.

"By my command as Lord Black you are hereby ordered not to find a way to break the binding between your son and Hogwarts, and not to act to break the binding if a way becomes known to you." Sirius stated firmly. "Do you understand?"

Lucius went red but nodded sharply. "As you will, Lord Black." He left slamming the door behind him.

"Well I never." Molly huffed.

"You told him, Draco mate." Ron said approvingly.

Draco sniffed imperiously.

"There is more I need to tell you." Hogwarts said, her gaze landing on Harry.

Harry sighed. "I'm bound too, aren't I?"

"What?" Sirius glared at the dragon. "Is he right?"

Hogwarts lowered her head deferentially. "In times past, the spell would only be used if there was a great need. The Head of the school would have the task of choosing the four to enact the spell but in choosing…"

"They were also bound." Harry completed.

Sirius's hand landed on his shoulder. "And what does that mean for Harry?"

"He'll be Headmaster of Hogwarts one day." Minerva supplied dryly.

Harry was surprised at how much that idea pleased him.

"Is she right?" Sirius asked of Hogwarts.

"It is normally the Headmaster who is tasked with the choice," the dragon said, "and they are already bound." Her eyes stayed with Harry. "You were chosen by the Founders themselves and in that moment you were bound."

"So I guess it's the same as the others?" checked Harry. "I'll be connected to you now and even though once I'm done with school and I can leave, eventually I'll become the Headmaster."

Hogwarts inclined in her head in a gesture he was beginning to realise was how she indicated
agreement. "Our connection will be stronger though."

Harry took a breath. "I think I'd like to teach."

Minerva smiled widely. Sirius's hand squeezed his shoulder and he turned to look at his father who was beaming proudly back at him.

"I think you're going to be a brilliant Headmaster." Sirius said.

Harry felt the nerves in his belly settle with his father's straightforward acceptance.

"Well, I think we all have our answers." Sirius said, looking around at the group and receiving nods in return. "Any other questions?"

There was a collective shake of heads.

"Do you have anything else to discuss with us?" Harry asked the dragon, not realising he had slipped into parseltongue.

"No, my young Mage." Hogwarts spread her wings out wide. "I look forward to our years of friendship."

They all stood and the chairs disappeared. Harry said his goodbyes to Minerva and fell into step beside his father as they made their way out of the office and back through Hogwarts.

They paused as they reached the front steps and Harry looked towards the Quidditch pitch with a grimace.

Sirius nudged Harry's shoulder with his. "You alright?"

"Just…" he shivered, "that's…" he grimaced and hunched his shoulders as he pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket. "It's the first time we've been back here since."

Sirius glanced over to the Quidditch pitch. "You want to take a look at it in daylight?"

Harry bit his lip but he ended up nodding. They quietly made their way down the path. He was vaguely aware of a discussion and footsteps behind them but he ignored it, focusing on simply putting one step in front of the other until they came to a stop by the edge of the usual entrance.

The pitch looked like a disaster zone. The grass was blackened and torn up; grooves of dirt criss-crossed over the whole area. The hoops were missing but then they'd been removed to make way for the maze and Harry couldn't remember seeing them during the battle. The stands were either gone or in ruins.

"Bloody hell!" Ron blurted out behind Harry.

"Ronald! Language!" Molly said, although her hands were clasped together tightly in front of her; her face pale under the freckles.

"Mum!" Ron protested, his hand shooting out to point at the damage. "Look at it! How are they going to get this fixed in time for us to come back and play Quidditch here?!"

"He has a point." Draco muttered.

Harry shuddered at the idea. "I don't think I'm going to play Quidditch anymore."
"WHAT?" Ron's voice was a shriek more than a yell. "BUT YOU HAVE TO PLAY!"

"You guys played fine without me." Harry said shaking his head. He couldn't imagine taking another
step forward; taking another step onto the pitch where he'd killed and…where he'd died. "Ginny was
great."

Sirius's arm landed around his shoulders and Harry leaned it unthinkingly to soak up the support and
comfort. "Whatever you decide is fine, Harry…"

"But…" stuttered Ron before he stopped abruptly.

Harry figured Sirius had glared at him.

"Whatever you decide is fine, Harry," Sirius repeated, "but maybe now's not the time to make a
decision."

"Can we go?" asked Harry, wanting – needing – to be away from the pitch.

"Sure we can…" Sirius stopped and frowned. He reached into his pocket with his free hand and
pulled out a mirror. "Padfoot."

The mirror's shiny surface filled with Remus's face – Remus's panicked looking face.

Harry and Sirius exchanged a quick look.

"Moony?" asked Sirius urgently.

"You have to come home right now!" Remus said. "Narcissa's in labour! She's having the baby!"

"Oh, that's lovely!" Molly beamed, turning to Arthur with a happy smile of remembrance.

"Mother's having the baby?" Draco turned and started for the path almost at a run.

Sirius nudged Harry and they quickly followed after him.

"Not to worry, Moony." Sirius replied. "We're on our way!"

o-O-o

Sirius hummed softly, rocking the baby in his arms.

Regina Dorea Malfoy was adorable. She was creams and peaches in complexion, startling silver
eyes, and a thin thatch of blonde hair. She had weighed in at seven pounds eight ounces, with
surprisingly active arms and legs for a new-born, and an impressive pair of lungs.

She was currently slurping down the bottle of milk Sirius was feeding her as though she hadn't been
fed since her birth some fourteen hours before.

They had all hurried back to the Estate from Hogwarts only to wait for hours for the arrival. Narcissa
had insisted on staying at the Estate for the birth and a hastily arranged nursery had been organised
by the elves.

Lucius had finally shown up two hours after the birth. He'd stank of firewhiskey. He'd taken a brief
look at his new daughter before falling into bed in one of the guest rooms, clothes on, and sleeping
like the dead.
Narcissa had sniffed in disgust and promptly turned her attention to her daughter.

Sirius hummed again as Regina frowned around her bottle. He smiled down at her. "You are a precious bundle, Reggie."

"Oh," Draco's voice sounded from the doorway, "I didn't realise…"

Sirius glanced out of the window. It was very early in the morning but he wasn't surprised that the brand new big brother hadn't been able to sleep and had intended sneaking a peek.

"She woke up hungry a while ago." Sirius murmured. He'd set an alarm on the nursery to notify him and not Narcissa. The new mother needed rest and Sirius felt it was his godfatherly duty. He'd done the same for James and Lily with Harry. He motioned for Draco to come further in, pointing at the nearby window seat to the rocking chair Sirius was occupying.

Draco soundlessly entered on bare feet. He'd had the presence of mind to shrug on a dressing gown over his pyjamas but he looked cold.

Sirius sent out a mental nudge and the room warmed.

Draco looked startled.

"One of the advantages of being the Head of House." Sirius said quietly. He scanned Draco's face and inwardly debated starting the conversation he figured he needed to have with his young cousin. "So," he began deciding just to go for it, "what's going on with you and your father?"

Draco's head snapped up and for a brief second he stared in shock at Sirius before his usual mask settled on his pointed features. "Sometimes you act like a Gryffindor." He sniffed.

"That's because I am a Gryffindor," Sirius pointed out wryly, "even if I was raised Slytherin."

Draco's brow developed a small crease as he considered that. "You act so Slytherin most of the time."

"I've had to," Sirius said, "to protect Harry."

Draco slowly nodded. He shifted position, sitting cross-legged on the love seat. "When we did the spell…Hogwarts…Hogwarts judged us. She spoke to us mentally, reviewed our memories and…" he flushed red, "and she found me lacking."

Sirius stayed quiet but silently urged Draco to continue.

"She showed me a world where you hadn't become Lord Black and were killed." Draco continued. "Harry…he still defeated the Dark Lord but my life…" he sighed and fidgeted with the hem of his gown. "The Dark Lord lived in our manor. He…he terrorised and tortured everyone. I…I was scared of him, scared for my life, scared for my mother's life and my father's." He looked up and met Sirius's cautious and sympathetic gaze. "I was glad when Harry won; glad to be free of that evil."

"And your father?" Sirius prompted gently.

"In that world Lucius Malfoy was a coward who kissed Riddle's robe and worshipped at his feet until my mother saved us all and told the Dark Lord Harry was dead when he wasn't." Draco said briskly. "My father here…he would have done the same if he hadn't been forced to bow to the House of Black's primacy." His eyes blazed with anger. "He wouldn't have done as Nott did. He wouldn't have sacrificed his life so we would have lived." He gestured furiously. "He blames you for his
wound because you forced him into wearing the beacon. If he'd had a choice…he wouldn't have chosen to stand against that…that monster. He would have given us all to him!"

Sirius adjusted his hold on Reggie, noting she was almost at the end of the bottle, as he considered what to say. "Your father is self-serving, Draco. He always was and I dare say once he's gotten over his pity party and begins to realise he can brag about his disability as a war wound he received in heroically providing us with a beacon, he will be again. It's who he is."

"Well, I don't want to be like him." Draco blurted out. "Not anymore. I want to be worthy of the trust Hogwarts said she had in me when she realised how disgusted I was at the other me and my determination never to be like that."

"You don't have to be like your father or anyone else." Sirius assured him. "You'll always have a place in the House of Black, Draco. You should become the person you want to be and if Hogwarts showed you the way, well, I'm pleased."

Draco nodded, a pleased flush rising up his neck. "I have a different future now. I want to…I want to be the best Head of Slytherin Hogwarts has ever seen. I want people to think of the House as more than just a place for dark wizards or where He came from."

"That's a good ambition." Sirius commented.

He gently disengaged the empty bottle from Reggie before she started sucking on air. He set it aside and shifted her to burp her gently against the towel which was already lying across his shoulder in readiness.

"Why are you rubbing her back?" asked Draco.

"Babies can take in a lot of air when they suck their bottles." Sirius explained. "This helps bring up any wind."

Draco made a pout of disgust.

"You may want to think about how you deal with your father civilly." Sirius suggested. "You can disagree with his politics, his beliefs and deride his character, but you are still his son and you will need to interact with him during family occasions."

"I know." Draco said defensively. "It's just…” he breathed in sharply and stared up at the ceiling.

"You're angry." Sirius said.

"Yes." Draco admitted with a grudging look at Sirius.

"You can be angry just…”

"Civil." Draco completed.

Sirius smiled at him.

Reggie burped loudly; a milky bubble of air erupting from her lungs and onto the waiting towel.

"There's my girl." Sirius said approvingly.

Draco looked at the milieu in horror. "That's just…gross."

Sirius's lips twitched. "You probably don't want to experience her nappy either then."
Draco sniffed haughtily. "I'm her big brother. I should get to do the fun stuff." He yawned suddenly.

"I think you should probably head back to bed." Sirius said.

Draco nodded. He slipped off the love seat and with a wistful glance at his sister headed out of the room.

Sirius got to his feet carefully, keeping good hold of the baby in his arms. He headed to the cot and placed Reggie down, drawing up the light cotton blanket to cover her restless legs. He hummed a lullaby he'd once heard Lily singing for Harry and smiled down at the gurgling baby.

"So how much of my conversation with Draco did you hear?" asked Sirius suddenly, surprising the woman who had come up behind him.

Narcissa raised an eyebrow when he turned to look at her. "All of it." She said crisply. "As you well know since you are unlikely to have missed the baby monitoring charm I left."

She smoothed a hair back behind her ear and ran a hand down her pristine and tightly belted blue silk dressing gown. She looked stunning for someone who had given birth hours before. She placed a hand on Sirius's arm.

"Thank you for talking with him, Sirius."

Sirius shrugged. "He has potential."

"More now than he ever did as simply Lucius Malfoy's heir." Narcissa's expression softened as she gazed down at her slumbering daughter. She straightened and looked at Sirius. "What do you intend to do with Lucius now you no longer need him?"

Sirius straightened to meet her gaze head on. "What do you want me to do with him?"

"I do not wish to return to my marriage." Narcissa declared bluntly. "My children and I deserve better."

"Then we'll work it out." Sirius said. "I'll talk to Lucius later once he's sobered up." He planned to offer Lucius exile or Judgement. He had a feeling he knew which the other wizard would take.

Narcissa's eyes fluttered closed; tension draining out of it so quickly Sirius realised she hadn't been certain of his response. He reached over and clasped her hand, squeezing just enough to comfort her. She opened her eyes and nodded at him; she was fine.

Sirius let go of her and stepped away from the crib. "I should leave her to sleep."

"You're very good with her." Narcissa said, a hint of bewildered amusement colouring her tone.

"I looked after Harry a lot when he was a baby." Sirius said dismissively. He gave into the temptation to touch Reggie's soft cheek again one last time.

"You should consider having some of your own." Narcissa said.

"No matchmaking." Sirius instructed briskly, noting the look in her eye. It was far to like the one Andy got on occasion. "You're not allowed to match-make."

Narcissa's lips curved into a slow smile. "Of course not, my Lord Black."

Sirius looked at her with suspicion. "Hnmpf." He said eloquently. He glanced one last time at the
baby and started for the door.

"Cousin." Narcissa called out to him softly; her voice low to avoid waking her daughter.

Sirius turned immediately.

Narcissa fell into a deep curtsy. "Thank you, my Lord. For looking after my children so well."

Sirius smiled warmly. "You're more than welcome, Cissy."

And his next stop was going to be his own son's room.

His mind was a kaleidoscope of memories of his son as a baby, of James and Lily…and he just needed to see him with his own eyes again, reassure himself Harry was alive and well and breathing…

O-O-o

13th July 1995

Severus repressed the urge to squirm. He sat on the fourth tier of the Wizengamot beside Alastor waiting to be called to give evidence. Or rather waiting for the whole damned thing to actually start since they'd arrived early.

He ignored the stares and whispers around him but it was difficult and he took care to hide his mutilated hand out of sight. That it was still functional was a testament to the treatment he'd received – and he thanked Merlin every day that he would be able to brew – but the deep scarring would remain.

Alastor's presence was keeping anyone from approaching him at least. The Heirs of the Potter Alliance had settled for small nods of acknowledgement as they had taken their places on the bench; his colleagues from Hogwarts the same.

Severus found his gaze drawn back to the central floor. In addition to the usual Ministerial chairs, the seat of the Chief Witch – Griselda Marchbanks had been appointed in an emergency session the previous week – and the clerk's chair, there was a chair for witnesses. There was a table on the left for the prosecution with a corresponding table on the right the defence. In the middle of the floor was the accused's chair. Alastor had informed him that the chair had been spelled with security measures to ensure the accused would speak truthfully and could not escape or attack.

A soft swell of noise erupted from the public tier above them and Severus glanced automatically towards the door.

The Minister walked in with Black and Potter.

Immediately a thunderous applause rang out and everyone in the Wizengamot rose to their feet. Severus wanted to ignore Alastor's tug to rise but he got to his feet, wincing at the tremors and stiffness that still physically assailed him.

Shouts and whistles permeated the air.

Severus wasn't surprised when Black moved closer to Potter, a hand resting supportively on the boy's shoulder. For a moment, Potter looked nothing more than a fourteen year old boy who would rather be anywhere else but in an instant his expression changed and he lifted a hand.
Slowly silence descended.

"The Houses of Black and Potter thank you for the welcome." Potter said loudly. "But we couldn't have defeated Tom Riddle without a lot of help from our allies and from the Ministry."

Cornelius puffed up like a proud peacock beside the boy. Potter looked at Black.

"We should focus today on why we're here." Black seamlessly picked up as though they had rehearsed it. "There will be time for thanks, remembering those who sacrificed their lives, honouring all who fought, and celebrating our success once we have completed the trials."

"Well said, Lord Black." Cornelius said, with a firm look around the chamber.

Griselda rose from her new seat. "Everyone take your seats then so we can begin!"

Severus was grateful to sit back down. He belatedly realised the rest of the House of Black had entered with their Head of House and Heir as he watched them take up the remaining empty positions on the bench beside him.

Minerva sat down on Severus's left side and gave him a small smile. "Severus."

He inclined his head, his dark hair falling forward to almost hide him from the penetrative gaze of the Headmistress. She had visited him several times during his stay in Saint Mungo's; had reluctantly accepted his resignation but wished him well and encouraged him to stay in touch. Severus hadn't quite decided what it was that he wanted to do with the rest of his life – he had been so ready to die that he had been shocked to wake in the hospital. He had received an offer from the DOM by Croaker personally but...he wasn't certain he wanted to stay in Britain.

His eyes drifted to the Malfoy seat which was unoccupied.

The only Malfoy in attendance was Draco who sat on the bench some way down from Severus. Draco had taken a seat next to Theo Nott, the two boys seemingly under the supervision of Ted Tonks.

The same emergency session which had installed Marchbanks had also announced Andromeda Tonks would stand as the Regent of the House of Nott. The Malfoys however…

The paper the day before had carried an announcement of the birth of the Malfoy baby girl and Lucius's retirement from the Wizengamot on health grounds; the House of Black was appointed as proxy until Narcissa would be able to attend as Regent on behalf of Draco until he was of age. Lucius had apparently gone abroad for treatment for the injury he'd sustained but Severus firmly believed he'd never be seen again in Britain. The House of Black was ascendant and the rest of the Wizengamot knew it.

"Seal the doors!"

And the Wizengamot began.

Severus reflected that he hadn't actually attended a full session for a long time. His mother had brought him as a teenager determined that Severus should have an understanding of politics and the government who shaped their lives. He'd gone as a young man to support his friends who had been or thought to have been Heirs, especially Regulus. But...he had rarely stepped foot in the chamber since the tribunal which had declared him as a spy for Dumbledore at the end of the last war.

"This session of the Wizengamot has been called as a fully public trial for the accused known as
Dennis Travers and Peter Pettigrew." Griselda announced. "The Wizengamot members will hear evidence from witnesses called by both prosecution and defence counsel. A vote will be taken to establish their guilt or innocence of the charges the prosecution has levied. If a guilty verdict is rendered, the Wizengamot will then debate and declare the sentencing." Griselda looked around the chamber. "Does anyone have any questions?"

There was silence.

"Let me also make one other thing clear," Griselda said brusquely, "this is a trial not a gladiatorial event. Any, and I mean, any heckling will have the idiot heckler removed from this chamber and barred for the rest of their lives. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a hurried chorus of agreement.

Griselda hummed and threw a look toward Dullard.

Dullard rose to his feet and cleared his throat noisily. "The Wizengamot calls the prosecution and the defence for Dennis Travers to the floor!"

Severus watched as Rufus Scrimgeour took the prosecution table along with a grim looking Malcolm Wood. Across from them, Barry Bootle and a younger witch from his office took the defence table.

"Bring in the accused, Dennis Travers!" Dullard called.

A small door appeared opposite the main chamber entrance; a chained Travers was marched in by two aurors who Severus recognised as the remaining members of the Rat Squad. He was placed immediately into the accused box.

"The prosecution will state the charges!" Dullard declared and sat down.

Scrimgeour got to his feet. "Dennis Travers is charged with the following crimes: belonging to a terrorist organisation known as the Death Eaters, also known as the Knights of Walpurgis; conspiracy to commit a terrorist act at the Quidditch World Cup; committal of a terrorist act at the Quidditch World Cup on twenty-fifth of August of the year nineteen-ninety-four; escaping from custody in September of the same year; conspiracy to commit terrorist acts in sabotaging the TriWizard Tournament in November, nineteen-ninety-four, February nineteen-ninety-five and June nineteen-ninety-five…"

Severus listened as Scrimgeour continued charging Travers with the actual acts of sabotage, murdering Karkaroff, the kidnapping of Potter, and finally the attack on Hogwarts and attempted murder of Alastor.

"How does the accused plead?" Dullard asked.

Bootle stood every inch the polished solicitor with his swept back blond hair and aristocratic manner. "My client pleads not guilty."

"So noted." Dullard gave Griselda a nod and sat down.

Griselda stood. "The prosecution may begin."

Severus took a deep breath. He would be called as a witness but not until the events at Hogwarts were tackled. In the interim he watched as the Scrimgeour showed the Dark Mark on Travers’ arm, the evidence of the Death Eater paraphernalia he had carried at the World Cup and at Hogwarts. He moved on calling the aurors who had arrested Travers at the World Cup and a shaky looking Colin
Summers gave evidence of the switch he had been forced to make. Bootle was able to show that Travers had had no knowledge of the escape attempt until it was in progress and had Summers admitting that Travers had potentially had as much choice as Summers in the matter.

Severus frowned as the evidence of the sabotage at the tournament was presented. It was the weakest part of the case and Bootle was able to present reasonable doubt that Travers had played any part, placing the blame wholly on Crouch.

"The prosecution calls Severus Snape!" Scrimgeour's gruff voice called out suddenly.

Severus gathered his robe and stood up. He made his way down to the witness chair slowly. He took the oath to speak truthfully and sat down with relief.

"The Wizengamot ruled in November nineteen-eighty-one that even though you bear the mark of a Death Eater that you were a spy for Albus Dumbledore and provided him with vital information which he passed onto the relevant authorities." Scrimgeour began. "When did you resume your spying duties?"

Severus waited until the rush of whispering died away.

"Following the events of the first task of the tournament." Severus stated clearly. "It was clear that the perpetrators were using the Durmstrang ship as their base with Igor Karkaroff's compliance, although there was not enough evidence at that time to search the ship. Lord Black requested that I approach Karkaroff to infiltrate into Riddle's circle once again and upon my acquiescence the Minister and Director Bones officially noted my status."

"What did you personally observe regarding the accused?" Scrimgeour asked.

"My main point of contact was Bartemius Crouch Junior." Severus explained. "He informed me that Travers had been the one to kill Karkaroff."

"The prosecution draws the Wizengamot's attention to the wand examination previously entered into evidence which shows the wand of Dennis Travers was used to kill Igor Karkaroff."

"Additionally," Severus continued once Scrimgeour turned back to him, "Riddle informed me that he had sent Travers abroad to purchase mercenaries and gather allies for when Riddle was resurrected."

Scrimgeour nodded. "The prosecution enters into evidence the summary veritaserum testimony of the mercenaries tried who stated or identified Dennis Travers as their recruiter." He motioned for Severus to continue as Wood passed the parchments to Dullard.

"Finally, I witnessed Dennis Travers at the gathering prior to the assault on Hogwarts at the headquarters of the Dark Lord." Severus finished.

"The prosecution enters into evidence magical forensic analysis of Riddle Manor which confirms Dennis Travers was present at the location." Scrimgeour gave a satisfied nod. "Thank you, Mister Snape."

Bootle rose to his feet and walked over to the witness box. "It is true, is it not, that the trial in 'eighty-one expunged all crimes you committed during the time you were an actual Death Eater and not just a spy?"

Severus barely managed not to grimace. "Yes." He said tersely.

"On the say-so of Albus Dumbledore." Bootle lifted his gaze to the section of the Wizengamot most
opposed to the late wizard.

Severus glared at Bootle.

"Does the defence have a question or do you just want the opportunity to preen in front of an audience, Bootle?" Griselda asked bluntly.

Bootle jerked as though slapped but he quickly regrouped. "You never gave a full accounting to the court of your crimes in 'eighty-one, did you?"

"I did not." Severus said not denying it.

"Hmmm, and yet we're simply to believe your actions were on the side of the Light on the say-so of Albus Dumbledore." Bootle said crisply. "Tell me, Mister Snape, how was informing your Dark Lord of the prophecy and placing your childhood enemy James Potter and his family at risk an action for the Light?"

A horrified murmur ran around the chamber and Severus dared not look toward the Potter seat. He knew Black hadn't ever told Potter…he couldn't bear to look and see the horror and anger in those green eyes that were so like Lily's…

It was for the best, Severus determined; hadn't he already determined his future lay beyond Britain?

Scrimgeour got to his feet and was recognised by Griselda. "Objection. Whatever crimes Mister Snape committed were covered by his previous trial. We have plenty in this chamber who are in the same boat."

"And crimes committed now?" Bootle strode back to his desk and plucked a parchment from the table. "According to this, Mister Snape actively led Lord Black into an ambush at Yule where Lord Black suffered grievous injuries. He created the potion which resurrected Riddle and he performed the ritual which resurrected him, assaulting Lord Potter in the process!" He handed the document to Dullard. "Surely he should be brought to account for these!"

Bones got to her feet. "Both myself and the Minister provided a blanket permission for Mister Snape in his role as a spy. These acts were known by both us, Director Croaker and Lord Black and were part of the wider strategy to defeat Riddle."

Griselda nodded briskly. "Mister Snape is not on trial. Move on, Bootle."

Bootle looked as though he'd swallowed a lemon his expression was so sour but he returned to Severus. "Did you ever see the accused at Hogwarts or on the Durmstrang ship?"

"I did not." Severus said.

"Did you ever see the accused solicit mercenaries to be in the employ of Riddle?" Bootle continued.

"I did not." Severus admitted.

"Were any of the Death Eaters wearing masks when you entered the room in the manor?" Bootle asked bluntly.

Severus sighed and nodded before verbally responding with a terse yes.

"Yet you claim you saw the accused?" Bootle smiled like a shark scenting blood in the water.

"I recognised him even with the mask." Severus said tersely.
Bootle lifted an eyebrow. "The defence has no more questions of this...witness."

Severus was released and he slowly made his way up to the bench. He wasn't surprised at the looks of disgust aimed his way and he sat down next to Alastor and a surprisingly sympathetic looking Minerva with a heavy heart.

"I knew, lad." Alastor whispered under his breath.

"So did I." Minerva confirmed.

Their support shook Severus and he clamped down tightly on his emotions. He was barely aware as the trial concluded, as Travers was found guilty of the World Cup events, cleared of the tournament sabotage, and found guilty of attacking Hogwarts and Alastor. Travers was sentenced after a short swift debate to life imprisonment.

A recess was called and Severus allowed Alastor to hustle him into a small office.

"Stay here," Alastor ordered, "I'll send someone with a drink and something to eat for you."

Severus nodded uncaringly. He turned his attention to the small bookcase on the far side of the office and began to peruse its contents, desperately trying to keep his thoughts away from the events and disclosures of the trial.

He didn't turn at the sound of the door opening. "You may leave the refreshments on the desk." He ordered.

"Sorry," Potter's voice had Severus freezing into stillness, "no refreshments."

Severus turned slowly to face him. "I suppose not." His fingers twitched to draw his wand to protect himself but didn't he deserve this? To stand and allow Potter his revenge? "Does Black know you're here?"

Potter gave a small smile. "He knows. He's not happy about it but he knows." He paced a couple of steps before he stopped and once again met Severus's gaze. "He asked me, you know, back in the Summer, whether I wanted to know. I said no back then but I..." he sighed and pushed his hands deep in his pockets. "I figured it was either you or Lucius based on what was said. I figured it was easier not knowing which of you because I...I didn't want to know for certain and have to still be civil to you."

"And now?" Severus bit out.

"Why?" asked Potter bluntly with characteristic Gryffindor bravery. "Why did you tell Riddle the prophecy?"

"Because I was his at the time." Severus replied without any hesitation. "Because I was young and stupid and I wanted his attention and regard and this was...information; a way in." He saw how his words impacted Potter like sharp splinters of shrapnel. "It didn't matter who it was about or whether he would believe it, it was just words that might have won me some favour."

"And did it?" Potter shot back.

"Yes." Severus didn't deny it. "More so when he realised who the prophecy could be about." He grimaced. "He was aware of my former attachment to your mother." He raised his eyes to meet Potter's furious eyes, determined to be brave himself. "I regretted my action in telling him the instant she became a target. By the time I followed Riddle's directive to throw myself on the Headmaster's
mercy under the pretence of being horrified at placing your mother in danger in order to become his spy at Hogwarts, it wasn't an act."

Not all of it.

"When he killed her…I would have stepped between them if I could have." Severus said.

"Aunt Minnie said you'd resigned." Potter's change of subject might have thrown most people but Severus knew what was at the heart of it.

"Yes." Severus agreed. "I only accepted the position to stay safe in the aftermath of the war and to be in place for your arrival. You've defeated Riddle; you don't need my protection as flimsy as it was and my oath died with the Headmaster."

There was silence for a long moment.

"I can't forgive you for painting a target on us." Potter said eventually. "Whether you would have protected her…your motivations for protecting me…none of it matters. But…you don't need my forgiveness and I doubt you want it, and really, you'll have to face my mother one day and make your excuses and apologies to her."

It was Severus's turn to feel shredded by shrapnel; to be left feeling raw and exposed, vulnerable.

"I…I appreciate everything you did to help defeat him." Potter continued. "You've spent a lot of time saving me over the past few years and during the ritual…I'll always be grateful to you for that; I made it through knowing you were there to help me so..." he dragged a hand through his messy hair. "But I don't…I can't be around you and since you won't be at Hogwarts...let's call it even and go our separate ways."

Severus breathed out slowly and gave a short nod. "I am planning to go abroad."

Potter frowned. "I thought you had a job offer from Bertie?"

"In the circumstances..." Severus began.

"You're going to turn it down because of this? Just...take the job." Potter said sharply. "You could do a lot of good with it. I doubt my mother would want you wasting your life." He grimaced. "Not that...it's not any of my business really."

"No," Severus agreed, "it's not."

Potter's eyes gleamed with something hot and angry for a moment. "Have a good life, Snape." He turned and made for the door.

"Potter." Severus stopped him before he stormed out. "I am deeply and sincerely sorry my actions led to the death of your mother," he paused, "and your father."

Potter turned and nodded, accepting the apology. He swept out without another word.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and finally acknowledged the stabbing pain above his left eye.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter." Severus said briskly.
A timid looking witch opened the door with a tray of food balanced precariously in her other hand. She placed it on the desk and left him alone.

Alone.

Like always since he'd lost Lily's friendship and…

The door reopened and Alastor marched in, Croaker following him.

"Ah, good." Croaker smiled at him. "I was hoping we could speak about the job offer?"

Severus nodded understandingly. "You wish to rescind it after the revelations this morning."

"What? No," Croaker shook his head, the wild white strands bobbing frantically, "you're not the only spy I've dealt with and I dare say you won't be the last. I was hoping we could agree your start date." He gestured at the tray of food. "Why don't you eat while we talk? I wanted to bring you up to speed with some of our projects that I'm hoping to get you involved with."

A stunned Severus allowed himself to be chivvied into a seat and Alastor shoved the soup at him along with a headache potion.

"Eat up, lad." Alastor said gruffly. "Merlin knows your headache won't get better listening to Bertie."

Croaker slapped Alastor's arm. "Don't scare him away, Alastor! And besides…"

Severus tuned out their snarking as he turned his attention to his meal. Perhaps, he considered somewhat shakily, he wasn't as alone as he thought.

O-O-O

Sirius felt Harry start to tense and he eased away from the hug he'd pulled his son into as soon as Harry had entered Amelia's office.

"Alright?" Sirius asked, resisting the temptation to smooth back Harry's hair.

Harry nodded.

"I'm…"

"Don't apologise." Harry interrupted him sharply. "You asked me in the Summer and I said I didn't want to know. Bootle's a prick for announcing it like that in the trial."

"Well, that's true enough." Sirius said.

"He was always an odious little boy." Minerva agreed.

"How…" Remus let his voice fall away as though suddenly realising Harry might not want to answer the question.

"Snape's fine." Harry shrugged. "Shaken up, maybe? Moody was on his way in so…"

So at least Severus wasn't alone. Not that Sirius cared. Much.

He sighed. He and Severus had evolved a mutual grudging respect during the run-up to defeating Voldemort and, while Sirius would never forgive him for what he had done in the past, it didn't mean
he was dancing with joy over the man's most dirty and painful laundry being aired for the world to see.

Bootle was a prick.

Harry had been stoic during the trial; pale after the revelation but stoic. It hadn't been until they'd gotten clear of the chamber that he'd insisted on seeing Severus. Still, the meeting seemed to have given Harry some peace and that was all that was important to Sirius.

Especially since the afternoon trial would focus on Peter.

Sirius felt Harry lean into him a touch and he glanced over at his son.

"We can get through this." Harry said quietly.

Sirius nodded. They would get through it. They were together; they could get through anything.

Peter tried hard not to look at anyone as he was led into the Wizengamot chamber. He kept his head down and stared at his feet. The urge to transform into his rat form was high but even if the charmed necklace he wore prevented it, he couldn't do it. Losing his hand had interfered with his animagus ability. The loss was a physical ache worse than his arm.

He allowed himself to be shuffled into the accused chair. It was then he glanced up at the chamber and saw Harry.

Harry, who had defeated the Dark Lord.

Peter swallowed hard and forced himself to pay attention.

"…with conspiracy to commit the murders of James and Lily Potter; with conspiracy to commit infanticide…"

Peter ducked his head. He stopped listening. He didn't want to hear the litany of the charges they were reciting. He knew them all. His solicitor Giles Dotts had gone through them with him the day before. It had been a depressing hour.

"How does the accused plead?"

Dotts rose from the defence table. "Guilty to all charges."

A rush of noise erupted from the public tier. The Chief Witch raised her wand and set off a small bang to bring order to the chamber. "Enough."

She looked at Peter with sharply assessing eyes. "You do understand, Mister Pettigrew, the consequences of pleading guilty?"

"I…I…I do." Peter stuttered out.

The witch looked from him to his solicitor.

"I have been through the possible sentences he may incur, Chief Witch, and he understands that he may be sentenced for the remainder of his life to Azkaban or face execution." Dotts said solemnly.

"Do you agree, Mister Pettigrew, that you fully understand the sentences that may be brought to bear
once the chamber recognises your plea and ratifies that any further examination of the evidence is not required?” She pressed.

Peter nodded hurriedly. "I am guilty."

But deep down, he also believed that he had done enough to mitigate a death sentence. With the Dementors removed from Azkaban, he could live with a cell, a bed and a hot meal every day. It was more than he'd had once he'd gone in search of his master.

"I…I have a statement…” Peter began.

The witch held up her hand in a silent request for him to wait. "Head Auror, are you satisfied with the plea?"

Scrimgeour glared at Peter in a way that made Peter want to shrink back from him.

"I believe the evidence would speak for itself in this case.” Scrimgeour said gruffly. "However, I also believe that his plea would save the Wizengamot valuable time and reduce the stress on potential witnesses. I am satisfied."

"Director Bones?" The witch turned to the Head of the DMLE. "Are you satisfied?"

Bones rose from her chair to respond. "I would support a motion to recognise and move to sentencing, Lady Marchbanks."

"Then that's what we'll do." Marchbanks said crisply. "All in favour, raise your wands."

Dullard, the clerk, rose soon after. "The vote is unanimous. The Wizengamot recognises the defendant has pled guilty and will move to sentencing."

"Head Auror," Marchbanks said turning back to Scrimgeour, "what is the recommendation of the prosecution?"

Scrimgeour got to his feet and tapped his finger against a piece of parchment. "The prosecution recommends execution for his crimes."

Peter felt his heart start to race; his mouth went dry. That wasn't supposed to happen! He didn't deserve death! He'd helped them!

"This is a wizard who betrayed his friends in the worst possible way. He conspired for months against them, providing information to the enemy. He was entrusted with a secret which he promptly gave to the enemy. He conspired to ensure their deaths and the death of their child. In the aftermath, he conspired to frame another friend for their murder and, while others also bear responsibility for the injustice, it led to an innocent man being imprisoned for over a decade." Scrimgeour recited.

"This is a man who hid himself as a rat for years until confronted by those he had betrayed. He ran again, this time to his master who he helped kill and torture an innocent child in the act of creating an homunculus. He helped Riddle and his cohorts kill Bertha Jorkins, Bartemius Crouch Senior, Janice Mickle, and countless others. He conspired to resurrect Riddle; to sabotage the TriWizard tournament, to kidnap Lord Potter and use him within a ritual; to kill Lord Potter and attack Hogwarts."

Scrimgeour glared at Peter again.

"This is the truth of the man; a cowardly rat who would stab his friends in the back and cut their
throats in their sleep if it served him, yet turn around and try to wheedle his way into their good graces if he thought it would serve his best interests. He has no moral compass, no redeeming traits. He should face the harshest sentence we can bring to bear."

Peter watched as Scrimgeour took his seat. He glanced up towards Harry. Harry's gaze seem directed above Peter's head and Peter realised that Harry was looking at Sirius. Peter didn't dare look towards Padfoot.

"Mister Pettigrew," Marchbanks called for his attention, "you said you had a statement? Now would be the time to read it."

Peter nodded hurriedly and gestured at his solicitor who passed him the parchment. He smoothed it out and cleared his throat.

"I…" Peter lowered the parchment, turning it over to hide the words. It was too trite; too rote. He cleared his throat a second time. "When I was eleven I sat on a stool and placed the Sorting Hat on my head to determine my house at Hogwarts. I thought I'd end up in Slytherin or Hufflepuff. My father's family had been the ones to secure my place there and they had been Hufflepuffs. But my mother was an ambitious woman who married well and who raised me to believe survival in life was paramount."

He didn't look up at the faces. He kept his eyes on his hands, still cuffed and clasped in front of him, resting on the discarded parchment.

"It was a shock to be sorted into Gryffindor. I didn't think I was particularly brave or courageous in nature." Peter continued. "The Hat told me I would find my courage there." He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. "And I did. I found my courage in the friendship with three other wonderful boys. Together we seemed invincible." He paused, lifting his eyes for the first time but staring sightlessly into the past, oblivious to the people around him. "Then we left school and we went our separate ways. Well, Moony and I…we went into different things. I ended up at the Ministry."

In hindsight, he wished he'd taken on McGonagall's remonstrations to smarten up his academics; he might have made it into the Hit Wizard programme if he had.

"My first supervisor was Dennis Travers Senior. He was a Death Eater and he…he intimidated me into joining." Peter babbled out. "I should have told someone when he approached me but I was scared and alone and…it was easier to go along with him, easier to say yes to the Dark Lord than say no and be killed or tortured! I was a coward but then I didn't think of it as betraying them. As a spy I helped save my friends and kept them out of the line of fire."

There was a murmur, a rush of whispering that pulled Peter from the past. He shook himself a touch.

"Then came the prophecy and the secret and…I was weak." Peter admitted. "I should have refused to tell the Dark Lord where James and Lily were; I should have stood up for my friends as they would have stood for me. Or as Sirius said to me when we faced each other last year, I should have died for them as they would have died for me." He paused, the silence of the room loud in his ears; condemning. "But I…I just wanted to survive; just survive. And so I led the Dark Lord to James and Lily, and when Harry hurt him, I framed Sirius to prevent him from arresting me. I hid away and when I was finally found out, I ran back to the Dark Lord and I helped resurrect him; helped commit crimes to help him. Because I wanted to survive. It's pathetic and cowardly and yet, it's all the excuse I have."

He gave a sad short laugh. "The only time I found my courage again was standing beside Moony in the corridor at Hogwarts facing down the mercenaries and vampires as though they were a group of
Slytherins and we were once again school-children. Because that's where my courage always was; right beside them and I forgot that."

Peter paused for a breath. "I think I helped save Moony. I think I helped there at the end. Maybe… one last act isn't enough to make up for everything else. All I know is that I don't want to die."

His fingers tightened on the parchment and crumpled it.

"That's…that's all I have."

There was complete silence.

"Does anyone wish to debate?" Marchbanks asked, her question dropping like a stone into the tension.

Ogden raised his wand. "This is difficult." He said. "We all know that Pettigrew's crimes are far-reaching and wide in their impact and their atrocity, yet…” he sighed heavily and looked over at Sirius. "I don't believe I'm the only one, Lord Black, who feels that the only people in this room who should have the right to determine Pettigrew's fate are you, your son and your steward. You and Lord Potter's parents were his friends and he betrayed you. There is no sharper knife in your back; no deadlier poison to counter than that of an enemy who wears the face of a friend and who lies unknown at the heart of your family. I feel utterly unqualified to make any kind of judgement without knowing for certain which action would bring you the most sense of justice." He held up a hand. "I know that it's unfair of me to ask but I…I will ask anyway and hope you forgive me."

Augusta Longbottom raised her wand. "I too regret placing this burden on Lord Black, but I feel the same."

A third wand went up.

Marchbanks raised her hand and turned to Sirius. "Lord Black? It is not unusual in these cases for the Wizengamot to request the opinion of those most affected by the crimes of the perpetrator."

Sirius's gaze went first across the chamber and Peter ducked his head to hide from the intense look his old friend exchanged with Harry.

There was a rustle of fabric and Peter looked up again in time to see Sirius rise from his chair.

"I appreciate the sensitivity here and the opportunity to speak." Sirius began. "As much as we don't like to say the words," he glanced back to Harry, "we are victims of Pettigrew's crimes; his decisions and actions. He betrayed us and took away the people we loved the most. He ran from facing the consequences of his actions and I ended up in Azkaban, and when he ran a second time, he ran straight to his master and set in motion a chain of events where more and more people were killed or hurt. But this is about more than myself and Harry; more than myself and Remus Lupin. Were Pettigrew's acts against us the worst crimes? I'm not sure the parents of the child he kidnapped for Riddle to live in would say that." He shook his head. "Are any of us truly qualified to render judgement on such a heinous act?"

A wand was raised and Marchbanks recognised the wizard who stood as Sirius sat.

"Lord Black raises a good point." Selwyn pinned Peter with a contemptuous look. "The actions of Peter Pettigrew are wider than himself and Lord Potter. He had a devastating impact on the wizarding world in the actions he took. We should not shirk our duty to sit in judgement upon him. But one could argue that we are all too affected by Pettigrew's actions to be objective. There is practically no-one in the wizarding world who isn't." He gestured towards the Chief Witch, "With
that said, I do not believe we are the right body to sit in judgement, and if I may I have a suggestion for a third option to those of execution and life imprisonment?"

Marchbanks lifted an eyebrow but nodded.

"Pettigrew broke oath." Selwyn said bluntly. "I suggest we vote for the family magic of us sitting in this body to sit in judgement upon Pettigrew. Let Magic itself render Judgement." He sat down.

There was a stirring of whispers and Peter's heart sank. He squirmed in his chair, uneasy and uncertain of which way he wanted the vote to go.

Marchbanks stood up, capturing everyone's attention. "This is a difficult. You have all spoken with sincerity and honesty. I personally feel Lord Selwyn's suggestion has merit. I can call Judgement if this is what is required. I call for a vote; those who wish to enact Lord Selwyn's motion raise your wands."

The wands went up.

Peter's heart beat wildly in his chest.

Dullard counted the wands and turned to the Chief Witch. "The motion is carried. Judgement will be rendered."

A babble of noise broke out and Peter lowered his gaze, sick to his stomach with fear. The Lestranges had lost their lives; was that to be his fate?

Marchbanks hushed the crowd and turned to him. "Peter Pettigrew, you have pled guilty to your many crimes. We ask Magic to call Judgement upon you so you may face justice. Familius magicus animus!"

The Marchbanks' avatar, a gold hare, shimmered into view; sparkling with gold. It stood on its hind legs sniffed the air and jumped – changing into a stream of gold magic which rushed upwards and out toward Harry.

Peter wondered at it for a long moment but he registered Sirius's hurried stand even as Harry rose to greet the Hare as it reformed and bowed to the griffin sitting at Harry's feet.

The gold griffin shifted and there was an audible gasp as the griffin disappeared and the form of a man took its place; James.

The gold spirit of James Potter reached out and cupped his son's cheek. "We're so proud of you, Harry." He glanced at the silver Black snake and at the hare. "Guard my son."

The avatars bowed to James.

The spirit turned to the Wizengamot, his eyes only seeking one wizard. "Padfoot."

Peter reluctantly dragged his attention away from James to look back at Sirius. He was pale – his features etched with grief and loss.

"Prongs." Sirius murmured, the rough word echoing across the chamber.

James looked over then to where Moony sat in the family tier; amber eyes bright. "Moony." He gestured with his head. "Join me and Pads on the floor." And a moment later he transformed into a stream of gold magic and rushed down to the centre.
Peter pressed back into his chair as the magic gathered in front of him – a whirlwind of gold. It settled back into James's familiar form. "Prongs..."

"You don't get to call me that, Wormtail." James replied immediately as he turned impatiently to see where Padfoot and Moony were at.

The other two Marauders finally reached them.

James reached out to Moony first, a hand clasped onto his friend's shoulder. "You always did get the difficult jobs and I've left you the most difficult of all; keeping Pads out of trouble."

Moony laughed and reached up to pat James's shoulder. "I miss you, Prongs." He shook his head. "And you'd be just as bad if you were here. You always got each other in trouble after all."

James smiled; the same wonderfully warm smile he'd used to give Peter. "Look after them, Moony."

Moony nodded.

James turned to Sirius next and the pain on both their faces was heart-wrenching. Peter could barely look as James reached out and enfolded Sirius into a hug; as Sirius melted into the ethereal embrace.

"My brother." James murmured lowly, but it wasn't low enough and Peter saw its impact as it travelled to the rest of the chamber in the bright eyes and quiet sniffs.

It was a long moment before they stepped away from each other, exchanging a silent look of communication which Peter remembered all too well from school and which never boded well for the target of their ire. They looked over in unison to Remus and something was determined; an action, a decision – Peter's fate.

The three Marauders turned to face him and the years, where they were, why they were there bled away until all that remained in Peter's eyes were his three friends, accusatory looks levelled at him; no, levelled at *Wormtail*.

"Wormtail." Prongs began. "As a wizard and a Marauder, you are hereby Judged as Oathbreaker and given to the Marauders for justice." He lifted his hand and inside of it was a gold rat. "Your animagus ability. The act that bound us together as brothers."

"I thought that was the pranks, Prongs." Padfoot said laconically beside him.

"I thought it was the bottles of whiskey." Moony countered.

Prongs shot them both a look.

Wormtail tried hard not to hyperventilate but he was barely breathing. He realised absently he couldn't feel the suppression necklace he had been wearing.

"Magic casts you out," Prongs intoned clearly, "but for this last act, one last prank from the Marauders."

Moony smiled wolfishly. "You hid as a rat and now you will live as a rat."

"Only as a rat." Padfoot stressed with a smirk. "No magic to change back into a wizard; just a rat for all the rest of your days."

"With the lifespan of a rat." Prongs agreed.
"What is that again, Moony?" Padfoot tilted his head.

"Two to three years." Moony responded cheerfully. "Unless a cat gets him or a snake."

Wormtail shuddered. "Please, please, please?" He begged. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry for everything but I was scared!" Tears escaped and ran down his face; snot gathered and dripped from his nose as he sobbed.

His three friends looked at him stonily unmoved.

"You were once a Marauder; a friend we trusted before all others with blood and spirit and magic." Prongs stated evenly. "You are a Marauder no more, Wormtail. All you are is a rat, Oathbreaker."

Wormtail felt the magic starting to crawl over his skin. "NO! NO! Moony! Please?! Didn't I help you?"

"You were once a Marauder and so for every time this past year you have helped us truly in the spirit of a Marauder with blood and spirit and magic, you'll live another year." Moony smiled, amber eyes glowing as he smiled wolfishly. "You are a Marauder no more, Wormtail. All you are is a rat, Oathbreaker."

Wormtail felt the magic press in on him, tingles on the ends of his fingers and in his scalp. He turned to Padfoot, helpless and already knowing he would find no mercy there.

"You were once a Marauder but you drove a dagger into the spirit and magic of us and left us only blood." Padfoot replied a harsh edge of anger colouring his voice. "You are a Marauder no more, Wormtail. All you are is a rat, Oathbreaker."

"Judgement is served." Prongs intoned gently. He smiled sadly at the others. "Mischief managed."

The form fell into a million gold sparkles and reformed as the Potter griffin.

And the pain hit Wormtail and the world disappeared…

Peter came to; he was panting, surrounded by material. He scrambled his way up into air, hurrying, hurrying…

An invisible force reached down and plucked him up, levitating him above his clothes and the chair where he'd been sat.

Scrimgeour's florid face appeared in front of him. "Don't worry, Rat. You'll have a nice cage waiting for you in Azkaban."

He shook in his rat form, terrified and vulnerable. He could feel the absence of his magic like a yawning chasm in the centre of his body. He couldn't change! He was trapped, trapped, trapped…

It was over.

He was a Marauder no more.

Chapter End Notes
TBC - More funerals and trials as the healing continues
Two more chapters to go - thank you for your continued support :)
"It was war when I met Albus for the first time." Moody stated briskly. He stood proudly behind the lectern in the Great Hall, his magical eye scanning the gathered assembly for the funeral of Albus Dumbledore.

Harry sneaked a glance himself. The funeral seemed to be taking forever. They'd already sat through a speech from Cornelius and one from an aged Chinese wizard who had spoken about Albus's contributions abroad.

There was no evidence of the battle that had waged within Hogwarts' walls, although the grounds and particularly the Quidditch pitch still bore scars. The castle had been repaired though; flagstones gleamed; the walls stood solid and unbroken; priceless tapestries and portraits restored or replaced.

The Great Hall itself looked magnificent. The illusionary sky above reflected the bright Summer's day outside. The banners of the Hogwarts' houses hung suspended by magic in the centre of the room. The windows gleamed, sunlight streaming in to catch the dust motes dancing in the rays.

The usual tables had been removed and a semi-circular seating area arranged facing where the Professors' table would usually be. Only the table was gone and Dumbledore's cherry wood coffin lay upon a covered stand.

Harry and Sirius sat in the centre of the circle in the chairs designated for family. As Dumbledore's magical heir Harry was given the status of an honorary grandson. Aberforth sat beside Sirius. Dumbledore's brother had eschewed any notion of swapping. Aberforth had claimed his brother would have wanted Harry and not himself taking pride of place. Harry had the unsettling feeling that Aberforth spoke truthfully. Harry leaned closer to Sirius taking comfort in the steady presence of his father.

Minerva sat on Harry's other side – her place designated by her role as the Potter Regent Apparent. It also seemed fitting given her years of friendship with the Headmaster.

The seats beyond her were taken up with political figures – Fudge, Croaker and Bones but also figures who had been part of Dumbledore's international stage – Prime Ministers and Ambassadors. Harry had dutifully greeted them all.

The staff of Hogwarts took the row behind the front; the members of the Wizengamot beyond them with their families. Harry felt a pang of unhappiness at being separated by protocol from everyone but Sirius and Minerva. He especially missed Hermione. His hand sneaked up to touch the necklace he wore and his unease dissipated under the flow of love he received.

He gave a quiet sigh but wasn't surprised when Sirius leaned his shoulder against Harry's providing a silent show of loving support.
"Great wizards do great things." Moody continued his eulogy. "I saw Albus take down an entire platoon of magical beasts; I saw him liberate a Polish town from dark forces alone but for a few men who stood with him. I saw him stand tall against the darkest wizard of that time and defeat him with the Light. I saw how much it hurt him to do that; to face his former childhood love and know him as a monster."

Aberforth huffed but he didn't say anything.

"In the years of peace which followed, Albus did his best to never take advantage of the political power he wielded as the victor. He accepted his political positions unwillingly but dutifully. He believed his role there was to keep stability; to maintain a status quo between those who would seek to drive us forward and those who wanted to remain standing in the past. He would say he wanted nothing more than to be a schoolteacher, to impart his knowledge to the next generation; a role he played for many years here at Hogwarts." Moody looked around the room as he paused.

Harry wondered how true that was; had Dumbledore really only wanted to be a teacher?

As though he had heard his thoughts, Moody sighed.

"Great wizards do great things but their mistakes are also greater, and Albus's greatest mistake was to ignore the problem of Tom Marvolo Riddle. Whether Riddle was ever redeemable, ever able to be saved from the darkness within him, we shall never know. But Albus saw the danger of the young powerful Riddle and did nothing."

There was a hushed silence in the room as they all absorbed Moody's blunt observation.

"He neither took the lad under his wing one powerful wizard to another nor did he challenge him." Moody continued. "Was it his place? As a mere schoolteacher perhaps Albus could be forgiven for his lack of action – even though the teachers who excel are those who care for more than simply whether their students' essays and work meet the standards. But even if Albus wanted to be only a schoolteacher he was not. He was a powerful political figure; he was a powerful wizard. He had styled himself as the benevolent wise leader of the Light. Perhaps he had a greater duty."

He stopped as some of the audience shifted uncomfortable with the notion of criticising the dead.

"Or perhaps it was simply Fate. Because how he also acted in regards to the architect of Riddle's downfall was to be another of Albus's mistakes. He mishandled a prophecy and the child of that prophecy. He made decisions which were not his to make; he ignored his duty of care to the child and the child's rightful guardian."

Harry looked down unable to bear Moody's words.

"So his mistakes were as great as his triumphs but in the end this is what I will remember of Albus Dumbledore," Moody's gruff voice echoed roughly in the chamber, thick with grief, "he held the line; he put himself between a horde of dark creatures and this castle to defend his school and her legacy: he held the line. And in the end, he offered his own life for those he had wronged. In this I believe he was redeemed."

Minerva gave a quiet sob beside him and Harry reached over to take her hand, wrapping it in his. She squeezed back gratefully.

"He was never just a schoolteacher." Moody stared out at the assembly. "When we remember Albus Dumbledore we will remember his mistakes and his triumphs, and know he was also a great wizard."

There was a respectful silence as Moody made his way from the lectern to his chair.
Griselda got to her feet. "Those invited to the internment at the lake should follow me. All others should remain in the hall where the elves will see to your comfort." She flicked her wand and the coffin disappeared.

Harry got to his feet and allowed Sirius to chivvy him across the hall, following Griselda through the doors to the back, down the corridor and out of the doors that had welcomed him as a first year. They strolled down the path to the lake, a small troupe of people who Minerva had determined.

Of the official Wizengamot and Ministry party, only Griselda, the Minister, Amelia and Bertie were invited. The Hogwarts' staff were all present, Hagrid blowing noisily into an oversized handkerchief. There were a handful of people from the Order – Snape was included in that number as were the Weasleys. The remainder of the House of Black were at the rear; they were considered family because of their familial relationship with Harry, Dumbledore's heir. In his unwanted role, Harry walked behind Griselda in the procession flanked by Sirius and Aberforth. Minerva had fallen back to lead her staff.

They came to a halt in the small grove by the lake which Minerva had chosen. It was a patch of land which barely held their number comfortably. The Forbidden Forest was to their back; the lake to the front, the water lapping on the steep bank close by. The grave stood ready to receive the coffin, a mound of dirt beside it. A white slab of marble would be placed over it, with a golden plaque engraved simply with Dumbledore's name, and the years of his birth and death. Aberforth had refused any other memorial.

Griselda pointed her wand at the grave and Dumbledore's coffin appeared. She slowly lowered into the grave before turning and silently casting for the dirt to cover it.

"We say goodbye to Albus Dumbledore and return his body to the Earth." Griselda intoned solemnly as they watched the dirt slowly filling the grave. "Bon voyage on your next great adventure, Albus."

Harry was grateful for the heavy weight of Sirius's hand on his shoulder providing him with an anchor. He really was going to miss the old wizard and his throat closed up on a surge of emotion.

Griselda finally lifted the marble stone into place and as it settled into the ground, Harry felt his heart ache with renewed grief at the finality of it. Sirius shifted his hold, sliding his arm around Harry's shoulder and firmly tucking him against his side. Harry felt his eyes sting with the prickle of tears.

Griselda began to lead people away, and Harry was aware of the crowd of mourners slowly thinning. He stayed where he was; rooted to the spot as though his feet had been frozen. He felt Hermione approach on his free side and her hand sought his. He grasped it gratefully, dimly aware there were only a few of them left standing beside the grave.

Minerva stooped and cast a spell. The marble stone was suddenly surrounded by a pretty border of transfigured white roses. She sniffed loudly. "You were the one who taught me that spell, Albus. You were a good teacher." Her Scottish brogue was thick with emotion. "I will miss you."

Aberforth took a weary step forward. "You made things right in the end. Perhaps that's all that should matter. Goodbye, brother." He offered his arm to Minerva who took it and allowed him to escort her away.

Harry was left with Hermione on one side, Sirius on the other, and he sensed Remus just behind them. They stayed there, standing silently together.

Harry stared at the marble stone. He remembered the dream he'd had when he'd been recovering and somehow it eased his grief. Dumbledore was off on his next great adventure and he had sacrificed

...
his life to redeem himself. Harry was never going to regret that he and Sirius were alive instead of the elderly wizard; he was grateful to him.

Hermione gave a loud sniff beside him and he turned to find her with wet cheeks and damp eyes. He shifted to offer her a handkerchief. "Are you alright?"

"Just sad." Hermione said.

Sirius hummed beside them. "It's a sad day. I'm going to miss the old goat."

"Me too." Remus said, joining them.

"We should go back to the hall." Harry said sighing.

Sirius gave his shoulder a squeeze. They slowly turned away from the grave and made their way back up the path.

Hermione hooked her arm around Harry's as they walked. "Harry?"

"Hmmm." Harry said, his attention momentarily snagged by the still shambolic Quidditch pitch they were passing.

"Did you hear Professor McGonagall announce how the Headmaster's portrait had woken up?" Hermione said hesitantly. "She's put him in the antechamber at the back of the hall and said anyone who wanted to talk to him could visit him?"

"You want to visit his portrait?" Harry's heart sank because he suspected it was a situation where as her supportive boyfriend he would have to go along.

"No," Hermione shook her head, her bushy hair bouncing on her shoulders, "I thought you might want to go?"

Harry shook his head. "Not today." It was too soon. He didn't know how wizards handled it. How could you mourn someone properly when they were there in a portrait? He was suddenly glad his parents hadn't had a portrait made. He loved the still depictions that Padfoot had given him. They were enough of a memory. No, he couldn't contemplate ever being ready to speak to the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

Maybe in the future when he was Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Maybe.

He looked back at the Quidditch pitch. He still couldn't contemplate playing there ever again. He shivered.

"It's still a mess, isn't it?" Hermione murmured.

"Yeah," Harry sighed, "want to bet Ron's going to complain about the pitch again?"

Hermione snorted inelegantly. "No bet. Honestly, it's all he talks about!"

Sirius, Remus and Harry exchanged an amused look and for the first time that day, Harry's sorrow eased into something breathable, liveable.

Life went on even when great wizards died.
Bill quietly excused himself from the rambunctious company of his family and made his way out of the suite of rooms they had been provided with at the Black Estate. He had been fairly surprised his mother had acquiesced to staying with the rest of the alliance but he understood that the ritual had left its mark on her magic.

From the research Bill had begun, Morgana had used the protectiveness, feelings and motivations of all of the women in the ritual to weave a path back to Harry for her own blessing. That magical tapestry was a careful balance of not only Molly Weasley's maternal lioness but also of Griselda's political rationality and Augusta's belief in her vows of fealty. It was a brilliantly woven tapestry and Bill reckoned it was a thread that would bind the women together for as long as the blessing remained. He looked forward to seeing the changes it would evoke.

He made his way out of the wing where the alliance had been housed and into the main part of the house. He was tempted to head to the drawing room. It was one of Harry's favourite places to be and Bill had spent many of the evenings since Harry and Sirius had returned from the States just sitting quietly with Harry and Hermione.

He needed a quiet evening after the events of the day and Dumbledore's funeral. It had been long and draining. The political speeches had seemed to take forever. Thankfully Moody's speech had been short yet it had almost been the most poignant. It had reminded Bill that the venerable wizard had made his own sacrifice to save Sirius and Harry.

It had made the rest of the day almost unbearable.

The hurt of Caro's sacrifice still stung like a fresh burn; hot and unbelievably painful. He grieved for the beautiful woman who had been his partner; his friend. He couldn't begin to fathom how he would live up to the words she had whispered at the end.

"Worth it."

Was he worth it?

Bill hovered in front of the drawing room door. He wanted to go inside, curl up in the same chair he'd curled up in for so many nights and just grieve but life went on.

He lay a hand on the door. Besides, didn't Harry deserve an evening undisturbed with his girlfriend?

Bill turned and walked away from the drawing room and it wasn't long until he realised that his feet were taking him in the direction of Sirius's study.

The door was partially open but Bill knocked on it anyway.

Sirius turned from his contemplation of the portrait hung above the mantel and waved him inside.

Bill closed the door behind him. "Hey, I know this isn't a great day for this but do you have some time?"

Sirius gestured at the chair in front of his desk. "I always have time for you, Bill. What's this about?"

"My service." Bill said simply. He leaned forward in the chair, elbows on his knees, his hands clasped loosely together. "The Wizengamot meets for its usual session in the first week of August. It would be…" he sighed heavily, "it would be an appropriate time to announce the end of service."
"Yes." Sirius agreed, sitting down in the chair behind the desk. "It would." He gazed at Bill thoughtfully. "You've been an asset to the House of Potter, Bill. You'll be missed."

"I'll miss working for you and Harry." Bill said with a sad smile. The past year had been the best of his life and the hardest. "It's been an honour to serve."

"Have you thought about your future?" asked Sirius.

Bill nodded slowly. "I went to Gringotts last week. They have a new assignment starting shortly in Paris. The request from Bertie for the Lumiere document made the French government realise how badly disorganised the archives are and how dangerous. They've requested a team of curse-breakers to go in and get everything sorted out." He paused. "They offered me the chance to lead the team."

"That's great news." Sirius said, breaking into a genuinely pleased smile. "You deserve the opportunity."

"Do I?" asked Bill before he could stop himself. He flushed bright red as Sirius's gaze narrowed on him.

Sirius pressed his lips together briefly. He got to his feet and walked over to a side cabinet where a decanter and glasses stood proudly displayed. He poured them both a drink and walked back over handing Bill one glass. He took the seat next to Bill and offered his glass in a salute.

"To Caro." Sirius said seriously.

Bill's eyes filled with tears he refused to shed. He lifted his glass. "To Caro." He took a sip of the fiery liquid and was almost surprised when he realised it was ordinary Scotch rather than firewhiskey.

"It's a difficult thing when someone gives their life for yours." Sirius said. "It's hard to reconcile knowing that they put your life ahead of their own; that they felt you were worth the sacrifice."

Bill nodded. "I just…I don't…I don't know how to live with it."

"It's not an easy gift to carry."

"You seem to have…accepted Professor Dumbledore's gift." Bill said, striving to keep his voice even and non-accusatory.

Sirius sighed and gave a half-shrug. "Albus wasn't my first experience with someone giving their life to save mine." He paused and shook his head. "And even then, there's a part of me that believes Albus did nothing more than what he owed us, and a part of me who knows that anyone sacrificing their lives for Harry is the right thing to do so why would I rail against it?" He lifted the glass. "It's more complicated than simply someone stepping in front of you in the heat of battle."

Bill flinched at the blunt description of what had happened when Caro had…

Sirius settled back in the chair and took a sip of his drink. "At the beginning of 'eighty-one I was put in charge of a squad of hit wizards; a team of three of us. It was part of a new initiative Moody had suggested; small strike teams. It worked."

His gaze drifted to the fire and Bill realised Sirius was in the past.

"My team – we were close. Ernest Marchbanks and Howard Brady." Sirius smiled sadly. "Two very great blokes. Ernie was engaged to be married to Janet McKinnon; Howie had just graduated school
and was fresh out of the boot camp."

"What happened?" prompted Bill gently when Sirius fell silent.

Sirius took another sip of the whiskey. "We had an op go very wrong. It was faulty intelligence but…I was leading the team. We hit a warehouse on the Thames where we believed the Death Eaters were bringing in female muggles from the Continent for sport and torture. It was a set-up."

Bill frowned as he watched Sirius pale as he tossed back the rest of the whiskey. He wanted to tell the other man not to put himself through the reliving of it – not to ease Bill. He opened his mouth to speak…

"Ernie went down straight away to a killing curse. There was nothing any of us could have done." Sirius said tersely. "Howie and I dived for cover and I managed to scramble a plan together. We separated and…and it worked. We managed to get the bastards but…right at the end…Howie had only stunned one of the fuckers and he sprung up…Howie threw himself in front of me before I had a chance to move. He bled out in minutes."

"You got the guy."

Sirius nodded. "Constantine Fecale. He was a nasty piece of work." He refocused on Bill. "I was a mess afterwards. I holed up, drank myself silly on whiskey and wondered why the hell Howie had sacrificed himself for me. It didn't feel like a fair exchange at all. He was young, smart. His parents were great, happily married childhood sweethearts, and he would have gone on to make someone a lovely husband and a great father. He was a real stand-up guy." He gestured. "And there was me; the white sheep of the Black family, someone whose family didn't want him and who wasn't innocent or unflawed. I hated myself for surviving, and I almost hated Howie for saving me."

"How did you…"

"James." Sirius said succinctly. "He…he turned up – him and Lily and Harry. I don't even know how he knew but James turned up and kidnapped me. He and Lily took care of me – forced me into a bath and clean clothing; wrapped me up in a blanket in front of the fire and dumped Harry in my lap. They told me how much they loved me and how grateful they were to Howie for saving my life…and I spent a night sobbing on their shoulders. A few days later, James went with me to the funeral. When it was over he said…he said Howie had given me this wondrous gift of life and I had a duty to take care of that gift; to live my life fully so his sacrifice was never wasted." He stopped and frowned. "I'd forgotten that."

Bill swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump of emotion that had settled there. "I loved her, you know? And I think I might…it would have been easy to have fallen in love with her. We'd talked about being partners in the future after my contract with Gringotts was up. She…she had my back all the time. I'm going to miss her so very…" and his voice broke. He lifted his arms to cover his face as he sobbed.

Sirius gently took the glass from his hand and set it aside before tugging Bill into a firm embrace.

Bill couldn't find it in himself to be embarrassed as he wept. He only knew he was grateful that Sirius understood and that there was the comfort of shelter as he gave into the storm of grief.

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The fire had burned low by the time Sirius eased back and turned away to call for Dobby and mugs of hot chocolate. He added the remainder of Bill's whiskey to the mug he handed to him but kept his
own alcohol free. He sat back down in the chair next to Bill.

He had felt the phantom ache of his own grief as Bill had given into his. But he knew Bill was strong and would weather his pain. Losing Caro would always be something Bill lived with but Bill would live.

Bill gave a sigh as he sipped the hot chocolate. "Thank you." He said simply and Sirius knew he was being thanked for more than the drink.

Sirius nodded. "When do you start in Paris?"

"September, but Gringotts want me to start back once the announcement of my service completion is made. I have a month to spend learning French to the standard they expect the leader of the assignment to have so…" Bill shrugged. "I already speak it reasonably well and apparently there's a new French employee just starting whose sole assignment will be to teach me."

"You're more than welcome to use the Black apartment in Paris." Sirius offered. "It would be an excellent location for you."

"Thank you," Bill said with a smile, "I'd appreciate that." He made a nervous gesture before lowering his mug. "I'd like to return to service once my Gringotts' contract is over."

Sirius smiled warmly. "We would love to have you back. I assume you want to learn the ropes for assuming a political position of your own?"

"Yes." Bill nodded. "I want to work towards the House of Weasley resuming its place in the Wizengamot. It may take some time but I want to contribute to governing our country and ensuring its safety. My magic won't settle for anything less."

"Then we'll see what we can do to help you achieve that." Sirius said firmly.

Bill smiled back at him and for the first time since the Weasley Heir had walked into the study, Sirius could see the grief lift from him and his mind turn to the future. Bill was going to be fine, Sirius determined; maybe not that day or the day after, but there would be a day when his hurt wasn't as sharp and the memory of Caro made him happy rather than sad.

Bill pointed up at the sleeping portrait. "I don't think I've seen that before."

Sirius hummed. He hadn't seen it until his return from the States when he'd found it installed on the wall behind his desk as though it had always been there.

Bloody Moony.

"It's my Grandfather." Sirius said.

Bill's eyes widened in surprise.

"Remus thinks I should wake him up and talk with him." Sirius explained, trying and failing to keep the sulky edge from his voice.

"What do you think?" asked Bill.

Sirius sighed heavily. "I think my relationship with my Grandfather is complicated and…well, complicated." He shook his head. "I'm not sure I'll ever be ready."

Bill nodded slowly. "Mum hustled us all into speaking to Professor Dumbledore but…it's weird, isn't
it? I mean, I've never really thought about it before but if someone's died…it's a bit freaky suddenly having them there as a portrait."

"It's not really them." Sirius agreed. It was one of the reasons why he wasn't keen to wake the portrait up.

Bill gave a nod and stood up. "Thank you for everything, Lord Black."

Sirius got to his feet and shook Bill's hand. "Thank you for your service, William of the House of Weasley."

Bill gave a small smile and a nod. He left quietly, the door shutting with a firm click leaving Sirius alone in the room with the portrait.

He sat back down and looked up at the sleeping figure of Arcturus Black.

It wasn't his Grandfather. It was a facsimile of the man who had been his Grandfather with enough of his essence to give the impression of him.

There was no reason to wake up the image. Sirius had reconciled himself to his Grandfather's actions and inactions. He had come to admire the other man and his political nous. He didn't really want to disturb the fragile acceptance he had managed.

But there was a part of Sirius which did want to wake up the portrait, who wanted to talk with his Grandfather; to apologise for his youthful incomprehension of his Grandfather's love and care for him, and yet to yell at his Grandfather for not taking the time to make Sirius understand. And for all that, to confide the past year in his Grandfather; to let him know he'd made a difference and had helped Sirius and Harry win. There was always going to be a part of Sirius who wanted to make his Grandfather proud.

Sirius rubbed a hand over his face and considered the portrait. He got to his feet and walked back behind his desk. He sat down and pulled over his latest correspondence from Simeon – an enthusiastic agreement for Sirius and Harry to visit Australia later in August.

Harry had the right of it, Sirius mused. Portraits were creepy. Life was for the living. Maybe there would be a day he'd talk to his Grandfather's portrait, but that day belonged far in the future.

o-O-o

27th July 1995

Hermione sat down on the uncomfortable bench in the Wizengamot's family tier with a frown. Her eyes were on Harry. Harry sat in the Potter seat as though he belonged there. He had the avatars of the family magic guarding him and Hermione could see how it still freaked some of his fellow Lords and Ladies how comfortable he was with the physical representations of his family magic. Or maybe they were just freaked out at the very visible show of the vast well power Harry commanded. Either way she would have thought they would have reconciled themselves to it after all the sessions that had taken place that month. That afternoon was the final trial; Hannah Abbott's.

Neville fidgeted beside her and she patted his arm absently.

"It'll be fine, Neville." Hermione said in a low voice.

"I'm just dreading seeing her again." Neville answered back in the same low tone.
Blaise leaned in from Neville's other side. "You just have to remember she's not the girl you thought she was; the Hannah who dated you didn't really exist."

Neville's mouth drooped in an unhappy frown but he didn't argue.

Hermione turned to look past Remus sat beside her to a tense looking Susan Bones. Sue sat with her mother sandwiched between Remus and Ted Tonks. Karen Abbott was not present and Hermione couldn't blame her for staying out of the spotlight. Leonard Abbott was in his usual seat; he looked pale but stoic. Richard Bones leaned over to his friend and asked something but Abbott shook his head swiftly.

The doors were sealed and the trial began.

Hermione watched impatiently as the clerk stood. "The Wizengamot calls the prosecution and the defence for Hannah Abbott to the floor!"

Rufus Scrimgeour took the prosecution table but he had a female auror beside him; Hermione thought she looked vaguely familiar. Across from them, Mary Baron and a young female associate took the defence table.

"Bring in the accused, Hannah Abbott!"

Hermione bit her lip as Hannah was brought into the chamber. She looked demure. She was dressed in a plain blue modest robe. Her blonde hair was loose around her shoulders. She looked pale but healthy as she took the chair in the centre of the floor for the accused. Hermione barely heard the list of charges and the plea of not guilty by reason of diminished capacity, as she continued to look at Hannah.

How had they all been taken in by her?

"The prosecution calls Auror Lucinda Mackenzie to the stand."

Hermione suddenly placed her; the young auror was a friend of Dora's and had attended the wedding.

Auror Mackenzie was young but thorough. She gave a good accounting of the evidence they'd found against Hannah; the notes from Barty Crouch, the events of the Yule Ball, and the battle itself. Hannah's magical signature was on Sybill Trelawney's body; her wand had cursed the Creevey brothers into attacking another student; she had assaulted her best friend and left Susan tied up in a school where Hannah would bring vampires and mercenaries. It was damning.

It was George Weasley who was called to the stand next. He recounted the events in the corridor when Hannah had turned on them; their rescue by Sue and how they'd kept Hannah tied up and stunned during the rest of the events.

Scrimgeour provided written testimony from the others who had been present rather than call them. The defence conceded the point and confirmed it wouldn't require the prosecution to call the rest of them.

Neville breathed out in relief beside Hermione. She knew he had been worried Hannah's defence was going to force them all to give testimony in person.

The prosecution didn't take much longer and Hermione watched as Mary Baron rose to begin the defence.
"I call Healer Gayle Mellow." Baron said.

Mellow was a matronly lady who took the witness chair with a huff. Her steel grey hair was pulled back into a severe bun. She looked completely no-nonsense.

"Healer Mellow, please state for the Wizengamot your position and your relationship to Hannah Abbott." Baron asked politely.

"I'm a Senior Healer associated with Saint Mungo's. Hannah Abbott has been in my care since the second week of July." Mellow stated briskly.

"The prosecution gave testimony from your colleague Healer Spry that Miss Abbott was mentally competent to stand trial and did not meet the definition of legally insane. What are your findings?" Baron asked.

"Hannah is mentally sound; she is rationally aware of her actions; of right and wrong. She is therefore by definition legally competent. However, she had exposure to suggestion potions and compulsion spells for a period of two months. The trace of them was several weeks old but their impact can still be seen active on her magical core." Mellow began. "In my opinion, she is as emotionally, magically and mentally compromised today as though she was still in thrall of these potions and charms."

"Could you describe for the court how the suggestion potions work on a witch or a wizard's magic and mind?" Baron requested.

"They are insidious." Mellow frowned. "They invoke a state not unlike the effect of alcohol; inhibitions are lowered, responses are impaired, and the ability to make rational good choices is reduced."

"And the compulsion charms?" Baron continued.

"These are in my opinion simply a lesser form of the Imperius curse. The recipient is compelled by the charm to perform an act against their natural will." Mellow stated firmly.

"And it is your testimony that the effects of both the potions and the charms remain active in Hannah Abbott's magic?" Baron asked. "That they still affect her actions and decisions today?"

"It is." Mellow agreed.

Baron nodded. "With this in mind, do you believe she can be held accountable for the acts she perpetrated since she was exposed to the potions and charms?"

"I believe her actions have been beyond Miss Abbott's full ability to control since she was exposed." Mellow agreed.

Baron nodded. "Thank you. You're excused with my thanks, Healer Mellow."

Mellow left the chair and Baron recalled Auror Mackenzie.

Hermione bit her lip. She had some sympathy for the defence's position but she knew most of her peers would be furious.

"Auror, in your testimony you noted the DMLE took possession of a number of letters from Bartemius Crouch Junior to my client. Is this correct?"
"Yes, ma'am." Mackenzie nodded.

Baron handed her a list. "Is this a comprehensive list of the letters?"

Mackenzie nodded, stating a 'yes' for the record.

"What was the date of the first letter on the list?" Baron asked.

"It's August twentieth nineteen-ninety-four." Mackenzie stated.

"Was there a compulsion charm found on the parchment?" Baron stated.

"There were two," Mackenzie said. "One to read it and one to keep it a secret."

"And the second?" Baron asked.

Scrimgeour raised his wand. "The prosecution will concede that the first ten letters have similar compulsion charms and that twenty letters during the month of January and February also have charms which include a third variant to make Miss Abbott believe the content of the letters."

Baron dismissed Mackenzie and an Unspeakable, Lymus Pilchard, was called to the stand. His research was into suggestion potions and he also gave testimony that he did not believe Hannah could act normally while under the influence; that his own studies showed that animals acted under the suggestions for durations which exceeded the potion use by some way. Under Scrimgeour's cross he was forced to concede that there was alternative research which was contradictory to his own view.

Finally, the head of the Hit Wizards was called to the stand.

"Head Hit Wizard Poole, your area of the DMLE specialises in violent and deviant crime. You've studied the case," Baron said, "do you believe that Miss Abbott was the victim of a crime?"

"Undoubtedly." Poole agreed. He was a burly man in his early forties. "Had Bartemius Crouch Junior lived to see charges, he would have been charged with multiple crimes against Hannah Abbott."

"Please elucidate what charges he would have faced." Baron requested.

"Multiple counts of abuse of a minor through application of potions and compulsion charms." Poole stated. "Statutory rape."

Hermione winced. Harry had warned everyone in the alliance but it still shocked Hermione to hear it spoken out loud. Neville tensed beside her. They both wondered for a long moment whether the rest of it would be revealed; Hannah had been confirmed as pregnant two weeks prior.

In the centre of the chamber, Hannah was bright red. Her father sat stone-faced staring down at his daughter.

"If Hannah Abbott had been found to be directly under the influence of a spell or a potion, would she have faced charges for her acts while under such influence?" Baron asked.

"No." Poole said, although everyone could see he was reluctant. "She would not face charges."

Poole was dismissed and Baron rested her case without calling Hannah to the stand.

The Chief Witch called for a brief recess before closing statements. Hannah was led out. Hermione
followed Remus down and to the small office Sirius had been allocated. She was relieved when she
cought sight of Sue being led into her Aunt's office rather than joining them.

Harry greeted her with a small kiss on her cheek. "Hey." He clasped her hand and drew her further
inside, nodding a hello to Neville. "How are you?"

"It's weird." Neville sighed heavily. "I don't know whether to be rooting for her to be found guilty or
hoping she'll be found innocent."

Blaise nodded sympathetically. "I think it's an even split which way the Wizengamot will vote."

"Mary Baron's very good." Hermione commented. "She's established that Hannah's own will was
compromised by Crouch and that she wouldn't have faced charges if magically she was considered
still to be under the potions and charms that were used to subvert her."

"I hadn't realised there was magical research to suggest there was a possibility the effects were long
term." Theo said as he and Draco joined their small group and handed out glasses of juice.

"Well, contradictory research." Draco pointed out. "There is a body of evidence that says otherwise."

"I'm surprised they didn't call Hannah." Blaise said.

"I'm not." Neville grimaced. "She'd probably only declare Crouch to be innocent and come across as
deluded."

"Exactly." Blaise said. "It would prove she was nuts about him."

"Or it would have just underscored how rational she can be about choosing to believe in him." Harry
pointed out.

Neville sighed again, misery written all over his face. "Can we talk about something else?"

Hermione cast a sympathetic glance in his direction and turned to Harry. "Did you speak to Madame
Marchbanks about your exams?"

Harry nodded. "I'm due to sit them in two weeks' time."

"That's not an awful lot of time to study." Hermione murmured, worrying at just how little time it
was.

"I have the practical side down." Harry said with a shrug. "I just need to brush up on the theory. I
was thinking, well, hoping my girlfriend might have some thoughts about a revision plan?"

"Do you two have to be so sickening?" asked Draco bluntly.

Hermione and Harry exchanged an amused look before turning back to Draco and answering in
unison. "Yes."

Hermione smiled happily as the others laughed. Draco gave a long suffering sigh and rolled his eyes
at them but the sly amusement in his expression gave away his own feelings in the matter.

Hermione tightened her grip on Harry momentarily. She had felt so much more settled about her
relationship with Harry since the battle, and if she was truthful, the mind healing she'd had. Realising
her own insecurities had made her uncertain about Harry's affections had been a revelation. She was
working on her self-esteem. She wasn't going to just assume she and Harry would automatically end
at some point and she would lose him. It was a work in progress but Hermione already felt ten times
happier and immeasurably more hopeful.

It also helped that she and Harry had been pretty inseparable since his return. He turned to her for comfort and support, and Hermione turned to him. She had a sneaky feeling some of it was Morgana’s protection and how she had used Hermione as her avatar. But if the protection was encouraging Harry to turn to her, she wasn't going to complain.

"Has Weasley talked to you about his Quidditch idea?" asked Draco, changing the subject pointedly.

Harry sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Yeah."

Hermione grimaced. Ron's Quidditch idea was the only thing Ron seemed to want to talk about. The idea of playing a memorial pick-up game, similar to the one the school had played at Yule, once the pitch was rebuilt in order to reclaim the ground was a good one. But Hermione could sense how uncomfortable it made Harry.

"And?" prompted Draco impatiently.

"I think it's a good idea." Harry said cautiously.

"So you'll be the other Seeker?" asked Draco.

"Ron's asked but I'm not sure." Harry shrugged. "I didn't play last year because of the tournament and I haven't passed the exams yet to confirm my place in Hogwarts for next year."

As excuses went they weren't bad but Hermione knew the boys around her were well aware that Harry's decision had nothing to do with fairness about who had played the year before and his exams.

"We should head back in." Hermione said before they could get into a protracted discussion about it.

They all trooped back to the chamber and retook their seats.

Scrimgeour rose to the give the closing statement for the prosecution. "Members of the Wizengamot, the prosecution acknowledges that Hannah Abbott was targeted by Bartemius Crouch Junior. She was systematically groomed into being his spy at Hogwarts and we acknowledge that she was subjected to both suggestibility potions and compulsion charms during the period Crouch was uncertain of her loyalty."

Hermione worried her lip.

"Had Miss Abbott been arrested and found to have these potions or charms still being administered, she would have faced a very different past month. However, the potions and charms had not been used for months. On the night Miss Abbott attacked students on her way to perform her miserable mission for Crouch; on the night she attacked and captured Professor Trelawney; on the night she opened the door to the man she believed was her beau and allowed him to bring an invading force of dark creatures and mercenaries into Hogwarts…on that night, she had no suggestibility potion present in her bloodstream nor was she under the sway of any compulsion charm."

Hermione darted a look at Hannah. She looked pale, her head bowed.

"Do these things have long term effects? Perhaps they do and perhaps they don't. The experts seem conflicted. What I know is that the law currently does not acknowledge that there are long term effects; it makes no allowance. You have the potion in your bloodstream and are compromised, or you don't and your actions are your own free will. You either are under the compulsion or you are
It was a good legal argument.

Blaise sent Hermione a quick look over Neville's head which told her he thought the same.

"Do I consider Hannah Abbott a victim? Yes, and when we get to sentencing that is where we should consider how she came to make the decisions she made and do the acts she performed. Do I consider her innocent? No. Long after Crouch stopped giving her potions and compelling her to silence, Hannah Abbott chose to stand beside Bartemius Crouch Junior in his criminal acts. People died and suffered injury due to her actions and decisions. They deserve justice. I ask you find her guilty of all charges."

Mary Baron got to her feet and smoothed her green robes. They were high-necked, sleeves down to the wrists, and a tight row of buttons went all the way down the centre. She looked coolly classy and professional. "At the age of fourteen Hannah Abbott received a letter from an admirer, one that was coated in a compulsion charm to read and to keep silent about. She received several more such letters through September and by Yule believed herself to be the true love of her correspondent. She did not know his name at first only that he told her she was sweet and beautiful, and that he trusted no one but her. He coaxed her into a pretend relationship with another student to give their secret relationship cover and convinced her to go along with a ruse to get the young Heir Longbottom alone at the Ball claiming he simply wished to talk with the boy and make amends for past wrongs."

She paced a couple of steps beyond the table.

"When it became clear she had played a part in getting the Longbottom Heir kidnapped by Crouch, she tried to pull out of Crouch's grasp. He subjected her to an increased campaign of flattery and persuasion, of seduction. He used suggestibility potions and compulsions to ensure her compliance and his success. When she was completely under his thrall, he stopped the potions and charms and continued brainwashing her from one belief system to another with the force of his personality, turning her further away from friends and family who he convinced her would not understand and be against her, twisting her world until he was the centre of it and without him she would be alone. By the time of the battle at Hogwarts, Hannah Abbott was nothing more than Crouch's puppet, her acts and decisions nothing more than his pulling of her invisible strings."

Baron was an impassioned speaker and Hermione could feel her own heart ache for Hannah.

"Do I consider Hannah Abbott innocent? Yes. The young fourteen year old girl who found a letter on her bed would never have made the choices or performed the crimes she is charged with. That girl deserves healing and help to regain herself not punishment. Do I consider Hannah Abbott a victim? Yes, but more I consider her a survivor but she will only continue to survive if we help her. The law has a letter and a spirit. I believe I know which should be employed here today."

Baron returned to her desk.

Hermione shook her head. She had no idea which way the Wizengamot would vote.

Griselda got to her feet. "This is perhaps the most difficult of the trials we have faced. Both sides have argued well. We will now take a vote on each charge; raised wands will signify a guilty verdict. Lord Abbott will not be able to cast a vote given his relationship to the accused. Lord Black will hold both the Black and Potter vote as Lord Potter only sits his seat as a courtesy in this procedure. On the charge of conspiracy to kidnap Neville Frances Longbottom, how does the Wizengamot find?"

Hermione's heart sank at the sea of wands. Sirius had raised his as had Augusta Longbottom.
Dullard rose from his seat. "The Wizengamot finds the defendant guilty."

A murmur broke out in the public gallery.

"On the charge of conspiracy to perform a terrorist act?"

Hermione watched as Sirius lowered his wand.

"The Wizengamot finds the defendant not guilty."

A louder murmur erupted and Griselda let off a small bang with her wand.

"Do not make me clear the gallery!" She snapped. She glared everyone into silence and continued. "On the charge of casting an Unforgivable on Colin and Dennis Creevey?"

Hermione wasn't surprised at the not guilty verdicts that followed on that charge, on the charge of assaulting Susan Bones, on the charge of assaulting Trelawney, on the charge of performing a terrorist act in allowing the invading force into Hogwarts. It was far from unanimous but it was enough to clear her.

"Wow. I guess most went with Baron's argument." Blaise muttered. "I bet they found her guilty of colluding in your kidnapping because she did that before the potions."

Neville's hands were in fists. "I can't believe they found her not guilty of everything at Hogwarts."

"Lavender's going to be furious." Hermione noted. She glanced towards Sue who looked angry enough to spit nails.

Griselda called for order again. "The Wizengamot has found Hannah Abbott guilty of conspiracy to kidnap; all other charges are dismissed. Arguments will be heard in the matter of sentencing on the guilty charge."

Scrimgeour looked unhappy but got to his feet. "The prosecution asks for the maximum sentence to be brought to bear; a ten year stay in Azkaban. Miss Abbott willingly conspired to ensure her young friend was placed in danger. Regardless of whether she knew the end game, she was aware of the dangers that night as all members of the Potter alliance were asked to ensure they were not alone at any time. Her lack of care for what happened to Neville Longbottom, a bright young man who believed he was engaged in a romantic relationship with her, and who she was deceiving is nothing short of heartless."

He gave way to Baron.

"Miss Abbott was under a compulsion to stay quiet about the request to ensure her companion was alone; she was under a false belief that the reason was innocent. After the events, she attempted to break away from Bartemius Crouch Junior so disgusted was she at her involvement. As a result she was subjected to potions and charms which kept her under Crouch's control. I believe she has been punished enough. The minimum sentence should be applied here; a one year remand to the care of Saint Mungo's for mind healing."

Griselda stood. "We'll open this debate up to the floor in a moment. First, as much as it pains me to make this public, the Wizengamot needs to be aware that any sentence will need adjustment to allow for the safe pregnancy and birth of the child Miss Abbott carries."

There was an immediate outbreak of mutterings and Leonard Abbott looked as though he wished the floor would open up and swallow him.
“Bloody hell!” Blaise said.

Neville gave a heavy sigh.

“You knew?!” Blaise hissed.

Neville nodded unhappily. "Harry forewarned me this morning."

Hermione who’d been with Harry when he’d told Neville slid her arm around Neville's in a silent show of support.

"Sue was told as well I think." Neville said.

Hermione glanced down the row and nodded taking in Sue's sour expression, and mutinous glare.

"ENOUGH!" Griselda fired off another bang. "We'll hear from Regent Longbottom."

Augusta stared down at Hannah for a long moment. "Mary Baron spoke well in the trial. I cast my vote because I believe it is important we respect the spirit of the law and there is no doubt Hannah Abbott was twisted by Bartemius Crouch and that deserved to be recognised. The one act she remains guilty of performing is one which is close to me as it concerns the Heir to my House; my grandson, Neville. It's true she lied to him about her interest; about her regard and affection for him. It's true she helped to engineer the circumstances which allowed him to be kidnapped. But I also believe she was horrified at the turn of events and regretted her actions in the immediacy of the event – before Crouch convinced her otherwise with potions and charms. But whether she was naïve or uncaring in going along with the request to ensure Neville was alone that night, she brought harm to the House of Longbottom and while I do not believe the maximum sentence applies here, I would not see the harm done to my House dismissed by the awarding of a minimum sentence."

Hermione nodded. That was fair.

"Lord Abbott?" Griselda recognised him respectfully.

Leonard Abbott rose to his feet. "I know my voice is biased in these proceedings as her father but I thank each of you for your consideration in voting. I know that the daughter I raised would be horrified at her actions at the battle of Hogwarts. Her mother and I are devastated by the harm Crouch has caused Hannah. He has destroyed her as thoroughly as though he threw the Killing curse at her. I offer a third way forward."

"Whether she ends up in prison or hospital, Hannah has no future here in Britain. If she responds to the mind healing and returns to her former self, albeit one scared by Crouch, her peers in time may forgive her but they will not forget. Her child will suffer the stigma of being Crouch's Heir and she may come to resent the child as visible evidence of Crouch's crime against her." Abbott gestured down to his daughter. "I propose rather than Saint Mungo's, Hannah be remanded to the care of the Valley clinic; for her to be given the means to remain there but in normal time for the rest of her life; for her parental rights to be legally over-tuned and the custody of her child given to my wife and I."

He stopped. "Thank you."

Hermione darted a look towards Harry but he appeared as surprised as everyone else.

"While we are all tremendously aware of Lord Abbott's personal pain in this, I do not believe we should allow him to argue for what constitutes the minimum sentence with an exile thrown in. If he wishes to exile her, he should exile her; not use this body to do so."

Selwyn was recognised next.

"While we are all tremendously aware of Lord Abbott's personal pain in this, I do not believe we should allow him to argue for what constitutes the minimum sentence with an exile thrown in. If he wishes to exile her, he should exile her; not use this body to do so."
Sirius raised his wand and Griselda nodded at him.

"This is not an easy task before us. Our voting on her innocence and guilt was not unanimous and, despite my own belief that she was twisted by Crouch, I am not prepared for her to remain essentially unpunished in the sentencing of the one act she was found guilty of perpetrating. She did cause harm. I know exactly how much as I was there." Sirius looked around the chamber. "I'm sympathetic to Lord Abbott but I cannot agree with his proposal. Does she deserve as much as ten years in Azkaban? No. But to simply suggest she needs a year of healing…it feels too generous especially when you consider we have already been generous in acknowledging how far Crouch was to blame for her later actions. I actually don't have issue with the exile – I think ultimately it would provide those she hurt space to heal and for her to find a new start once she has served her time."

Selwyn got to his feet in response. "Perhaps we should vote on a variant then of Lord Abbott's proposal? Five years in Azkaban with mind-healing sessions allowed – and obviously enough care in the first nine months to allow for her circumstances. The child to be given into the custody of her parents and her parental rights removed. Thereafter, on her release from prison, exile from the British Isles to the Abbott location of her father's choice."

Augusta stood. "I find myself in agreement with Lord Selwyn. It is an acceptable compromise for the House of Longbottom."

The vote was carried and in short order Hannah was led away to prison.

"Well," Blaise said as the Wizengamot was dismissed, "I'm glad I wasn't taking bets. I think I would have made a massive loss! Who could have predicted that!"

Hermione turned to Neville as they got to their feet. "Are you alright, Neville?"

Neville considered her question for a long moment. He nodded sharply. "It's not perfect but it feels right. I think that's probably all you can ask of justice."

o-O-o

4th August 1995

Harry had found a small walled garden near to the kitchens. It was quiet and perfect for studying and Harry wandered out with his potions texts and a list of required reading Hermione had prepared for him.

She was spending the day at the DOM investigating the whole topic of the ritual, her role as avatar and the potential implications. She'd been incredibly excited and practically vibrating with energy at breakfast. It hadn't stopped her leaving him strict instructions for his study plan.

His lips quirked upwards in amusement. Hermione was determined to make sure he did well and he was happy enough to indulge her. He had insisted on a whole day off on his birthday and he had laid down some ground rules for the rest of the plan too; time off for flying and for his animagus study. He was working on his Grim form. He could easily transition to the lion, wolf and Snitch, but he wanted to share a form with Padfoot.

Harry slowed as he realised someone was already present.

There were only a few members of the alliance outside of the House of Black who were still at the Estate and he wasn't too surprised to find that the other occupant of the garden was Neville. The Longbottoms along with Blaise had decided to stay while Augusta had some renovations done to the Manor. They'd move back when Sirius and Harry left for Australia which was also when Remus
intended to bring over a small contingent of his pack.

The other family who had stayed surprisingly had been the Greengrasses. Harry had determined that was politics. Daniel was consolidating his place as Sirius's right hand man since Augusta had a firm role as Sirius's right hand woman. He figured Daniel wouldn't leave until Augusta did.

It had surprisingly worked out. Daphne provided Hermione with some much needed female company to offset the number of boys in the house. Astoria, her younger sister, had struck up something of an odd friendship with Draco. Harry figured his Slytherin cousin was simply waiting to Hogwarts and being out from under the watchful eye of parents before he asked Astoria on a Hogsmeade date.

Harry smiled at Neville who was elbows deep in a flower bed. "Hey, do you mind if I join you?"

Neville shook his head. "So long as you don't mind me digging."

"Go for it." Harry said. "What exactly are you doing anyway?"

"Planting some of the cuttings Sirius wanted. Flowers mainly but there's a prickly pear bush." Neville explained succinctly. "One of the elves was going to do but..." he sighed, "I really miss my greenhouses."

So Neville had co-opted the work.

Harry winced sympathetically as he sat down on a nearby bench. "Not long now until you'll be back in your own place."

Neville nodded. "Don't get me wrong it's been great being here." He looked over his shoulder at Harry and grinned at him. "I think we needed it right after the battle and everything." He turned back to the flowerbed abruptly and Harry figured he was thinking about Hannah again.

"Are you looking forward to the new hot house you got for your birthday?" Harry asked, subtly redirecting Neville back to his favourite topic.

Neville immediately brightened and immediately began waxing lyrical about his plans. As some of Neville's experimentations were for their shared business ventures, Harry listened intently even as he began to organise his books into order.

Neville slowed to a halt and pointed his trowel at the stack of books. "Potions?"

Harry nodded. "I really need to brush up on the theory. Hermione schooled me on the brewing all yesterday but I realised I'd struggle with the essays."

It had felt strange the day before staying home from the Wizengamot and watching Sirius go off alone but it was what would usually happen and Harry had simply been happy to have the time for studying.

Neville grimaced. "Yeah, they were pretty hard in the exam we had."

"Where's Blaise?" asked Harry.

"Over at the Patils." Neville waggled his eyebrows expressively. "Doing homework."

Harry burst into a surprised huff of laughter. "Really?"

"He's pretty taken with Padma." Neville said. "Actually he wanted me to go with him. He thinks
"Parvati still likes me."

"You're not interested?" asked Harry.

Neville shrugged.

Harry debated for a moment before he sighed. "Not every girl is going to be pretending like Hannah was. Parvati really did have a thing for you at the beginning of the last school year."

"I know I just…" Neville shifted to face Harry. "It's difficult knowing the first girl I kissed was only in it because Crouch was weirdly obsessed with me."

Harry frowned. "Hannah was interested in you before…before he got his hooks into her." It had occurred to Harry that Hannah's interest in Neville might have even increased her worthiness to Crouch.

"Maybe." Neville said. "It doesn't matter. I'm not quite ready to get back on that broom, you know?"

"I can empathise." Harry commented dryly.

Neville sent him a sympathetic grimace in response. "Ron still on at you to do the Quidditch match?"

Harry shrugged. "It is a good idea."

"But you just don't want to go anywhere near the pitch." Neville stated matter-of-factly.

"I know it's stupid…" began Harry.

"It's not stupid, Harry." Neville interrupted him. "I don't really want to go back into the corridor where I killed that snake and where…Caroline saved Bill. I can imagine a little bit how you must feel."

Harry sighed and put his book down. "It's not so much knowing he and Crouch were killed there…" he paused before giving into the urge to confess something he hadn't confessed to anyone outside of Sirius and his healers, "I died there."

"When you saved us from Crouch's bomb." Neville said quietly understanding immediately.

"I died and…and I think I was with my parents but then…" Harry gestured towards the house, "my bond with Sirius brought me back."

Neville got up and moved to sit beside him; a solid comforting presence by his side.

"I haven't really talked about it much." Harry admitted quietly, his fingers playing with the edges of his book.

"Sirius knows." Neville said.

"Yeah," Harry said, "and the healers." He sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. "I was pretty messed up when I woke up. I didn't talk to anyone for weeks. I think mostly it was because I knew I'd have to tell Sirius about dying and I was scared to tell him…" he shook his head, "turned out, he just knew." He had a suspicion that Death hadn't been joking when he'd called them his Grim and his Raven – and who knew what that meant? "A lot of the time at the clinic was me coming to terms with it. I mean, there was a lot of other stuff too but…I didn't even admit it to myself until I started talking."
Neville nudged his shoulder gently with his own. "Most people would have drowned just with the other stuff."

Harry shrugged. "I think I may be in therapy until I'm thirty." He said dryly.

Neville laughed. He poked at his boot laces with a dirt streaked finger. "I think we're all going to be in therapy for a while." He lifted a shoulder at Harry's mildly questioning look. "It's not just Hannah or what happened. I haven't really ever talked about my parents before." He ducked his head down.

Harry placed a comforting hand on Neville's shoulder briefly. He wondered if he should ask but then went ahead anyway knowing Neville would tell him if he was being too nosy. "Is it helping?"

"I think so." Neville said a touch hesitantly. "I mean, I think I get why I am about some things now. I don't think I ever really thought about it before."

Harry nodded in understanding. "The first time I was at the clinic it took a while for me to get how much growing up the way I did affected everything I did." He shook himself loose from the thought. He really didn't want to think about the Dursleys.

"That's just it." Neville said. "I guess I realised I was really stuck on Hannah, on my relationship with her, because you know everyone talks about how my parents were this perfect couple who got together at school and I thought I should have the same."

Harry nodded. He sometimes had wondered the same about himself and Hermione, and he was honest enough to admit that some of his want for them to make the distance was to emulate his own parents.

"I think I was more wrapped up in wanting that dream than wanting that dream specifically with Hannah." Neville continued. "So, then I think why am I so upset at her lying to me?"

"Different thing, Nev." Harry said softly.

Neville shot him a quick sad smile. "Yeah, I know." He sighed heavily. "It's awful what happened to her; awful what he did to her. It's weird thinking I'm never going to see her again."

"I just hope she gets better and starts over new somewhere fresh when she's served her time." Harry said diplomatically. He thought the sentence was a good compromise.

"Anyway," Neville said in a stronger voice, "I think maybe I need to get my head around everything first before dating someone else."

"Sounds like a plan." Harry said supportively.

"And maybe," Neville said darting a look at Harry, "you need to get your head around everything before you can play Quidditch at Hogwarts again."

Harry snorted but he conceded with a sharp nod. "Yeah."

Neville's eyes stayed on him though speculatively, as though he could read Harry's impatience with himself, his shame that it was still a problem. "You said you didn't talk for a while. Maybe this is like that. Maybe you just have to wait and one day you'll be ready."

Harry nodded slowly, agreement and acceptance stealing over him. "Thanks, Nev."

"Hello!" Luna's voice heralded her arrival as she poked her head around the entry to the garden.
"Hey, Luna!" Harry waved her forward. He vaguely remembered Sirius telling him at breakfast there would be reporters over to do an interview about the Estate becoming a werewolf sanctuary. Luna had probably come over with her father.

Neville grinned at him and went back to his gardening with a shy smile of welcome for the bubbly blonde Ravenclaw.

Luna settled into Neville's vacated spot and picked up the text book. "Studying?"

"Potions." Harry made a face. "You want to quiz me?"

Luna nodded and pulled up her legs, sitting cross-legged on the bench. She reached for his first book and opened it up, and tapped the author's name. "Did you know Professor McGonagall convinced Pierre Fume to be our new potions Professor?"

"She might have crowed about it a bit at dinner last night." Harry said with a laugh. He was just happy it wasn't Snape. He was grateful to the other man for everything he'd done to help defeat Riddle and keep Harry safe in the effort, but he couldn't forget Snape had pointed Riddle at them in the first place.

"I'm going to be the Care of Magical Creatures Professor." Luna said matter-of-factly. "And you'll be the Defence Against the Dark Arts before you become Headmaster."

Harry's lips twitched amused. "What about the others?"

"Draco will be the Charms Professor." Luna said. "He wants a wand subject and Charms is his best. Sue will take over from you. She'll be in the Aurors until then."

"And Ron?" Harry prompted.

"Will help revolutionise physical education." Luna said cheerfully. "He'll take over from Madame Hooch but he's going to introduce lots of new things even though he'll still be obsessed with Quidditch."

Harry felt nothing but a warm contentment at the idea of the future.

"I think I'm a little envious." Neville remarked. "You all have everything planned out." He grimaced and wiped his sweaty brow. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Don't be silly, Neville," Luna said dreamily, "you'll take over from Professor Sprout once you're done being Minister of Magic."

Harry and Neville exchanged a shocked look but by the time Harry looked back at Luna she was already blinking and turning to the book.

"Are you ready for your first question?" Luna asked brightly.

Harry stretched exaggeratedly and nodded. "Bring it on." He pushed thoughts of Quidditch and dying to the back of his mind. He had exams to prepare for if he wanted any kind of future.

o-O-o

11th August 1995

Sirius watched as Cornelius revealed the memorial in the Ministry reception hall with a flourish.
It took centre stage, replacing the awful statue of the magical creatures. The main part of the memorial was a wall. It stood eight foot wide by six foot tall, and a foot thick; a solid grey granite speckled through with gold. Etched upon the surface of one of its wider sides were the names of everyone who had lost their lives in the fight against Riddle on the side of the Light. Sirius had requested both his grandfather's and brother's names be included along with the Potters.

On the other side of the wall, the surface was etched with all those who had taken part in the battle on the night of the solstice eve. Every being who'd fought – whether werewolf, elf, wizard or witch was mentioned. They'd insisted much to Cornelius's distress that neither he nor Harry were given any special treatment – just that their names were included with the others. Cornelius had reluctantly agreed. The only thing Harry had requested was the inscription at the top – *Where there is love there is life.*

Cornelius had also reluctantly agreed to postpone any reward ceremony until much, much, later. Sirius had been firm that everybody needed to heal first before they started congratulating themselves. The award recipients could be told in private to ensure they understood their contributions were being recognised but a public ceremony would wait.

He knew Cornelius wanted to give him and Harry an Order of Merlin. Personally Sirius wasn't fussed about the award and he knew Harry just felt a great deal of distaste at the idea of being rewarded for defeating Riddle. Harry was still recovering emotionally from the battle; he and Ron had argued badly a few days before about the proposed Quidditch match. Ron had apologised the next day – Ron presumably getting a lecture from everyone about not pushing Harry – and Harry had forgiven him as Harry was apt to do with Ron. Sirius suspected Harry had finally confided in Ron about just how much healing Harry still had to do. Ron had certainly been more sensitive about the entire topic since.

Harry shifted beside him, sending him an inquiring glance. Sirius offered him an apologetic grimace. Harry was far too tuned into him. He wondered if the tether had something to do with that. They needed to talk about it at some point but Sirius had put it off, focused on getting Harry through immediate concerns such as his physical recovery, then their return and the trials, and finally Harry's delayed exams which would determine his schooling. But they were going to have to have the discussion some time. Maybe after their Australian vacation and before Harry returned to Hogwarts.

Sirius brightened at the reminder of their imminent trip. They were due to leave later that evening, arriving into Australia in the early hours of the morning. They'd go to bed and aim get up around lunch time. Sirius had a feeling the time difference was going to take some getting used to but it would be worth it.

It would be good to catch-up with Simeon, Anna and Jason. He knew Simeon hadn't been too pleased to have been kept out of the battle but they had needed someone safe in case the battle hadn't gone the way they had wanted. Simeon had requested some time to speak to Sirius one on one, and Sirius had a sneaky suspicion that Simeon was going to tell him that he was planning on transferring back to Britain.

"...and now," Cornelius announced, dragging Sirius's attention back to the memorial, "I'd like to ask Director Bones and Director Croaker to light the Everlasting torches. The flames will never die and their presence will remind us of all who sacrificed and fought for our peace."

Sirius watched as Amelia and Bertie stepped up, one at each end of the wall. The gold holders were simple in shape – almost like oversized candlesticks. They were ornately etched though with beautiful calligraphy which told the story of Riddle and his downfall. Amelia and Bertie raised their wands to the cup part of the torch holder and silently lit them in unison. Two strong flames
immediately sprang into life.

It was a fitting memorial.

"With the lighting of our torches, our main ceremony is now concluded." Cornelius said loudly. "I'd like to invite you all to stay. The Ministry ballroom has been opened for refreshments and sitting." He stood down from his lectern and led the way out to the open door just behind him.

Sirius wasn't surprised when Harry lingered in his seat rather than getting up immediately. He finally nudged him into motion and they walked over to the wall. Harry reached out and gently touched his parents' names. Sirius swallowed hard against the lump in his throat.

Bill stood at the other end of the wall. His eyes were pinned to Caroline's name. Sirius was pleased to see that there was more acceptance in Bill's expression than guilt. Bertie moved up to the young Weasley Heir and Sirius let his own gaze drift back to the wall.

There were so many names; so many had given their lives.

Hermione walked up to Harry and took his hand, resting her cheek momentarily on his shoulder. "You OK?" She asked lowly.

"Yeah." Harry sighed. "It's a good memorial; it just doesn't seem enough." It was his turn to nudge Sirius. "Ready to head into the ballroom?"

Sirius cast one final look at the wall and nodded. He glanced back to see the Delacours approaching Bill and wondered what that was about.

"Fleur's teaching him French." Harry explained, making Sirius realise he'd asked the question out loud.

"Really?" Sirius drawled, amused despite himself. "She's the new Gringotts' employee?"

Harry nodded, and a small smile flitted over his lips. "I think Vivien's planning to match-make once they get to France. Apparently it's rare a Veela finds someone who doesn't have a reaction to their allure."

Sirius agreed absently. It would be a good match if Bill allowed himself to fall for the girl. The Delacours were well placed in French society and she would make a great addition to the House of Weasley.

The ballroom was a press of people and Sirius guided them through the crowd to the table Andy had staked out at the back. Theo sat sandwiched between her and Ted. Narcissa was in attendance as the baby had been left in Dobby's capable care. Dora had also insisted on attending despite being very pregnant.

Sirius grimaced. Baby Lupin was due at the end of September and since Narcissa had effectively taken part in the ritual during her last month, Dora had been insistent that attending a memorial was a piece of cake by comparison. Remus hovered at Dora's side as though he was anticipating her going into labour at any moment regardless. It would have been hilarious if Sirius wasn't also a tad nervous about the same thing.

He was really going to miss Reggie during his vacation and on his return when they'd head home to Griffin House. Narcissa and Draco were moving to a newly purchased Black property near to Andromeda. Malfoy Manor was being locked down until Draco was old enough to take ownership. While Lucius was the Head of the House, the wards would allow him to enter freely and Narcissa
wasn't prepared to place herself and her children into such a vulnerable position. Draco had accepted the move with surprising equanimity.

He excused himself from the table once Harry was settled – sending his son a sympathetic look as Hermione started to quiz him again on how his final exam had gone the day before – and started to make the rounds.

He had barely said hello to three people before he turned around and found himself face to face with Severus Snape.

"Black." Severus sneered.

"Snape." Sirius drawled back. He raised his glass. "How's your new position?"

Severus inclined his head, his heavy fall of black hair almost obscuring his face. "Acceptable." He glanced around swiftly, eyes landing on Harry. "You do not have to be concerned. I will not approach him."

Sirius sighed. "He doesn't hate you; he just doesn't forgive you."

"Like father like son." Severus stated.

Sirius almost bit his tongue in the effort to stop himself from snapping back. "I haven't had a chance to thank you yet for what you did in the graveyard so: thank you."

Severus looked as though he'd been slapped.

"Our paths may cross in future." Sirius pointed out. "We may still not like each other much but we managed a civil and even grudgingly good working relationship there at the end. I'd like to think we can continue to be adults about this and leave our past in the past."

Severus gave a slow nod. "A reasonable suggestion."

Sirius breathed out slowly.

"I should return to my work." Severus said, looking around with barely hidden horror.

"Shanghaied were you?" Sirius asked, keeping his amusement well hidden.

"Director Croaker is very much like Albus in some ways." Severus admitted dryly. He gave a short bow of his head. "Lord Black."

"Unspeakable Snape." Sirius let him go with some relief. His interactions with Snape were never going to be easy regardless of their mutual attempt to maintain civility. And Snape was right. He was never going to forgive him for telling Riddle the prophecy; his efforts to defeat Riddle, to keep Harry safe – they didn't wipe away that act. He figured Snape rather felt the same himself.

Sirius took a sip of his drink and made for Daniel at the wizard's signal to join his group. It didn't matter in the end. Any of it. Their school-hood angst was buried in the past. Snape's sins – well, he'd answer for those when he met Lily in the afterlife. And while their paths might cross with Snape's new position with Bertie, Snape was gone from Sirius's every-day life, from Harry's.

It was time to move on.
Remus winced as Harry made another sharp turn in the sky and rubbed his head wearily.

"…and then the shark turned pink with purple polka dots." Sirius said, finishing the tale of scuba-diving in the Great Barrier Reef with aplomb – or at least Remus thought that was what the tale was about.

"Very nice, Pads." Remus said absently.

Sirius snorted loudly, finally dragging Remus's attention back to his old friend and away from Harry's flying. "You weren't listening, Moony."

"I was…" Remus caught Sirius's knowing look, "alright, alright, I wasn't listening! How can I listen when Harry is up there doing that?!"

"Flying?" asked Sirius dryly.

"Have you seen the acrobatics he's doing?!" Remus argued, turning away from the window and pacing back to his seat in front of Sirius's desk. "He's going to fall and…"

"And turn into Snitch and be perfectly fine." Sirius completed. He looked at Remus speculatively. "So, what's going on with you, Moony?"

Remus lasted for all of a second before he gave a frustrated cry and collapsed into his seat. "She's driving me mad!"

Sirius's lips twitched and Remus's eyes narrowed on his oldest friend. Sirius remained silent and expectant.

"I swear the last couple of weeks she's just trying to make me go grey!" Remus complained plaintively. "I mean, the food cravings are weird enough, and she can't sleep except on her back, so don't get me started on the snoring – or the need to visit the loo every five minutes, but then she keeps insisting on going for long walks around the Estate and into the Alley! She's bought out every shop! She can't possibly need anything else!"

Sirius calmly got up and walked over to the side cabinet. He poured a single glass of whiskey and brought it back to Remus.

"Drink it, Moony." Sirius ordered briskly.

Remus frowned but he followed the instruction. The warmth of the alcohol hit the back of his throat before flooding through the rest of him. He grimaced a little at the taste.
"So, Dora's very pregnant and she's driving you mad because you're in overprotective Moony mode." Sirius summarised sitting back down.

"That's…” began Remus indignantly before catching sight of Sirius's knowing grey eyes and deflating, "fairly accurate."

"Look, you only have another month." Sirius said soothingly. "And you'll have a wonderful baby boy at the end of it."

"I might not survive another month." Remus protested grumpily.

Sirius coughed to hide a laugh.

"I'm sure as my best friend you're supposed to be more supportive!" complained Remus. "Honestly? If she's not driving me nuts with her independence, it's her cravings or her suggestions for names!"

"I thought you'd settled on John Theodore?" queried Sirius with a touch of bewilderment.

Remus didn't blame him. They had settled on the name before Sirius had left for Australia but then…

"Dora decided it was too boring." Remus said tersely. "She wants to call our son Ziggy!"

Sirius wasn't quite quick enough to disguise the bark of laughter but he waved an apologetic hand and gestured at Remus. "What can I do to make it better, Moony?"

Remus sighed. "You're doing it." He admitted. It was good just to talk to Sirius face to face. "I missed you these past couple of weeks."

"The holiday was good." Sirius said. "For both me and Harry."

Remus nodded. He could see it had been in the healthy glow of Sirius's skin, the peaceful look in his eyes, and the good weight he'd put on.

"So is Simeon coming to Britain?" He asked, changing the subject away from his impending parentage and Dora's strange pregnancy quirks.

"Yes." Sirius said. "He wants to come closer to the family. But Anna wants to stay in Australia until the baby is born so they won't move until next Summer."

Remus nodded, remembering how chaotic his and Dora's move to the farm and back had been. "Makes sense."

"How about you?" Sirius pointed to the window where Harry's flying antics with some of the younger members of Remus's pack continued. "Pack settled in?"

"Yes, although they're pleased we're still keeping the farm as a second sanctuary until things get settled politically." Remus said.

"Patrick doing better?" Sirius asked.

Remus smiled at the mention of his beta. "He's doing very well. The prosthetic is great. He's getting better every day." And getting closer with Sian. Remus was almost certain they were sleeping together. "I've been invited to an Alpha meeting in Paris early next month. I think Gregor and Robert are keen to make the alliance permanent."

"Good." Sirius said. "Stability can only be a good thing, right?"
Remus nodded. "But it will mean my duties to the pack will take precedence at times and…"

"And we should really discuss whether it's appropriate for you to stay as our steward." Sirius finished.

"I'm staying." Remus said firmly, a stubborn glint appearing in his eye. "I just need help." He gestured with the empty glass. "If I was yours and Harry's steward only, it would be fine, but I also look after the Wenlock and the Malfoy estates, and now…"

"Nott's and Dumbledore's." Sirius winced.

"Well, to be fair, Albus only really left a lot of books. His personal wealth wasn't all that much." Remus allowed.

Sirius pointed at him. "What's your proposal?"

"Patrick can cover the paperwork and most of the duties associated with my Alpha duties and I get a secretary to assist him." Remus immediately began. "There's a young werewolf, Kevin, who has just joined us. I think he and Patrick would be a good team. That takes care of my pack's day to day needs."

"Clara still helping you with the steward duties?" Sirius asked.

Remus nodded. "I want to put her in charge of the Black estates under my supervision."

Sirius inclined his head in agreement.

"I'll retain the Potter estates personally." Remus stressed. He didn't want to put Harry's future into anybody else's hands.

"That still leaves all the others." Sirius said dryly.

"Christopher Wenlock begins his service at the beginning of September." Remus reminded him. They'd had a meeting with the Wenlocks just before the trip to Australia. While their mother was still frosty towards Sirius and Harry, the kids were respectful and pleased to be included in the discussions of their future. "I'd like to put him in charge of looking after his own estates, mentoring him in that so he learns. The aim would be that once he has shown he can be a good steward, we'd expand his duties to other estates."

"And in the meantime?" prompted Sirius.

"I'd like to hire someone else to be the steward for the Malfoy and Nott estates." Remus concluded. "I have a candidate in mind." He passed over a single piece of parchment.

"Viktor Krum?" Sirius's voice was heavy with surprise and incredulity.

Remus smiled smugly. "Krum took a curse which means he's healing for the next year and out of Quidditch. He wants to stay in England and continue his courtship of Natalie Warren – it wouldn't surprise me if they announced an engagement. They've barely been separated since the battle."

"Hmmm." Sirius placed the parchment down. "So, you stay as steward, delegate more to your deputies and supervise two juniors? This right?"

"Wenlock and Krum both took Estate Management at Durmstrang. Wenlock was being groomed by his father to take over eventually and knows most of the Wenlock estate. Krum similarly has been
taught by his father in regards to his own estate." Remus said firmly. "Neither are starting from scratch."

"Fine." Sirius gave in with a huff.

"I would have thought you'd be more pleased I've found a solution that allows me to stay on." Remus said, a touch aggrieved.

Sirius sat forward, leaning on the desk and clasping his hands. "Remus, you and I both know that you only took the job because you wanted to help me and help Harry, and the steward's position gave you a way of doing that and earning your keep – your words not mine." His grey eyes pinned Remus's gaze and he was unable to look away. "I would have happily have had you simply live with us as our friend and Harry's honorary Uncle Mooey, but you and I both know your pride wouldn't have accepted that."

Remus flushed because Sirius was right.

"And back then I could see you needed a reason to feel needed, to have something solid that gave you an excuse to be in Harry's life." Sirius continued. "But that was then. Right now, you're family. You're a member of the House of Black because you're Dora's husband. You don't have to create a reason to stay in our lives; you'll always be a part of the family. Merlin, you would be even if you weren't married to Dora and didn't want the steward's job anymore."

"I know that!" Remus felt compelled to say.

"Then why are you so determined to stay on as steward?" asked Sirius. "You can't tell me you wouldn't rather be writing books or teaching or both! If you took on the pack fully, and took a paying job as the Pack's Alpha – which you could because I know we set the terms of the trust for the Pack to ensure the salary was included – you could do that."

Remus sighed and slumped back in his chair. He gathered his thoughts into some kind of order before he looked back to Sirius and caught his gaze again. "I know in my heart that you'd never turn me away, that I don't need to your steward to be part of your lives. I know that. I also accept that there are other jobs I might prefer to do."

"But?" prompted Sirius gently.

"But last year I promised you I wouldn't walk away this time and…and not being your steward? It feels like walking away." Remus stopped there because the lump in his throat wouldn't let him continue.

Sirius sat back and nodded slowly. "Alright but we'll review this when Harry graduates from Hogwarts."

The relief almost turned his bones to jelly.

Remus gave his own swift nod of agreement. "That sounds fair."

Sirius gave a low hum.

"When do we find out about his exam results?" Remus asked, changing the subject.

Sirius shot him a look which told him he knew exactly what Remus was doing, but he cleared his throat to answer. "Tomorrow. We have a meeting with Minnie just before the memorial match."
Remus glanced out towards the window where Harry was still flying. "Will he play?"

"I'm not sure." For a moment, Sirius's face showed his worry and concern. "He'll play if he's ready." He glanced back towards the portrait of his grandfather. "Some things just take time."

Remus frowned wondering if he'd done the right thing to push Sirius to make peace with his grandfather's memory.

Dobby popped in right beside him and it took all of Remus's control not to shriek like a startled teen. He glared at the elf.

Dobby glared right back at him. "Miss Dora be wanting something called Weetabix dipped into peanut butter sauce. Mipsy panicked called me."

"It's a muggle cereal." Sirius offered helpfully.

Remus got up knowing his day was going to be spent hunting down his wife's latest craving in a muggle supermarket. "Tell Mipsy I'll take care of it, Dobby." The elf assigned to the Estate was wonderful with the Pack but she was always nervous about telling him anything that might even hint she was criticising Dora.

Dobby popped out and Remus turned to leave. He was almost at the door when Sirius called out to him. He turned back inquisitively, one hand on the door.

"I'm glad you're staying, Moony." Sirius said simply.

"I love you too, Pads." Remus said. He cleared the threshold and started to close the door. It was almost closed when he heard a soft sigh and…

"Time to wake up, Grandfather."

Remus closed the door and smiled.

o-O-o

Because he'd been watching him closely, Harry saw the moment when Dougal attempted to evade a bird and slipped from the broom.

He immediately dived after the falling boy and managed to get alongside him within seconds. Harry reached out and grabbed Dougal, pulling him onto Harry's broom. Dougal clung onto him tightly as the broom lurched. Harry focused on keeping control as they descended. He was relieved when he steered them down without incident.

Dougal was shaking as he clambered off Harry and he lowered himself to the grass with evident relief.

Harry summoned the runaway broom which Dougal had fallen from. The broom zoomed through the sky and stopped beside Harry, hovering in mid-air a couple of feet from the ground.

Dougal looked at the broom with horror. "I'm not getting back on that!"

"You should." Harry insisted firmly. "You over-adjusted when you evaded the pigeon; that's why you fell. You just need to get back on and get over it."

"I fell!" Dougal pointed out fiercely. "I would have been a pancake if you hadn't caught me!"
"But I did," Harry said, "and that's why you should always have someone with you until you get really competent; you're still learning." He dismounted and sat down beside the younger boy. "You can't let this get to you. I have this friend, Ginny? She fell off a broom last Summer. It was a really bad fall and she broke her arm. But she didn't let it stop her. She kept flying and she helped her team win the Quidditch cup."

Dougal lowered his head, his blond bangs falling into his eyes. "I'm scared." He muttered in such a low voice, Harry almost couldn't hear him.

He searched for the right words to say. "It's always scary," he began, "when you fall or something goes wrong and you get hurt. Because when you get up and have to face doing it again, you know how it felt when it went wrong, when you got hurt."

"So why do it again?" Dougal asked.

"Because if you don't face your fear and get back on the broom, you're letting yourself be constrained by it and you're denying yourself an experience which you love and enjoy." Harry said. "The fear will have won."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Harry's whole body vibrated with a realisation, an epiphany. Wasn't he doing the same as Dougal avoiding the Quidditch pitch? Yes, he'd almost died but he'd survived.

He'd lived and he deserved to fully live.

And maybe that was the thing he should focus on.

Dougal gave a heartfelt sigh and pushed off the ground. He reached for his discarded broom with a stubbornly determined look. "Alright. I'll go up again but…"

"I'll be with you." Harry promised, scrambling to his own feet.

The thought stayed with him as he and Sirius wandered into Hogwarts to get the results of the exams Harry had sat earlier in the Summer. Harry couldn't help but notice the bustling school preparing for the memorial match.

"You alright?" asked Sirius. "You've been pretty quiet since we got back from the Estate yesterday."

"Just thinking about things." Harry said as they moved through a restored corridor; its pristine walls and floor gave no sign of the battle that had been waged within it.

"Anything I can help you with?" Sirius asked.

Harry shook his head. "Something I have to work out for myself." He smiled at Sirius. "But thanks."

Sirius smiled back at him as they approached the gargoyle. "This have anything to do with you bringing your broomstick with you?"

Harry flushed he'd hoped Sirius wouldn't have noticed the shrunken broom in his robe pocket.

"Maybe." Harry gave a half-shrug and turned to the gargoyle. Before he could say the password the gargoyle moved granting them access.

He and Sirius continued up the stairs.

Sirius knocked sharply on the door before they entered.
Minerva sat behind her desk and to the side were Flitwick, Sprout, Babbling and Moody. The latter two Professors were new Heads for Gryffindor and Slytherin. "Come on in, Harry; Sirius." She waved and a set of chairs sprang up for them.

Sirius ushered Harry into one and took the other. "Well, how'd he go?"

Minerva smiled warmly at Harry. "Welcome back to Hogwarts and Gryffindor, Mister Potter."

Harry grinned back at her. He'd thought he'd done enough to secure his place in the school but it was good to know for certain. "Thank you, Professor."

Sirius clasped his shoulder for a moment. "Well done, kiddo."

"Now, we need to cover your lesson plan for this year." Minerva said tapping the parchment in front of her. "You've achieved Outstanding passes in your Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL, your Charms and Transfiguration."

Harry bit his lip. He hadn't realised he'd sat his OWLs! He'd thought they were just end of year exams.

"Your practical in your Defence OWL is also noted as an Outstanding grade at NEWT level." Minerva continued. "But we need to bring up your theory knowledge before you could sit that."

Harry darted a glance at Sirius who looked torn between glee, pride and shock.

Sirius took a breath and seemed to pull himself together. "Independent lessons then?"

Moody nodded. "You'll be taking your Defence with me, Potter."

Harry gave the old auror a smile. He liked Moody and he couldn't think of a better Head of House for Slytherin in the wake of the battle.

"And independent lesson plans with both Professor Flitwick and myself." Minerva said. "We'll obviously cover your Charms and Transfiguration lessons." She gestured. "You may have heard that I have appointed Miss Warren to the position of Associate Transfiguration Professor and as such she will only take the lower years. I'll retain schooling of the NEWT classes until she secures her Mastery."

Harry nodded in understanding.

Professor Babbling smiled happily at him. "I am also thrilled to say you also passed your OWL in Runes with an Outstanding. Do you wish to proceed to the NEWT class?"

"Please." He really enjoyed Runes and he was looking forward to the class. Hermione had also passed her OWL and would take the NEWT with him.

"The other classes will be taken with your year group." Minerva said. "On those classes combined, you came an overall fourth in your year, Harry, which given the…the distractions you faced is a remarkable achievement."

Sirius beamed at him, the picture of a proud father.

"You'll move back into the dorms and be required to wear the usual school uniform." Minerva continued.

Harry nodded. He'd expected that and, while the idea of moving back into the dorm did worry him,
he figured Ron and Neville would support him through it.

"With one addition." Minerva concluded.

Harry frowned at her.

Her lips twitched and she tossed a badge to him.

He caught it automatically just like he had caught every snitch. He opened his fist and in his palm lay a shiny prefect badge.

"But…" he began.

"You and the four students who participated in the spell are being made Special Prefects." Minerva said briskly. "It recognises the service and the bond you have with Hogwarts. Of course, the other usual house prefects will receive their badges today. They received special letters this morning."

Harry wondered if Hermione had get one. She had been slightly despondent when the usual school letter had arrived without a badge attached to it. Luckily Minerva had been there to explain that the prefect positions would be announced with the memorial.

"I would also encourage you to try-out for the Quidditch team." Babbling said. "It would be good for Gryffindor to retain the trophy."

"And on the subject of Quidditch," Minerva said briskly, rising, "we should make a move and start to get things organised for today's match."

"Perhaps I could have a word with Harry while you are gone?"

Harry froze at the sound of Albus Dumbledore's voice. His eyes flickered up and left to the portrait he'd missed when he'd entered.

"Albus…" began Minerva in an exasperated remonstrative tone that told Harry she had warned the former Headmaster from making demands and had been ignored. The other Professors were also shooting looks of disapproval at the portrait.

"It's alright." Harry said before she could really get going.

Minerva looked at him sharply. "Are you certain, Harry?"

He nodded. If he was going to get back on the broom, he wasn't going to do it half-heartedly. He'd quite enjoyed talking with his Grandpa Black.

Sirius's hand landed warm on the back of his neck. "Do you want me to stay?"

Harry shook his head.

Sirius squeezed gently and let go.

"Actually, Sirius, I'd like to speak with you on something." Minerva said. "Why don't we use your old rooms? Harry can join you there when he's done."

Sirius nodded. "Lead the way."

Within moments, Harry found himself alone in the office.
"I am sorry, my boy," Dumbledore's portrait said, "I did not mean to put you on the spot."

"Yes, you did." Harry replied evenly. "If you really didn't mean to, you wouldn't have done it."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said quickly, "but I felt it was important we speak after what happened. When you didn't come to see me after the funeral I believed I should take the next opportunity."

"We have spoken." Harry corrected the portrait. "I spoke with you through the Veil in my dreams. You told me you were ready for your next adventure especially as you wouldn't have lived long with the injury you took; that I shouldn't feel guilty; that dealing with the aftermath of a war was tough."

Dumbledore's portrait seemed completely taken aback. "Extraordinary."

Fawkes flashed into the office and flew to land on Harry's shoulder. He trilled at him gently. Harry let the bird soothe him.

"I'm the Master of the Hallows." Harry said, rubbing Fawkes's head. "I'll always be able to call them and use their powers."

"That amount of power…" cautioned the portrait.

"Is dangerous." Harry nodded. "The wand and the stone will cease to work when I die." He knew that like he knew the shape of his own hand. It just was. "Their purpose will have been served."

"Purpose?" questioned Dumbledore.

Harry wasn't unaware their conversation was gathering attention with the other portraits.

Hogwarts stirred, the dragon opening her eyes and staring out into the office. "The portraits are compelled to keep the Headmaster's secrets. They will not speak of anything you say to anyone else."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I'm not the Headmaster yet."

"Yes," Hogwarts said dryly, "you are and have been since you appointed the four who woke me. You just haven't assumed the position formally yet."

Harry accepted that. He guessed she would know better than anyone else.

"I died." Harry said starkly.

Fawkes let out another soothing trill.

"I don't remember much of it." Harry continued. "Just…overwhelming sense of peace and my parents' love mostly." He hesitated and forced himself to say the rest. "And Death."

Dumbledore's portrait had finally lost his twinkling eyes. "You spoke with Death?"

"Not exactly." Harry closed his eyes. "I stood with Death on every battlefield, I was the Raven on his shoulder, the dead around us and the Grim at our feet. I was in every moment of time, every possibility that was and will be." He opened his eyes and looked at Dumbledore. "It's my past and my future."

"Death's Champion." Hogwarts said solemnly.

Harry nodded. "I thought it was just about Riddle but…but it's more than that. Plans and actions put
He felt the surge of butterflies in his stomach again because there were glimpses of the future he could only just sense; things to come that he'd Seen. Things he'd been denying and blindly ignoring as his body healed and his mind tried to make sense of it all.

But he was done being afraid. It was time to get back onto the broom.

Harry tilted his head towards Dumbledore. "I want to thank you. Both for Sirius and for me – we wouldn't be here if you hadn't stepped up."

The portrait Dumbledore looked pleased. "You are more than welcome."

Harry turned back to Hogwarts as Fawkes remained a stalwart weight on his shoulder. "Hogwarts."

"Yes, Headmaster." The dragon replied in parseltongue, an amused understanding flitting across her reptilian features.

"What can you tell me about Avalon?" Harry asked.

The dragon stirred, wings stretching out for a long moment before settling again. She looked at Harry almost approvingly. "There is a tale of a Once and Future King..." she began.

Harry sat back to listen.

It was much later when he left the office. He hurried to his and Sirius's old quarters, certain that Sirius was probably worried. He wasn't wrong. He found Sirius in his old room, looking out of the window at the busy rebuilt Quidditch pitch. It was teeming with people.

He saw Sirius's relief at the sight of him written as bold and brash across Sirius's face before his father managed to wrangle his expression under control.

"Good talk?" asked Sirius.

"Yeah," Harry smiled sheepishly. "I got talking to Hogwarts." He sat down beside Sirius in the window seat. "I asked her about Avalon."

Sirius's eyebrows rose and he peered at Harry speculatively.

"I carry Merlin's legacy." Harry said. "Hermione now carries Morgana's. I don't think that's a coincidence."

"No." Sirius agreed with surprising solemnity. "Probably not." He gazed at Harry with silver eyes that suddenly saw too much. "When you..." he stopped as though he was unable to actually say the words, "when you...how long did you spend with Death?"

"A second." Harry said. "An eternity." He gazed back at his father. "And you were always there beside me."

Sirius reached over and cupped his shoulder. "And I always will be." His lips twitched. "Whether magic tethers me to you or not."

Harry leaned into the touch, relaxing for the first time in what seemed forever. A movement outside the window caught his eye – the Gryffindor banner had been raised and was flying high from the North corner of the pitch.
Sirius patted his shoulder and slipped off the seat. "Try not to give Remus a heart attack with the
tricks you do."

Harry grinned, contentment that Sirius just knew what Harry intended rushing through him in a wave
of pleasure that Sirius knew him. He shooed Sirius from the room and called Dobby – there was a
uniform he needed to put on.

He was more than a little surprised he didn't meet anyone on his way to the pitch – the corridors and
stairscases of Hogwarts silent and echoing with his footsteps. He jogged down the pathway, not
slowing at the line of students waiting at the new players' entrance to the pitch. He saw the faces of
some light up, some grinned knowingly, as he passed them. He got to the front of the line where Ron
goggled at him with an open mouth and Draco rolled his eyes expressively.

Harry ignored them and nudged a widely-grinning Ginny. "Can I cut in, Gin?"

"You have to loan me your broom for my try-outs next year." Ginny retorted, her brown eyes
shining with a familiar Weasley mischief.

"Done." Harry said breezily.

She stepped out of the line with an exaggerated step and ushered him into it with a sweep of her arm.
She was giggling as the Gryffindor Chasers pulled her back into the line by them.

Ron finally closed his mouth and motioned at him. "I thought…"

"Have to get back on the broom sometime." Harry said with a shrug.

Ron looked at him but seemed to think better about whatever he'd been about to say. "Well…just
make sure you get the Snitch."

Draco sniffed. "Don't expect me to go easy on you, Cousin."

Harry just grinned back.

"Right, then!" Ron turned to the waiting lines. "Don't forget the rules! Full team out at the start.
Seekers stay on, two players change at the whistle on both teams! Players can swap roles about but
you should try and play the positions which are coming off! Beaters will swap out first, then Chasers,
then Keepers! Any questions?"

There was a snicker of laughter further down the line but everyone nodded, faces slightly anxious
but eager to get going.

"And NOW," Lee Jordan's voice sounded over the pitch, "let's welcome the players to this
Hogwarts' Memorial Pick-Up Match!"

And the game was on.

o-O-o

Theo watched as the first set of players took to the sky. He almost smiled as Harry was announced as
one of the Seekers. He'd known the other boy wouldn't let his fear dictate his actions for long. After
all, Potter was nothing if not a Gryffindor. Beside him he could see Blaise handing over a galleon to
a smugly satisfied Neville while the Patil twins smiled at their antics.

On his other side, Ted Tonks gently poked him. "Alright, Theo?"
Theo nodded. Ted was a comforting solid presence. He was so unlike Theo's Father in so many ways that it was a blessing, and yet Theo knew Ted cared about him already; saw him as a son already. It was evident in everything Ted did to make Theo welcome; to ensure he had all he needed. Theo might have felt guilty for the affection he already felt for the other wizard but he knew his own father would want nothing more for him than to be safe and happy. Benjamin Nott had given his life to make that happen after all.

If he understood Ted, Theo was at a bit of a loss about the women in his new family. Dora was a constant surprise. So unlike the pureblood women Theo had been socially exposed to with his father's set of friends, yet so funny and kind and smart...she was a character. She was also settling into a big sister role with him so fast, Theo was hard pressed to remember when she hadn't been part of his life.

He was looking forward to the baby; to being an honorary uncle even if he wasn't certain the latest name for the baby boy would stick. Remus hadn't looked all that happy at the idea of calling his son Romulus and Theo couldn't blame him, but Dora looked equally unhappy at John.

Andy was a revelation. She was at the same time the epitome of a pureblood lady and the antithesis of one. She had the manners and style of a lady but her kindness and her generosity were astounding to Theo. He barely knew what to do with her maternal care. He had never truly had a mother figure before. But he figured he could quickly come to love it and her.

No, Theo was pleased. Harry and Sirius had welcomed him to the House of Black and already he felt part of the family.

His eyes strayed to the sky to where Harry was already leading Draco on a merry chase and smiled. Harry Potter was destined for great things; Theo was sure of that. The defeat of Riddle was only the beginning.

And Theo would be part of it, helping him, supporting him.

Theo missed his father but his future was something he looked forward to living.

O-O-o

"Oh my goodness!"

Percy tugged Penny closer to him at her exclamation at Harry's manoeuvre. His arm was around her shoulder and it felt good to have her close. He smiled back as she smiled up at him warmly.

He was pleased they'd decided to try again; pleased she'd given him a second chance. They'd taken things slowly all Summer, gradually getting to know each other again.

He was pleased they'd decided to try again; pleased she'd given him a second chance. They'd taken things slowly all Summer, gradually getting to know each other again.

Percy hoped Penny could see how he'd changed. He winced remembering how stuck-up he'd been about his Ministerial job; how puffed up and self-important. He had been a prig.

His hand strayed to his belly where the faint scars of the werewolf scratches still remained. He had been so lucky. He had more of a taste for red meat and he'd noticed he was restless around the full moon but he wasn't a werewolf.

His new job was a good one. Working in Brian Cutter's office as a legal secretary was giving him valuable experience and, alongside his legal apprenticeship he was on his way to becoming a legal advocate for witches and wizards with special circumstances.

He sneaked another look at Penny; at her rosy cheeks and smiling lips; her bright eyes as they
tracked Harry through the sky.

Yes, thought Percy with satisfaction. It might not have been the future he had dreamed about, but he was happy with the future ahead of him.

o-O-o

Amelia accepted the binoculars Brian handed her and peered with pride as Susan took to the sky, changing places in the pick-up game with a Chaser. Sue flew with confidence, dipping and diving. Amelia lowered the binoculars.

Beside her Richard winced and shifted his weight.

"Your ankle's fine." Amelia told her brother with exasperation.

"It hurts." Richard complained.

"You haven't been doing your exercises." Flick said, tucking her arm around her husband and leaning into him.

Richard grimaced. "They're silly."

"They're supposed to strengthen your muscles." Amelia retorted. "Honestly, Richard. If you don't want to start walking with a cane, do your exercises!"

"Yes, Mother." Richard said and stuck his tongue out at her.

"Merlin," Flick said laughing, "anyone would think you were Sue's age!"

They all turned to look at the young girl weaving in and out of the hoops.

"She's doing better, isn't she?" Richard said quietly.

"Much better." Amelia agreed. "She said she's looking forward to coming back to school and making a new start."

"She has good friends," Flick said warmly. "The alliance kids have been there for her." She smiled a little. "She and Neville seem to have picked each other up."

Richard frowned. "Neville?"

Flick slapped his arm playfully. "Not like that." Her amusement dimmed. "I don't think Sue will think about boys for a while. She misses Cedric a great deal."

Richard nodded but Amelia could read the relief in his eyes; relief that as a father he didn't have to worry about his little girl being with boys.

"Have you seen the Abbotts?" Amelia asked wondering if they were attending.

Richard shook his head. "Leonard flooed me yesterday. They're going abroad for a while. He's asked me to be his proxy."

"I can't say I blame them." Flick added. "I'm not sure I'd cope with the unremitting gossip here either." She sighed. "Karen won't even talk to me."

"It's a very difficult time for them." Amelia said.
Brian nodded beside her. "I've seen it happen with a lot of families who have a son or a daughter in prison. The shame and the guilt can be worse for them than for the culprit. A lot of people move homes trying to find somewhere they're not known."

Richard sighed heavily. "I think you're right. I think they're going to stay abroad and – truthfully? I think that's got to be the right move for them."

"As much as I hate what Hannah did to Sue," Flick shook her head, tears gleaming, "it could so easily have been the other way around if Crouch had targeted Susan and not Hannah."

Amelia nodded. She was so deeply grateful that Crouch had looked to Hannah first. Of course, she didn't discount that Crouch might have discarded Sue as an option due to her own familial relationship with her. If it had made a difference in his choice, she couldn't help be thankful as guilty as that made her feel about Hannah.

She hoped the combination of prison and mind-healing would be the right one for the girl who had spent so many years of childhood as Sue's best friend.

Her thought drifted as her eyes returned to the game. It had been a long Summer since the battle but a good one. It had been difficult dealing with the trials and the fallout of the battle but it had been worth it.

On a personal level, her family was safe; Sue was healing from the wounds she'd sustained with Hannah's betrayal and the death of her boyfriend. Richard was alive and well, his wife providing her family with love and support.

Professionally, Amelia couldn't remember a better time. Politically the landscape was stable; the Wizengamot revitalised and reformed. Cornelius was proving, with the right guidance, he could be a formidable Minister. Bertie was reinvigorating the DOM with new blood and new ideas. Her own patch was also re-energised. The losses they'd taken in the battle seemed to have bonded the Auror and Hit Wizard forces. There were more new recruits than ever.

She glanced over to where Sirius stood with the rest of the Houses of Black and Potter. Her lips twitched.

"What are you thinking?" asked Brian in a low voice, his mouth close to her ear.

Amelia turned to him and smiled. "Do you remember telling me how you thought Lord Black would shake things up?"

Brian's eyes widened as he recalled the moment in the corridor just after they'd convinced Cornelius to give over the custody. "I do. You said you'd look forward to it."

"Well, I might not have enjoyed every minute," Amelia said wryly, "but I'm so glad he did it."

Brian gave her an understanding smile, his arm sliding around her waist. She gave into the urge to lean against him. That reminded her…

"Brian," Amelia whispered, "how do you feel about a trip to Italy?"

o-O-o

Bill rocked as Charlie punched his arm with overexcited enthusiasm.

"Did you see Ginny make that turn?!" Charlie shook his head. "How did she do that?!!"
"Ow." Bill stated, staring pointedly at his brother.

Charlie didn't pay attention, his eyes already back on the sky. "She's good."

"She's very good. I'm sure she's going to go into Quidditch." His mother said loudly.

Bill looked at his Mum shocked. He was beginning to think maybe the Wiccan ritual had given his mother a personality transplant. She had actually congratulated Bill on his assignment in Paris and had helped him pack.

"We probably should look at getting her a better broom, Arthur."

Bill exchanged a 'did Mum really say that' look with his Dad who shrugged and grinned, his freckled face alight with pride.

"Right you are, Mollywobbles." His Dad replied.

"She shoots! She scores!" Charlie whooped.

"Excellent play!" Percy agreed, dragging his attention away from Penny for a moment.

Bill shook his head and returned his own attention to the game where Ginny was exchanging high fives with another Gryffindor team-mate Katie Bell.

Across the pitch Fred, George and Ron were applauding their sister's run even if they had ended up on the other team.

"Your sister is a natural, non?" Fleur said, suddenly reminding Bill that he'd played host to his French tutor.

"She is." Bill said. "I don't think my Mum's wrong. I think she's headed for a Quidditch team." Especially since his sister had embraced finding her own path and stopped focusing on becoming Lady Potter.

"She is good." Fleur said and huddled into her coat when a blast of wind caught them by surprise.

Bill offered up a warming charm and Fleur smiled at him prettily. She was stunning and smart; very smart. When they'd been introduced at Gringotts they'd immediately recognised each other and Fleur had apologised for her behaviour at the school when she'd had a crush on him. He had suggested they begin with a clean slate.

They'd started a friendship which Bill was already coming to treasure. Fleur had provided him with a sympathetic ear about Caroline and had been a stalwart support as he'd adjusted to working for Gringotts again and prepared for his latest assignment. He enjoyed her company but he wasn't ready for anything more than friendship, and he rather thought Fleur was happy with the status quo too. Maybe one day that would change and there would certainly be opportunity as Fleur would be part of his team in Paris.

He was due to leave that week.

He was looking forward to it. He would stay in the Black apartment but he had already secured a standing invitation to the Delacours who had offered to show him around, and he had a challenging assignment to complete.

The next couple of years would be busy, he had no doubt about that. But Bill was determined to
keep up the bonds he'd re-established with the rest of his family, the friendships he'd formed with Sirius, Harry and Remus. There would be a service to the House of Potter once he was finished with Gringotts and building a future for his own House to make a difference again.

He still didn't know if Caroline had been right but he would live his life to the full and ensure her sacrifice was worth it.

o-O-o

Draco rolled his eyes at the Weasley brothers celebrating their sister's goal. They were on the competing team! Still, he couldn't deny that the Weaslette was proving to be a very good Chaser. The Gryffindor team was going to be hard to beat in the coming school year especially with Harry resuming his previous place as Seeker.

Harry was across the other side of the pitch running interference with Fred and George to help Ginny and the Bell girl score. He wasn't actively looking for the snitch which was so far remaining elusive.

Draco was hovering and keeping a look out. Well, he would have preferred to have followed Harry around as he had at the start since he suspected Harry had some preternatural ability to spot the snitch and therefore the best strategy was to follow him and hope he could beat him to it once it was spotted. But this was a friendly match and he had eschewed his chase of Harry for a wait-and-see approach instead.

He shook his head.

He would never have believed that he would be so close to Potter; so close to Lord Black; so estranged from his father.

But it had happened.

His gaze drifted to where his mother sat in the stands, Regina in her arms.

Draco wasn't ashamed to admit if only to himself that he was head over heels about his new baby sister. She was beautiful. A tiny perfect human being who Draco was determined would never know Lucius Malfoy.

His father was banished to South America and a Malfoy plantation there. By all accounts he was drinking heavily and spending most of his days sozzled. Draco didn't wish his father dead but he was happy the man was out of his life. He still had nightmares from the alternative events Hogwarts had shown to him.

Hogwarts.

It felt strangely right that his future was with the school. He was actually looking forward to teaching; to being a Head of House. It would be a new start for the House of Malfoy, a better start. One that would give his baby sister everything she would ever need.

A glint of gold caught his eye.

The Snitch!

And Potter nowhere in sight!

Draco dived after it gleefully.
Augusta watched as Harry managed to intercept Draco's run and completely disrupt it, ensuring the Snitch remained free. She rather suspected he'd done it so the game played on.

It was a touching sight. So many students had turned up to take part in the pick-up game. They were all cheering each other on regardless of the team. And so many parents were doing the same.

Her eyes strayed to where Neville stood with Blaise.

She felt a moment's satisfaction at how happy Blaise looked. He had stayed with them the whole Summer and looked better for it. She was quite certain the mind healing had helped him come to terms more with his relationship with his mother. Nora Zabini was still abroad and apparently seeing some Romanian Duke.

Blaise was quite enamoured with the Patil girl but Padma had a good head on her shoulders and it looked like quite a good match. Unlike her grandson and Padma's sister. Parvati was a nice enough girl but not for Neville.

Augusta smiled to herself. She wondered if any girl would ever be good enough for her grandson. But she hoped that once he was over the disaster with the Abbott girl, he would find a good match, the same way Frank had found a match in Alice.

Her heart ached a little at the thought of her son and his wife. She had moved them with Neville's blessing to a care home near to their manor. They would be well taken care of and they could visit often. It seemed a better environment than that of Saint Mungo's. Neville was pleased with the arrangement and that was the only thing that mattered to Augusta.

She watched as Neville laughed at something Blaise said but turned in a gentlemanly fashion to the girl beside him to include her in the joke.

He was such a good boy, she thought on a swell of pride. He had come into his own that year with Harry's friendship and the support they'd both received from Sirius and the House of Black. She believed Neville had a wonderful future ahead of him.

She looked forward to seeing it; to being there to see it. To watch him as he did find a girl he loved; to watch him walk down the aisle. She would hold great-grandchildren in her arms one day and she would happily tell them what a wonderful man their father was; what a hero he was on the day Harry Potter had defeated Tom Riddle.

And so she would continue to build a world that would be safe for Neville and his future children. Her work in the alliance was important and she wouldn't step away from it until it was time for Neville to take her place.

Neville turned to her as though he had felt her regard and raised an inquisitive eyebrow, asking silently if all was well.

Augusta smiled back at him and nodded. She had Neville, alive and whole. Her world was perfect.

Neville smiled back at his Gran and turned his attention back to the game. Draco had started shadowing Harry and the two seemed to be engaged in a spirited discussion. Probably about how Harry had thwarted Draco's glory.
Neville simply grinned and held out his hand.

Blaise grumbled and put a galleon in it. "That's so not fair." He said. "When we made that bet, Weasley was the Seeker."

"You really didn't think Harry would miss this did you?" asked Neville.

He had been pretty certain Harry would overcome his trepidation and get back onto the Quidditch pitch. But he could understand the trepidation.

Harry had died.

Harry had died protecting them. If it hadn't been for his bond to Sirius, they would have lost Harry the night of the battle. Neville couldn't help feeling grateful at the quirk of magic that had kept his friend alive.

He still felt his own trepidation about moving on and beginning to date again. He wasn't really on a date with Parvati. He was simply providing company for her while she accompanied her sister as a favour to Blaise.

He whistled as Harry dove for the ground, fooling Draco into following him and forcing the Slytherin Seeker to cut up his own team's run at the goals. Neville laughed and shook his head.

"Draco is going to go ballistic." Blaise said grinning widely.

"Krum taught Harry that move when they practiced together." Neville said cheerfully.

Blaise nodded. "Well, I think I know how this is going to end."

Neville didn't doubt the outcome either.

Harry was going to win.

After all, hadn't he already won just by stepping back onto the pitch? By facing his fear? And if Harry could face something so momentous as dying then…

Neville took a breath. He turned to Parvati and cleared his throat. "Parvati, how would you like to go on a date with me our first weekend back at Hogwarts?"

Parvati's head snapped around to him so fast, he was worried she had injured herself.

Her dark eyes were wide with surprise. "Really?!"

Neville nodded. "I'd like to take you on a real date."

"Oh Merlin!" Parvati squealed and clapped her hands together, happiness lighting up her face. "I have to find Lavender and tell her!" She took two steps away from him before she suddenly realised she hadn't actually answered him and swung back around. "I mean, YES!"

Neville grinned and waved her away to find Lavender. He turned back to the game, feeling pleased with himself.

"Really?" Padma said dryly.

Neville glanced at her.
Padma rolled her eyes and handed Blaise a galleon.

Neville shot his friend an incredulous look.

Blaise grinned at him. "Reckless Gryffindor courage at its finest." He slapped Neville on the back. "Never change, Nev."

And Neville burst out laughing.

o-O-o

Ron grinned as the whistle went and he retook to the skies. He exchanged places with Seamus who handed him the beater's bat with a wide smile.

Beater wasn't Ron's best position but the rules said the players swapping had to play the position which was up. Only the Seekers stayed the whole game in the same position as they were the only players exempt from swapping at the whistle.

He really hoped he'd still be in the air when the snitch was caught. He was glad he had ended up back on Harry's team. He was even gladder that Harry had decided to play.

He still felt bad about the argument they'd had earlier in the Summer. He hadn't meant to put Harry under any pressure, it was just…it was just important to him.

The match was about more than Quidditch.

It was about remembering the night of the battle and everyone who had fought; everyone who had lost their lives making sure Riddle and Crouch didn't win; everyone who had succeeded and come away with scars.

It was about retaking back Hogwarts and shouting aloud that the damage they'd done wasn't lasting; wasn't going to stop them.

Ron knew Harry knew it was important though and he'd been stupid to push him. He'd apologised and Harry had explained enough that Ron had apologised again and backed off completely. Ron figured there was more to Harry's previous reticence than simply not wanting to step foot where Riddle had been, where he'd had to end Riddle. Ron was confident that Harry would tell him when he was ready.

But then Harry being Harry had come through in the end. Just like he always did.

And in the meantime…

Ron smashed the bludger towards Angelina who'd ended up as a chaser on the other team. She dodged it but had to pass the quaffle and she shot him a look. He grinned back at her.

He felt a sense of peace steal over him as he flew over to intercept a bludger headed for Harry.

This, thought Ron contentedly, was his future. Hogwarts. Himself, Harry and their other friends. Probably Hermione would take over in the infirmary once she became a healer. Luna was convinced Neville would one day join as a Herbology Professor.

It would be great.

Even better his Mum fully supported Ron going into Quidditch first. Actually, his Mum was supporting all of them. It was weird. She hadn't yelled at Bill for going to Paris, or Ginny for saying
she wanted to be a professional Quidditch player.

Ron shook his head. Bill's theory was that the Wiccan ritual had somehow affected her but Hermione had laughed at that. Her theory was simpler; that his Mum was just pleased that her family had survived to live the lives they wanted.

Ron glanced back to the stands where his family was gathered. They were really lucky. Apart from Fred's ear, some bruises and scratches...they'd all come through relatively unscathed. He didn't think he'd ever take his family for granted again. The night of the battle had given him a glimpse of how terrifying it would be to lose them.

And no money or title or recognition would have made up for losing any one of them.

His gaze moved to Harry weaving in and out in a lazy pattern on the other side of the pitch.

Ron was done being envious. Ron was pleased his friend had found a family with Sirius and the rest of the House of Black. He deserved a family; a father who loved him.

And Harry deserved a best mate who supported him. Ron renewed his personal vow to do better and –

Batted away a bludger.

He shook himself ruefully. Maybe he'd better get his head back in the game first. His future could wait a while longer.

o-O-o

Hermione touched the necklace she wore and reassured herself again that Harry was fine. Sure, he was doing his usual insane things on a broomstick but he was fine. It was tremendously reassuring knowing he could change into a bird and be safe if something happened. She still remembered all too well the horrifying moments when he'd fallen from the broom after the Dementors had invaded in their third year.

She fingered the letter in her pocket. It informed her she would be awarded a prefect badge at the closing ceremony for the memorial match. If she hadn't wanted it, she was to have informed the Headmistress, but Hermione did want it. She wanted it very much. Just like she wanted the Head Girl position one day. She sighed. She was prepared to admit her academic ambitions were probably not her most attractive feature.

She was happy with the news in the letter that the usual prefects would be joined by five new special prefects; Ron, Luna, Sue, Draco and Harry. Neville had been given the other Gryffindor fifth year badge. Theo had secured the Slytherin prefect position along with Daphne; Padma and Anthony in Ravenclaw; Justin Finch-Fletchley and Lily Moon in Hufflepuff. She wondered how the special prefects would fit into the usual model.

Hermione shook herself and returned her attention to the match. Harry was being followed closely by Draco but he didn't seem to be actively chasing or looking for the snitch. She was glad Harry had decided to play. She knew he'd been reluctant to do it, still caught up in memories of what had happened at the battle.

She had almost throttled Ron when he'd pushed the matter.

But that was Ron.
There were times he was just too passionate and tempestuous about something and he pushed too far. She figured even his newfound maturity – the memorial match had been Ron's baby – that he'd still have moments of being, well, Ron.

Luckily the boys had been quick to make-up and the argument had blown over with Ron surprisingly accepting of Harry's position. She had a feeling it would be something of a characteristic of their friendship, especially as Harry wasn't happy to passively go along with everything the way he had been before Sirius had come into his life and given him a home. She had a feeling it was going to be interesting when Harry became Headmaster and they had to work together. Her lips twitched at the thought.

She was slightly jealous of the new bond they shared with Hogwarts. It was something that she would never have and she was envious not only to their connection with the dragon, but to each other.

Hermione bit her lip. She'd put away a lot of her insecurities about her relationship with Harry. Some of it was down to the mind healing and understanding her insecurity better; some of it was because she and Harry were just closer in the aftermath; some of it was the strange connection they shared between the two of them after Morgana's blessing.

Hermione wondered if Harry had managed to speak to the dragon picture about Avalon. She frowned and thought back to the dream she'd had the night after she'd gone to the Ministry to start researching what it meant for her to have been chosen by Morgana…

She didn't recognise where she was but it seemed so familiar. Her hands traced the white washed walls of rough stone on either side of the corridor as she followed it until she emerged onto a balcony overlooking a wide silver lake.

There was an old lady sitting in a chair looking out at the view. She had short grey hair in a spiky style and her blue eyes twinkled as she looked over at Hermione. A tea service appeared on the table beside her. "Tea, dear?"

"Thank you." Hermione accepted the invitation to sit and took the tea-cup and saucer she was handed. The tea was perfect. She looked out and couldn't help feeling content at the peaceful serenity of the scene in front of her. "This is beautiful. Where are we?"

"Where do you think we are?" The old lady asked.

Slowly Hermione took note of the shape of the lake, the hint of mountains and…and a familiar castle beyond in the far distance.

"The Black Lake." She realised out loud.

"A man's name." The old lady remonstrated gently. "What does your spirit tell you?"

Avalon.

The word whispered through her.

Hermione breathed in sharply.

"Morgana's blessing granted you passage." The old lady commented and set her tea aside to pick up some knitting in a basket that had appeared at her feet. "The first witch in far too long to make the journey."
"I don't understand." Hermione commented.

"The truth has faded in your time; distorted by myth and legend." The old lady agreed. "You seek answers. You will not find them in the books of Wizards, my dear."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Will you tell me then?"

"It's why you're here, is it not?" The old lady smiled and turned to face her.

Hermione was suddenly aware of the light in the old lady's eyes, bright and compelling like stars, like moonlight, like the sun.

"Balance is always needed in the world." The old lady said. "Light is balanced by dark; love by hate; chaos by order. For every agent of Death, there must be an agent of Life."

"You...you're..." Hermione stumbled over her words, shocked.

"I have had many names; Gaia, Danu, Toci." The old lady said matter-of-factly. "Perhaps here Grandmother will suffice."

Hermione swallowed. She had seen Death; she shouldn't be surprised at a counterpart. "Morgana didn't choose me as her avatar, did she?"

"She chose you as mine." Grandmother agreed. "Balance was needed. Riddle wanted to escape Death and destroy life; he challenged us both." She smiled. "When Death sent his Champion to battle, I always sent mine to stand with him. Lily stood the first time; you this time."

Hermione reached for her tea, needing the normality of it to steady herself.

"Why do you think you were chosen, my dear?" Grandmother asked Hermione.

"Because I knew Harry the best of those in the circle?" offered Hermione tentatively.

Grandmother levelled a gaze at her that had Hermione flushing and squirming.

"Because I love him and he loves me." Hermione said quietly.

"And love is life." Grandmother said with satisfaction. "His mother's love protected him and guided him to the truth. It gave him the strength to stand; the strength to use the power he wields as Death's Champion, as the one who can call on his father's and Merlin's legacy. Love led him to create the bond to the father of his heart and soul, to tie him to life. It allowed me to send you to shield him and restore the balance. I have walked beside him every day because Harry loves and is loved."

"And now? What happens now?" asked Hermione.

"Now you are my Champion as Harry is Death's; equals. The most powerful witch balancing the most powerful wizard." Grandmother said. "Just as Morgana was Merlin's equal."

"So we're destined to be together?" Hermione double-checked, unsure how she felt about that.

"Your relationship is your own, child." Grandmother assured her. "You are no more likely to be with him than you are to be without him. It is your choice."

Hermione breathed out relieved. "But I am your Champion."

"Wiccan magic will bloom again under your hand." Grandmother said. "A balance for the magic of
Wizards for the challenges to come."

"What challenges?" asked Hermione, alarmed.

*Grandmother's blue eyes twinkled. "Now that would be telling, my dear."*

And she had woken up.

Hermione had told Harry about the dream but he was the only one. Harry had smiled at the news they formed some kind of harmonic balance and frowned at the news of future challenges. But he hadn't been surprised. He'd just been pleased they would face them together. And she was pleased she would face them as his equal; someone who could stand beside him and not behind him.

An image leapt into her mind; a lioness. Fierce and proud; intelligent and strong. An equal to any lion.

A cat.

Hermione smiled.

"I see you found your animagus form finally." Luna commented, startling Hermione out of her thoughts.

"I thought I was just a domestic feline." Hermione said. It was what the family magic had changed her into after all and the form she had been diligently practicing.

"You weren't ready to embrace your true self until now." Luna pointed out with a bright smile.

That was true. But she had stood shoulder by shoulder with Harry against Riddle. She was Life's Champion.

Hermione glanced towards the lake.

"Avalon will sleep a while longer." Luna murmured. "Everything is as it should be."

Hermione smiled at her, wondering if Luna was speaking from her gift or just from her heart. "Is it?"

"Isn't it?" Luna responded.

Hermione heard the shout go up from the crowd and turned back urgently to the game just in time to see Harry narrowly missing a hoop as he avoided a bludger.

Her mother gave a gasp beside her; her father hushing her. Andy murmured something reassuring.

Across the pitch, a sheepish Matthew Inglebee held up the bat in silent apology.

Hermione shook her head as Harry simply grinned and flew on.

Typical, Hermione mused, torn between grumpiness and relief. She smiled suddenly. Harry was flying, playing Quidditch, and she was worrying about him. She guessed things were back to normal after all.

Luna was right; the future would wait a while longer.

o-O-o
Remus grumbled under his breath. "That shouldn't be allowed!"

"It was an accident, Wolfy." Dora said, dipping her chocolate biscuits into the jar of mayonnaise she'd brought with her. He'd given up trying to work out her cravings weeks before. "Stop getting your knickers in a twist."

"Boxers!" Remus spluttered out, his cheeks bright red. "I'm wearing boxers!"

He glanced at Ted who gave him a distinctly unsympathetic look followed by a shrug which said 'women what can you do.' Remus shifted his attention to Sirius.

Sirius was holding Regina, holding her securely against his chest with one hand and pointing out her brother and Harry with the other. He looked so completely at ease and so happy that Remus's breath caught in his throat.

"I was thinking we could name the sprog Michael." Dora said suddenly, dunking another biscuit.

"I thought we ruled Michael out because of Ted's drunken Uncle Mickey who is now doing ten years hard time?" Remus said, his heart sinking.

"Right." Dora grimaced.

"I thought we were going with John Romulus." Remus said coaxingly. Merlin knew it was much, much better than just Romulus or Ziggy which Dora had been set on for a while.

"John is so boring though." Dora grumbled. "I mean, no offence to your Dad, Remus, but his name isn't exactly unique."

Remus counted to ten in his head before he replied. "I thought you wanted something normal?"

"I do." Dora sighed and stuffed the mayonnaise dripping biscuit into her mouth.

"We could go with James." Remus suggested. They'd already discounted it thinking they should leave it for Harry but it was worth another discussion.

"No." Dora said firmly after swallowing her mouthful of food. She sighed, setting aside the jar and biscuits. She rubbed her belly before throwing up a privacy bubble. "Look, I'm thinking we definitely can't call him Theodore. I mean, my Dad is Theodore and his new uncle is going to be Theodore. We can't call him Theodore. And if we can't call him Theodore then I don't think it's fair to my Dad that we call him John."

"If it's important to you to call the baby Theodore, I don't think either your Dad or Theo will mind." Remus said soothingly.

"I'll mind." Dora stated firmly. "Look, it's not Theo's fault he's become part of the family – and I like him! He's a good kid. Scary smart. Mum already adores him and Dad…I can see Dad's already enjoying having a son-type person."

"Son-type person?" Remus repeated.

Dora poked him. "You know what I mean." She sighed, looking slightly downcast. "It's just…I don't ever want to make Theo feel unwelcome, and I'll never ever say I hate having him around, but I can admit I'm a little jealous."

Remus slid his arm around her to give her some comfort.
"I'm stupid." Dora sniffed.

"No," Remus said, "I would think a little sibling jealousy would be normal under these circumstances. It's alright for you to resent sharing your parents."

Dora sniffed again but she snuggled into his embrace. "I like Theo. He's really cool. He's going to be aces with the sprog." She sighed. "I just…it's the name."

Remus hummed under his breath. His eyes caught Sirius's. His best friend gave him a meaningful look asking if he needed help; Remus gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head back.

"You really want to call the baby Theodore." Remus surmised.

"Well," Dora said in too bright a voice, "not really Theodore." Her fingers caught hold of the buttons on his jacket and fiddled with them. "When I was little, I used to dream I'd call my baby Teddy, because I couldn't call him Ted as that was my Dad but I wanted to call him after my Dad because my Dad was the greatest, you know?"

"I know." Remus said gently.

Dora sighed and cuddled in.

"You know," Remus said considering the problem, "Teddy isn't only the derivative of Theodore. It's traditionally been used for Edward too."

Dora pulled back out of his arms and stared at him open-mouthed. "Wolfy, you're a genius!" She lunged forward and kissed him. She gave a squeal and clapped her hands. "Edward John; it's perfect."

Edward John.

Teddy.

Remus could live with that. He nodded happily.

Dora grimaced suddenly. "Damn, I need to pee!" She took down the privacy bubble and started to gather her purse.

"Bathroom?" asked Andy delicately.

Dora nodded unhappily.

"The new players' changing rooms have a visitor's set." Sirius reminded her.

Dora beamed at him. "You're a genius!" She waved a hand as she started to walk away. "Not as much of a genius as my Wolfy but a genius!"

Andy gave a laugh and followed after her daughter.

Sirius sidled up to him and Remus realised his friend had relinquished Regina back to her mother. "Everything alright?"

"Hormones, I think," confided Remus in a low voice that he ensured did not carry. "We agreed on a name."

Sirius raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Sirius gave a slow nod. "Good name." He nudged Remus's shoulder. "You're getting good at the husband and father thing."

Remus smiled but he was pleased at Sirius's words. He was doing his best. He and Dora worked. Yes, she drove him round the bend with her cravings and her insistence on pretending she wasn't pregnant at times, but...they worked.

And he couldn't wait to be a Dad. To hold his baby son. To introduce his cub to his pack.

He glanced over to his left where Patrick was holding court with most of the ladies of the pack who were hovering around him concerned, Sian glaring at them with disdain. He figured his plan for covering all his duties would hit some rough spots but it was a good plan; workable. It meant he could be there for his pack and for its heart; his family – Sirius and Harry, Dora and his son...

"You know Teddy is going to need a godfather." Remus posited out loud, his heart beating a touch faster because he'd assumed Sirius was going to be the godfather, and had even spoken as though it was a done deal to Sirius about it, but he hadn't actually asked...

Sirius turned to him with a sly smile. "Is that a request? Because if it was a request..."

"Pads!" Remus remonstrated with him gently but firmly.

Sirius drew himself up and met Remus's eyes. "I'd be honoured, Moony."

Remus grinned and slapped Sirius on the shoulder. Sirius grinned back and turned away to watch Harry. Remus followed his gaze out to the sky above the pitch.

It was good to see Harry taking part in the match. It meant he was healing. It meant that maybe, just maybe, the worst was over. The world was safe. Safe for Harry. Safe for Remus's family and pack. Safe for his son.

Teddy Lupin.

Remus couldn't help the smile that broke across his face. He couldn't wait to meet him.

o-O-o

Sirius figured Harry was almost done playing. The match had lasted over an hour; a respectable time to honour the dead and the living. All of the kids had been up twice and the first players were back in the air. Harry would start actively targeting the snitch soon; Sirius was sure of it.

He glanced around the stands. They were filled to the brim with a happy crowd. Over in the Slytherin stands, Sirius could see Selwyn chatting away with Wilkes and Gibbon. The traditionalists had reformed under Selwyn and so far their agenda had been constructive. It would be interesting to see how the politics would play out in the Wizengamot.

Sirius's gaze drifted to Daniel Greengrass who was deep in discussion with Cornelius. The Minister was in his element. He had certainly risen to the occasion and his approval rating was through the roof. He'd go down in history as a good Minister. Sirius couldn't quite believe he and Cornelius had such a solid working relationship but he couldn't deny they worked well together. Of course, Sirius had a lot of help.

Daniel was a good man. He was taking on more of a leadership role with the Potter alliance and
Sirius welcomed his assistance. Not that they would do anything alone; Augusta would be their third. Her contribution couldn't be overstated as far as Sirius was concerned. He looked around the stands and found more members of the Potter alliance conversing happily.

His Grandfather's portrait had been stunned at their political success and smugly proud.

"I always knew you'd be a formidable Lord Black, Sirius."

And there was acceptance there. He had spoken about the past with the portrait, and understood some of his Grandfather's motives more. They'd talked of how he had been reluctant to simply take custody of Sirius and his brother because he'd hoped his son was a good father despite Walburga's influence; how he'd realised too late just how much neglect and abuse had been in the home. Sirius had forgiven him because truthfully he wouldn't have changed where he'd ended up; he had loved the Potters and the Marauders.

His heart ached as he thought of Prongs taking form to deliver judgement on Peter. It had been heartbreaking yet so fundamentally right Sirius felt it to his bones. The rat was securely tucked away in Azkaban and Sirius figured Wormtail would only get another year from his defence of Remus against the vampires to add to his rat's life-span. It wasn't a perfect end – a part of Sirius still snarled with the fury that wanted to kill the rat – but it was justice.

His gaze caught Amelia's and she nodded at him in acknowledgement. Sirius smiled. The Director of the DMLE was a good friend. She was a good woman; a good witch. He owed her a great deal, Sirius mused. She had provided him with stalwart support since she had cleared his name.

He owed Bertie too, Sirius realised, looking around for the Director of the DOM, and finding him deep in discussion with Moody and Snape. Bertie's company almost made him snort with amusement – they seemed unlikely friends – but he shook his head and turned away. He was actually pleased to see that Snape had settled into a new life, one that didn't involve spying and where his former nemesis could indulge his passion for potions. Somehow Sirius thought Lily would be pleased with where Snape had ended up.

Sirius's gaze landed next on Bill. He was glad to see the Heir to Weasley House recovering from the pain of losing Caroline. The Weasleys were out in full force, Sirius realised. The youngest all playing while the older children cheered them on, all under the watchful eyes of Molly andArthur.

Minerva's sharp remonstration to the commentator cut through the air and Sirius swallowed a laugh at her caustic rejoinder. His smile faded as he considered the offer she had made him when they'd left Harry alone with Albus's portrait: to move back to Hogwarts and the rooms he'd shared with Harry; to be a commissioned artist for the school. She had loved the artwork he'd produced and she wanted him to paint portraits of all the staff. Sirius wasn't sure what he was going to do.

He loved the idea of staying close to Harry; loved the idea of having a bolthole for his son if the scrutiny and pressure of being Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived to Defeat Voldemort, got too much. Sirius knew Harry's friends would provide him with support; Hermione would scratch the eyes out of anyone who would hurt him and Ron and Neville would help – all of the alliance would. But it didn't take away from the fact that Harry was famous and in the spotlight even more since he'd killed Riddle and saved the wizarding world.

He was also tempted by the work. He loved painting. He much preferred it to politics. And maybe with Daniel and Augusta taking the lead there, Remus and his cohort of deputies handling the estates – maybe, just maybe there was an opportunity for him to do something just for himself.

Something to think about.
And talk to Harry about.

As if Harry knew Sirius had thought about him, his son glanced over his shoulder at Sirius and their eyes met across the distance.

Harry gave some form of salute and suddenly he shot forward on his broom…

Sirius smiled.

Yes.

The game would be over soon and the future would begin.

o-O-o

Harry let the wind rush through his hair, drag his clothes close to his body. He arrowed downwards to the ground, weaving a crazy pattern across the grass, before lifting back shooting into the sky.

He was flying and he was free.

He hadn't let his fear stop him and his heart lifted with joyous glee.

He could live now, Harry thought happily.

He could date Hermione; spend time holding hands, kissing and maybe a little bit more…

He could spend time with Ron, playing Quidditch and debating tactics…

Gold glinted to his left and he spun sending the broom down…

He could spend time with Neville, his godbrother, who understood in a way the others didn't…

And he could even spend time with Draco who was flying like a dervish to catch up to him…he could cement the bond between them into a real friendship…

There was baby Lupin to look forward to; time with baby Reggie. Time with all his family; the Houses of Potter and Black, and all who fell under his protection.

He sent his broom to the left and the snitch compensated darting out of the way.

But most of all, he had Sirius.

He had a father who loved him, who cared about him. A father who had given him a home. A father who had loved him so much he had fought for Harry, fought for a future for him.

And now that future was within Harry's grasp.

Harry reached out and grabbed the snitch, lifting it high into the air in victory.

o-O-o

1st September 1995

Steam hissed and floated across the platform.

Sirius kept a hand on Harry's shoulder as they made their way through the crowds of parents and children. They garnered more than a few looks and Sirius was glad Harry had insisted on saying
goodbye to the rest of the family at dinner the night before. He dreaded to think about the attention they’d have attracted if they’d come en masse.

Harry was already in uniform having decided he didn't want the hassle of changing mid-journey. It was weird to see Harry wearing the familiar colours of Gryffindor and Hogwarts after he’d spent so much of the previous year adorned with his own crests. They were still there; discreetly embroidered onto this cuffs but Harry was once again a Hogwarts' student. It still gave Sirius mixed feelings.

Part of him wanted to keep Harry home still but with the threat of Voldemort gone, Sirius couldn’t deny that Hogwarts was as safe as it ever could be for his son. And he would be there himself; staying in their old rooms as Hogwarts' resident artist with Harry able to visit him often.

Harry tugged Sirius towards the front of the carriages. He was apparently oblivious to the attention he was garnering from the young girls around him, the stares of awe and hero-worship. Sirius knew better than to think Harry was oblivious, of course, but he allowed Harry the pretence. Harry felt that the best way to deal with his increased fame was to simply not acknowledge it and try to have as much normality in his life as he could.

It amused Sirius that he was turning heads as much as Harry.

Sirius had opted for casual robes over a muggle outfit of denim jeans and plain white button-up shirt. He was the very personification of 'dressed-down' but that didn't seem to stop many of the women, and a few of the men, batting their eyelashes at him and giving him come-hither smiles. He still wasn't all that interested in finding romance. He had his work, his friends, and more importantly, he had Harry. He was content.

Harry shot him a pleased grin as they finally reached their destination and boarded the train just behind the prefect compartment.

"Perfect." Harry commented. "We're in easy reach of the prefect compartment but have a whole compartment to ourselves."

Sirius hummed as he waved Harry's trunk into the overhead rack. Hedwig had eschewed the cage, and flew up to the luggage rack to perch there. She gave an approving bark. She was never very far from Harry.

The space seemed incredibly empty but he had a feeling it would fill up quickly; Harry's friends would show up sooner rather than later, especially as they were all prefects.

He didn't know how he felt about Harry being a special prefect, it seemed too much of a reminder that Harry was bonded to Hogwarts. But then Sirius really didn't mind that the bond ensured Harry would have a good profession one day which didn't involve him getting into too much danger. He still feared Harry deciding to go into Quidditch after school for a time.

Angelina Johnson had been awarded the Captain's badge again and had already written to invite Harry back to his old Seeker position.

"Right then." Sirius said gruffly, knowing his time with his son was drawing to a close.

"I've got my mirror." Harry reminded him. "I'll call you if there's trouble."

"Don't forget to eat the lunch Dobby packed for you." Sirius said. Harry was still a few pounds short of a good weight even if he was healthy and fit.

Harry reached out unashamedly and Sirius hugged him close. He let him go reluctantly which was
stupid because he was going to see him in just a few short hours.

"Hey," Harry grinned at him, "I have a surprise for you."

Sirius smiled back. "A surprise for me?"

Harry shooed him back, still grinning.

Sirius rolled his eyes and obligingly stepped back. His back was almost at the doors of the compartment.

Harry took a deep breath and transformed. In his place was a young dog; a young Grim.

Sirius's mouth fell open as the Grim's tail wagged happily and he bounded over to him. "Pronglet." He breathed out the name and ruffled Harry's head. The memory of Harry's first accidental transformation as a baby filled his head; Prongs' panic and Lily's calm; his own delight that Harry had copied his form.

Harry allowed a few moments of petting before wrestling himself away and transforming back.

Sirius immediately hugged him again, a lump in his throat. "I love you, Pronglet."

"Love you too, Padfoot." Harry replied softly.

They stood there, soaking each other up in silence.

There was a courtesy rap on the door and it slid open to reveal Hermione. She stopped in the doorway as she took in Sirius and Harry hugging.

"Oh!" Hermione said, blushing faintly. "I'm sorry! I just…"

Sirius gave Harry one last squeeze and eased back to wave her inside. "It's fine, Hermione. We were almost done saying goodbye. Come on in."

He took control of her trunk as Harry moved forward to greet her with a chaste kiss, tangling their fingers together. Sirius smiled at the sight. Ah, young love. A bittersweet memory of James and Lily doing the same thing in their Seventh year drifted through his mind and he shook it away.

"Alright. Be good, you two, and enjoy the journey." Sirius instructed gently. He ruffled Harry's hair one last time. Harry's amused expression lifted his heart.

"See you on the other side, Padfoot." Harry promised.

Sirius nodded. "Pronglet."

They exchanged one last smile; one last look.

"Alright," Sirius said abruptly, realising the moment was lingering slightly too long, "leaving now." He stepped back and out of the compartment to the sound of Harry chuckling and Hermione giggling.

Sirius quickly made his way out of the carriage and down the platform to the apparition point. He nodded a few hellos, smiled in acknowledgement at Augusta saying goodbye to Neville and Blaise further down, and hurried to leave before anyone could stop him.

He just needed to catch his breath, to adjust to letting Harry go even if it was just for a moment and
not really real because he'd see him in a few short hours; he just needed to be on his own…

He got to the apparition point, grasped his wand and spun on his heel, his destination simply home…

And landed outside Godric's Hollow.

Sirius laughed weakly and pushed a hand through his hair.

Despite everything his heart still couldn't let go of thinking of the cottage as home. Griffin House was home too but only because Harry was there. The cottage, on the other hand…

He gazed at the broken down house and his memory erased the reality of the untidy garden, dirty windows and crumbling walls, replacing them in his mind's eye with immaculate whitewashed stone covered with ivy; a garden filled with lavender and honeysuckle; gleaming windows underlined with their boxes of flowers and herbs.

Sirius could almost hear James's deep laughter; Lily's bright chuckle; the gurgle of a baby…

He remembered the night of their deaths; remembered all too well the horror of finding them gone; finding Harry hurt.

He remembered the poignant angst of showing Harry around the Christmas before; of telling his son the way the cottage had been before; of the happy home it had been for Harry and for Sirius.

But then another memory landed at the forefront of his mind.

A memory of himself standing in front of the cottage just over a year before and coming up with the most insane plan he could think of so he could raise Harry.

"Told you I'd do anything, Lily-flower." Sirius murmured.

It had been a plan of cunning and guile built off a stupid brave and reckless decision to tear down one world and rebuild it for Harry using all the power Sirius had never wanted but all the power he needed. A plan to keep Harry, to keep Pronglet safe.

"It was a good plan in the end, Prongs." Sirius said out loud. "He's safe now and he's alive and he's happy."

A breeze floated over him, the scent of lilies heavy in the air, the sense of love, family and safety Sirius had always associated with Prongs.

He reached out and touched the rickety old gate as though by touching it he could reach through time and space to his friends, to the brother and sister of his soul.

"Love you." Sirius whispered.

But it was time to leave the past behind.

Peace infused him at last; the heavy grief which had been his constant companion dissolving into acceptance.

And as he took a step away, and spun on his heel to leave, he knew they were listening; knew they'd approved back then and would approve for the days to come, because his plan always had Harry at its heart – and it was always a Marauder's plan.

The End
Chapter End Notes

So it is with both a sense of achievement and a sense of grief that I say goodbye to this story. It has been a journey of delight, discovery and determination. I hope you've enjoyed the journey with me even if every twist and turn on the way wasn't always to your liking. I have appreciated the support from seeing the people who followed and who have reviewed over the past four years.

If anyone has been affected by any of the storylines here, particularly in respect of the abuse/rape elements, or believes they may be the potential target of a paedophile, I would encourage you to reach out to your local support groups, and to any personal support you may have in friends and family.

You may have noticed a few hints about the future dropped into the this final chapter and yes, there are seeds to a sequel. However, I cannot guarantee it will ever be written and while I will never say never, a sequel is unlikely to happen in the near future. I may do some Harry Potter one-shots, but the immediate couple of months are going to be focused on finishing some other work which got pushed to the side for this story and which are under different pseuds, and trying to finish and publish an original novel.

Once again, many thanks to you, the reader who sometimes had to wait an incredibly long time for an update and to you, the reader who has just found and finished this story for the first time. Good luck with your future reading and much happiness to you and your family in life.

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