The wizards are now in the new world, but can they make a go of it?
A whole new world

The morning exodus from Hogwarts was a bit more chaotic than in years past, though it was understandable—so much had changed in such a short time, and everyone was still trying to wrap their minds around it. Most of them still had trouble really accepting that they were in a new world—and it was no wonder, really; they’d been in Hogwarts since the move, and the castle, village, lake and forest were unchanged, while the mountains around them, though different, weren’t so very different that they could really accept it. It probably wouldn’t really sink in for most of them until they’d gotten to the new settlement, and even then it would probably take some time.

Most of the students continued to be nervous, right up until the moment they stepped onto the Hogwarts Express and found it unchanged, and saw the train tracks vanishing into the distance between two mountains just like always.

Harry, Neville, Ginny, Luna, Ron, and surprisingly Hermione, all clambered into an empty compartment together. Ron glowered at Hermione’s presence.

“Where’s Vicky?” he demanded, his voice vicious.

“Vicktor left with the other Durmstrang students and then he’ll be heading off for the quidditch season. Apparently worrying about quidditch was one of the first things people did when they arrived—couldn’t have an interruption in the sports season, after all. Honestly.”

“With so much else different, I’m sure it will be a tremendous comfort to most people to have some things continue on unchanged.” Luna suggested.

“I suppose…it still seems silly.”

“Sweet Merlin, would you look at that!” Ginny suddenly exclaimed. Everyone gathered by the windows and looked out.

“We’re underwater.” Hermione muttered.

“We’re just outside the space the ocean is, but it’s showing us what’s in the same space we’re occupying.” Harry corrected. “Cool, huh?”

“You know…I was just about to say how fascinating all the new muggleborn students would find the ride to Hogwarts in coming years…but there won’t be any more muggleborn, will there? Those of us already at Hogwarts are the last of our kind.”

“I hate to break it to you, Hermione, but there are forty nine muggleborn out there, scattered across the Earth Kingdom, Fire Nation and Water Tribes right now. Those from the water tribes will be the oldest of the bunch by a few months—they were all made in winter. The Earth kingdom ones were made in the spring, and the Fire Nation ones in summer.”

“How do you know that?” Hermione scoffed.

“Because Tom and I had a tea party with the spirits of this world and the spirit of the earth called magic on it and demanded equal exchange. That’s why the squibs—forty nine of them—became benders.”

“That’s…ridiculous.”
“I see, I act as an anchor to pull the whole of the wizarding world across dimensions into a completely different world—you have no trouble with that…but I tell you I had a tea party with some spirits and you call me a liar?”

“Well…it just sounds so…”

“Where are you going to be staying this summer anyway?” Neville suddenly asked.

“I joined the internship program. It will give me room and board during the summers and cover my tuition, books and supplies for Hogwarts. I do have a bit of money saved away, but I would have really had to stretch it to cover all my expenses till I finished school, and I would have been destitute when I graduated. This way, I’m covered till I’m out of school, and I have five years guaranteed employment afterwards. I can hold onto my savings for a rainy day when I actually need it.”

Ginny and Ron both started looking uncomfortable. It had only really just sunk in that Hermione had been effectively orphaned by the move—there was no home, no family, no nothing, waiting for her in the new settlement.

“We wouldn’t have left you homeless and starving—you know that, right?” Ginny asked.

“I didn’t, but it’s nice to know.”

Ron looked away, his bitter rage draining out of him once he realized she was stealthily wiping away tears.

“But, even if you all had offered me a place to stay this summer, I would have looked for other options before accepting. Your mother has two new babies at home, the last thing your family needs right now is another mouth to feed.”

The return of sunlight after hours underwater came as a surprise to everyone.

“Looks like we’re almost there.”

Everyone crowded around the windows again, each wanting to see the new all-wizard settlement. The train pulled away from the water, past a couple of houses perched a short distance from the shore, with boats by docks sticking out into the water, and then started chugging across a green meadow. After travelling for some time, they cut between two hills and suddenly could see a number of buildings ahead.

“Looks like you were right, mate, the train station is in the middle of an open field.”

“There’s stuff around it though…a good distance away but still somewhat nearby.” Ginny pointed.

“There’s the hospital.” Harry pointed.

“Where?”

“Way over there. See? It says St. Mungo’s”

“Huh, it doesn’t look like a deserted muggle department store anymore. Sweet.” Ginny laughed.

“The Green Dragon Inn…” Ron pointed.

“Really? Where?” Hermione stretched to see.

“Mind you don’t go in there, get lost in a book, and forget about your portkey.” Harry reminded her.

“Oh, that’s true, isn’t it?” she fretted.

“I’m pretty sure the portkeys are two way, and will bring you back here. I think you’ll have weekends either off outright, or at least have free time during them. You could always come back once you’ve settled in.”

“Oh, there’s the station!” Ginny cheered.

“And it looks like everyone is waiting. You were right, Harry, nothing to worry about.” Neville said with relief.

“There’s dad…where’s mum though?”

“Idiot, the babies are too little to be being apparated around, or flooed. Mum’s probably home with them, which is why dad came to get us.”

“There’s daddy.”

“Hey! Mum and dad are here with gran!” Neville shouted.

“And there’s Sirius…man, I just remembered, Adeline just had a baby too.”

Hermione was starting to look depressed again, but then she saw someone with a sign hovering over her head that said “Summer Interns”.

“I wonder what that’s all about?” Ginny wondered.

“Probably just gathering everyone up to make sure they all make their portkey on time.” Luna pointed out.

“Isn’t that Penny Clearwater?” Hermione realized.

“Who, Percy’s girlfriend? Yes, I think it is.” Ginny nodded.

“She’s part of the intern program? Well, at least it’s someone I already know, even if not well.”

“Penny’s cool. It should be fine.” Ron shrugged.

The train pulled to a halt and everyone began trooping outside.

All the adults seemed to be in high spirits.

“Oh, kids, you’re going to love it. And Ron…the Chudley Cannons stadium isn’t too far from us.” Arthur said cheerfully.

Ron’s eyes widened in shock and a big grin split his face.

“Seriously?”
“Would I lie to you? It’s a bit of a hike, but you can see it there, off in the distance; it’s probably not far at all by broom. We’ve all sorts of space, and neighbors close enough to visit, but far enough to not be tripping over one another, plenty of space for the quidditch pitch, a pond right nearby. It’s perfect, just perfect.”

Right nearby, the Longbottoms were having a similar conversation.

“Aunt Enid and Uncle Augie’s place is just over the hill, and cousin Wilfreda is down the road a bit, and there’s a forest right nearby—odd plants and odder animals, but lovely, just lovely…”

The Lovegoods were having a slightly different conversation…

“But I’m sure it is indeed a crumple-horned snorkack. He’s a friendly little fellow. I left him in the living room so you could see him.”

“Well, it’s no wonder we couldn’t find one if they’re dimension hoppers!”

“I know! Well, one mystery solved. Won’t our readers be pleased?”

“Oh, I’m sure they will.”

Sirius and Harry traded a grin, said their goodbyes and disappeared with a pop.

Penny Clearwater checked off the last name on her list and checked the time.

“Alright, we’re still mostly on schedule, but let’s move along now. Does everyone have everything? Good, good, follow me, please.”

She led her band of interns to the Green Dragon Inn which was right nearby. Once everyone was seated, dinner was brought out for everyone. The kids were nervous, but it had been a long train ride and they were quite hungry. Penny checked the time again as everyone was finishing up.

“Alright, everyone! Attention please! Gather your things and let’s head outside. Does everyone have their portkey handy?”

The kids all pulled out their portkeys and held them up for inspection.

“Good. You’ll be leaving in one minute intervals starting in five minutes. Please listen carefully. You’ll find yourself on the lawn in front of a large building. When you land, head immediately for the building, and you’ll be directed further from there. Don’t linger where you land, as others will be coming along behind you, and we don’t want any accidents. Give your portkey to the person waiting for you and tell them your name. You’ll have an hour once we arrive to unpack a bit and set up your room to your liking. When you are done, head back downstairs, and you’ll be directed to a room for the orientation meeting. Are there any questions?”

Everyone shook their head no.

“Good…because the first portkey will be heading out in….3, 2, 1”

Hermione startled slightly as the boy to her left vanished. A minute later the girl behind her did, and a minute after that it was her turn.

Even knowing to expect it, the sudden hook-behind-the-navel feeling was still a shock. She started
walking as soon as she felt the thing begin to slow, and landed on her feet. A quick glance around showed her the ‘big building’ she’d been told to expect and she hurried towards it.

Dan Richards, a muggleborn Hufflepuff who’d graduated this year, was waiting near the doors to the castle. He was standing next to a table with a box on it, that had a couple of buttons in it—obviously the spent portkeys—and beside it a double row of old-fashioned looking keys; the ones on the top all with a pink jewel in the center of the top, the ones on the bottom with a blue jewel. Hermione tossed her portkey in the box in and told him her name.

“Alright, Hermione Granger. Pick a key from the pink row.”

She eyed him a moment and picked up the closest key with a pink jewel.

“What’s the number on it?”

“312”

“Alright, that’s you on the third floor. Go straight in, you’ll see a staircase. Head up to the third floor and to your…right. 312 should be near the end of the corridor. You’ll be sharing a bathroom—there’s a communal bathroom at the end of the hall. Go, unpack and do whatever and then come back downstairs. When you go inside you should see a sign to your left that says ‘New Intern Orientation’, you need to head in there. You’ve got an hour.”

As she headed inside, behind her, she heard him begin the spiel all over again for whoever had come in after her.

The ‘big building’ was a castle—or at least a mansion in the style of a castle. There was a large, two-storey entryway in the center, with wings stretching off to either side, and off the back, and four storey towers at each end, and in the center. It was a grandiose sort of place, that spoke of wealth, privilege and old money. The entry way and the staircase were gold-veined white marble, and a vividly red carpet with gold designs and edging ran down the middle of the hall and up the staircase. Overhead hung a massive golden chandelier, bedecked with thousands of glittering crystals. It took up most of the space between the mezzanine on the second floor, and filled the whole area with light. She could hear others moving around in the building and itched to explore everything, but she only had an hour, and she’d yet to find her room. With that thought in mind she hurried upstairs to the third floor.

Her room was at the end of the hall, right near the bathroom—which could be good or bad, depending on the others she’d be sharing quarters with for the summer. Her pink-jeweled key unlocked the door, and revealed a simple room, tastefully decorated, with a wardrobe, desk and chair, bed, nightstand, and bookcase.

She unpacked quickly, just those things she thought she’d need overnight and in the morning, and changed out of her uniform. By the time she was done, it was nearly time for the orientation meeting.

She ran into a couple of other girls in the hallway—fifth, sixth and seventh years. It didn’t surprise her; her year was on the small side, and the only muggleborns beside herself were Justin Fitch-Fletchley, who was independently wealthy, and had moved his trust fund to Gringott’s long ago, and would be living with the Abbots in the meantime. Dean Thomas-Bonham had later turned out to be a half-blood, found out he owned St. Mungo’s hospital, and was both independently wealthy and had rich relatives that would be hosting him to boot. The last person who’d been on their shopping trip had been Harry Potter, but he was a half-blood as well, and had a slew of rich relatives as well as being independently wealthy, and was in fact the one who seemed to be footing
the bill for the current operation. She was lucky, incredibly lucky in fact, that he hadn’t let the fact that she seemed to annoy him stand in the way of giving her a spot; she knew a lot of people would have.

She really was going to have to see if there was any way she could fix things between her and Harry. She’d never meant to drive him away like she had. Honestly, she didn’t understand half of her actions with regards to the boy over the years. It had been like, from the first moment she saw him, she had simply wanted to know everything about him, and it drove her to the point of distraction when he didn’t comply. She had lost sleep at night and fretted herself nearly sick on more than one occasion because he was out of her sight and she didn’t know what he was doing, or where he was, or who he was with, and she needed to. The more he’d pulled away, the more he’d kept secrets, the more he’d wriggled away from her control, the more obsessive she’d gotten on the subject, and she had just known, deep in her bones that he needed to be found and kept contained or terrible things would happen…except they never did.

That desperate need had been gone after they’d arrived in the new world, and now she could only look back on her past actions with some embarrassment.

She honestly didn’t know if there was any chance of them becoming actual friends after everything…but she was willing to settle for friendly acquaintance if that was all she could get. She had alienated a lot of would-be friends and allies with her behavior over the years, and now she was in a new world, alone and clanless and needed all the friends she could get.

She could so easily have been in truly dire straits upon arriving in this world…but Harry Potter had come through, not just for her, but for all of them.

She had a safety net now, and the time and opportunity to make a place for herself in this new world they all found themselves in; she intended to make the most of it.

Upon reaching the ground floor, she and the others found themselves in a large conference room with an oval table taking up the center. On the table, in front of each seat was a folder with the words “NEW WORLD ENTERPRISES” printed in bold letters on the front with a logo of the earth held cradled between two hands and slowly rotating. Upon closer inspection, she realized the earth didn’t look quite right…that’s when it hit her: the landmasses depicted didn’t show the earth she was used to—it was the landmasses of the new world she’d seen on a map before they’d all come here.

A man she’d only seen before in the papers entered the room and headed for the podium at the front of it.

“Welcome, everyone, to the first summer internship program. Now, I realize you’re all probably tired—it’s a long trip from Hogwarts, and I’m sure you want to finish settling in, so I’ll keep my remarks brief, and then you can read over your information packets at leisure later. First, let me introduce myself, my name is Bartemius Crouch Jr.…you can call me Barty. Where we are right now is the corporate headquarters of New World Enterprises.”

A map projection appeared hovering above the table in the middle of the room.

“What you are looking at right now is the new all-wizard settlement…we haven’t yet decided on a name for ourselves, though I understand the arguments are getting rather vicious.”

The peninsula bordering a sizeable bay lit up, as did a number of islands of various size scattered
around it. Four small islands in the bay, off the coast of the peninsula lit up.

“This is where we are now, on the second smallest of the islands here.”

The projection changed, to show an opaque 3D projection of the building they were currently in. As Barty spoke, different sections lit up, showing intern quarters, offices, work spaces, classrooms, conference rooms, common areas, the cafeteria, infirmary and owlery.

"It will be up to you to keep your rooms cleaned. There's a laundry chute in each of your rooms. Fresh linens will be provided as needed and your clothing will be laundered, but it's up to you to make the bed and put everything away. In your common room, and also outside my office on the bulletin board there will be announcements, team assignments, and the like, so make sure you check it every day. Breakfast is served from 6 am to 7 am, dinner from 6pm to 7 pm, lunch will be provided on site unless otherwise specified." He looked around at everyone and grinned. “I think that’s enough for tonight. Get some sleep, you have an early start tomorrow…and before you ask why so early, there’s good reason…it’s hot on this island. The earlier we get started the better. I guarantee, for the first couple of days you’ll probably be walking around feeling rather dozy and lethargic. You’ll adjust, and then I’m sure you’ll find the weather quite delightful, once you start tanning. We've stocked up on sunburn cream, so don't worry too much. You'll get your team assignments in the morning and your schedules for the next two weeks. You'll work until 2 each day, and the afternoons are yours for whatever. Classes as needed will usually be held in late afternoon and early evening… Ah, I should stop talking. Get some sleep, good night, and we’ll see you all in the morning. Don't forget to set your alarms.”

“Babies are disgusting.” Harry said conversationally as Adeline flicked her wand over him to remove the large mass of gloopy spit-up baby Regulus had just belched all over him.

“Be nice. He can’t help it, and you were no different when you were his age.”

“Yeah, but then I was the one throwing up, not getting it all over me, which is completely different.”

Harry had been amazed and pleased by the changes when they’d arrived at Sirius’ house earlier. No. 12 Grimmauld Place still stood in the center of what was, for all intents and purposes, a decent-sized village. There was a central square in front of the house, which was currently filled with children playing. The houses had been deposited in rows facing it on three sides, and each now was a separate building with its own little piece of land around it, with a shared alley between houses. All the buildings that had been transformed into flats were in the second row back, leaving all those that had shops on the bottom floor facing the central square. It looked picaresque and friendly—the sort of village anyone would want to live in. There was a good sized stream separating no.12 from the rest of the ‘village’ that already had decorative bridges spanning it in several places, from which several men were busy fishing, and there was a stand of woods surrounding the whole village, making it a small homey center of civilization.

From what he could see, everyone seemed well-pleased by the move—people were flying overhead, neighbors were gossiping, children playing…and everyone was dressed like wizards, many wizarding things were on display, and everyone was relaxed and at ease, and not looking over their shoulders for muggles or angry ministry workers.
It was perfect, and just what he’d imagined.

He was greeted with a cheer when everyone saw him arrive, which was disconcerting, to say the least. Somehow, word seemed to have spread far and wide that he was one of the two mostly responsible for the move—which he supposed shouldn’t surprise him as much as it did, but he had been out of the loop for most of the meetings and what have you, so it was rather odd to him that so many people seemed to know his part in things. He waved at them a bit awkwardly, and hurried inside, Sirius laughing all the while.

“You had to have known to expect something like that—it’s not any old wizard who decides to find the wizards a new homeland in another world…and actually manages it! It would have been more surprising if you’d been ignored.”

“Well, I wasn’t doing it for recognition. I would be quite happy if people did mostly ignore me…unless they have reason to pay attention to me, that is. That’s different.”

“I’m sure it’ll die down eventually.”

“I hope so…four years back in the wizarding world, and I still have people gawp at my forehead upon first meeting me.”

He got a surprise when they entered the house. Adeline was entertaining Tom, and looking very amused while doing so; Tom was jiggling a squirming bundle of blankets in his arms and looking torn between being simply ill-at-ease and outright panic. He looked so utterly relieved to see Harry that he started snickering. Tom, in retaliation, shoved the squirming bundle of blankets at him. It was now Harry’s turn to be panicked and ill-at-ease; he had no more experience with babies than Tom did. Adeline sighed, and helped Harry hold him correctly.

“Honestly, you’d think neither of you’d ever seen a baby before!”

“Never this close.” Harry agreed.

“The babies at the orphanage were kept in their own section. The rest of us never saw them unless they survived long enough to be somewhat self-sufficient…at two or three.” Tom added.

Adeline sighed. “My mistake. He’s simply a very small person. It’s nothing to be worried about. Would you like to feed him?”

Harry looked down at the scrunched up little face and shrugged. “I’ll give it a go, yeah. If he poops on me, or starts screaming though, you’re getting him back.”

Adeline helped him get situated and gave him a few tips, and then stepped back to let him handle it.

“He’s got some suction action going there, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, he eats like a champ.” Sirius agreed proudly, while making stupid faces at the bundle.

The baby slurped up the last of his milk and then stared at Harry intently with a solemn look on his little face.

“Well, hello, Regulus Alphard Black. I guess you’ll have to grow into your name—it seems a
rather big name for such a little person.”

“You’ll have to burp him now.”

“Yeah? How do I do that then?”

Adeline once again came to the rescue. He followed her instructions, and Regulus gave a lusty belch, and spit back up everything he’d just eaten—all over Harry’s shoulder, neck and chest.

Tom wrinkled his nose and backed away. “Better you than me.”

“Men! Honestly! It isn’t like you can’t just clean it away in a moment!”

“It’s a good thing too…stuff never seems to stop coming out of them; if it isn’t one end it’s the other.” Sirius added.

“Lovely.” Harry and Tom said in unison.

Adeline was starting to look a little upset.

“That must be why he’s so cute…so that you don’t mind it so much?”

“It would have worked better if it didn’t come out sounding like a question.” She replied, voice wry.

“Sorry. He is cute…I just have a thing about people throwing up on me. Dudley used to like to make himself sick on purpose, often on me, and then he’d get me in trouble for it. I’m traumatized and all.”

“I’m sure.” Adeline snorted. “Come along. I’ll show you how to change his diaper.”

“Do I have to?”

“It’s good practice for when you have your own…not to mention if you ever end up babysitting.”

Tom snickered at him when he returned a few minutes later.

“Shut up.”

“It’s funny. You look traumatized from changing a dirty diaper.”

“You didn’t see it! It was all wet and gloopy and it was everywhere!”

He settled down near Tom and rested his feet on the coffee table and put the baby on his bent knees so he could get a proper look at him.

“He looks like a mix of both of you. He’s got Sirius’ hair and eyes…but I think he’s got your face.”

“He’s got my grandfather’s chin. I wish he’d lived long enough to see him. His nose is my mother’s, and I think he got his ears from great-aunt Druella.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Regulus’ little ears, chin and nose just looked like a nose, ears and chin to him. Regulus latched on to one of his fingers and Harry grinned. “I can’t believe how small his hands are.”

“He was a lot smaller when he was born.”
“I can’t even imagine it. He seems incredibly tiny as it is.”

He amused himself for a bit playing with the baby’s feet.

“I guess I’m going to have to make the rounds and see all the babies. Vince, Greg, Millie and Daphne all have new siblings, though I forget who had what. I know Draco has a little sister named Drusilla.”

“Barty and Dora have a little girl too.”

“What’s her name again? I remember I was surprised when I read it.”

“Eridanus Nymphadora Crouch.”

“That’s right!” Harry laughed delightedly “After the way she’s always complained about her name, she goes and names her daughter Eridanus Nymphadora?”

“Yeah, Andi’s been teasing her since the kid was born.”

“Oh, I almost forgot the Weasleys new twin girls in the list…any idea what their names are?”

“Elaine and Nimue. They look like they’re going to be tall like Arthur, Bill, Percy and Ron, not short like Molly, Charlie, Fred, George and Ginny.”

“Yes, they’re both long and lanky looking already.”

"He seems to be asleep."

“Put him in the bassinette there. Gently. There you go, still asleep.”

“When’s dinner?”

“Another hour.”

“I think I’m gonna take a quick fly around the area and see what’s what.”

“I’ll come with you. I’ve apparated all over the place, but I haven’t seen any of it from the air.”

The two boys transformed once they were outside. Harry flew overhead for a bit, showing off, for the kids on the lawn who ‘oohed’ and ‘ahhed’ and started clapping happily when he transformed. The rose up, high above the village and began flying lazily around the surrounding area. Off in the distance he could see the Puddlemere United stadium. He turned and looked in another direction.

“Is that…?”

“The alleys, yes.”

They flew over the forest behind Sirius’ house to where he had spotted them. Diagon Alley meandered down the center, while Knockturn Alley, Scientific Alley, Vertic Alley, League Alley and Internation Alley branched off Diagon to either side, like a splayed spider with too few legs. The Leakey Cauldron still stood as the gateway to Diagon on one side, while the other side was blocked by another pub called the ‘Seelie Court’. All around the shopping area was a number of small houses, filling the spaces between the shopping lanes.
“It’s a mixed village—witches and wizards living on the Leaky Cauldron side, mixed fairy-human hybrids, goblins, hags and the like on the Seelie Court side.”

“Cool. I guess we should head back. It’s starting to get dark. I’ll have to fly over everything tomorrow so I know what’s where. I can’t wait to see it all.”

“It’s pretty amazing…though the best part is that, even scattered as we are, there is still so much room everywhere to expand without ever having to leave the peninsula.”

“Good. That was something I know we were both worried about, having misjudged how much space we’d all need.”

“If anything we grossly overestimated how much. We could easily have had all of us, and all the scattered schools here and still had more room than any of us knows what to do with, and that’s even taking into account massive farming initiatives starting up in spring. Even if each family gave themselves several fields around their house, there would still be room enough for some time to come. It’s perfect.”

“That’s definitely a load off my mind.”

Tom landed and transformed a distance from the house and village. Harry, curious, did so as well, but all Tom did was start walking at a leisurely pace back. Harry, remembering the odd dream they’d had of summer and winter, reached out his hand. Tom obviously remembered as well, as he smiled wryly and laced their fingers together, and they walked the rest of the way back, hand in hand, their arms and shoulders brushing.

The smell of dinner filled the air when they got back to the house. They found Sirius and Adeline already seated, with baby Regulus off to the side between them, still sleeping in his bassinet. Harry and Tom took their seats and served themselves.

“Oddment, everything smells wonderful.”

Oddment beamed before disappearing.

“So what did you think?” Sirius asked, once everyone had a chance to take the edge off their appetite.

“What I could see looked great. I’ll have to take the grand tour another day though—it was getting too dark to see very far.”

"You'll get the chance eventually, but not tomorrow. You need to go to the organization meeting tomorrow."

"I have stuff to do. I want to check in on the corporation, get my summer house up and built…"

"You have a big house surrounded by a village. Guess what? That means you're technically in charge of said village. We're having meetings now to organize things on a local level, which you'll have to attend, unless you want your village left out of things. Later, there will be meetings to decide things for the peninsula as a whole, that will be based on what we're doing now locally for each settlement. As it stands you've missed a couple of meetings--sadly, you didn't miss much beyond a lot of arguing about how things should be done, and whether we should consider ourselves one country or a federation of states."

"Great. How long do these meetings take? I have a lot to do this summer and not much time to do it
in since I'll have to be back at Hogwarts in September."

"The first couple took all day and half the night and got nothing much done. We finally hashed out a procedure and voted to have the meetings only last until 2pm and no longer. A lot of folks complained that they didn't have a chance to see to their homes and settlements because they were stuck arguing all day and night."

"Even 2 pm isn't going to leave me a lot of time. Even with magic, it takes time to build a house. Bugger."

"Now that we have a procedure and a schedule, we're hoping things will go more smoothly, and like I said, it won't be forever. The idea is that the peninsula-wide meetings will start the beginning of August, so we really need to have something concrete already resolved by then. Happily, it seems the goblins have been working on simplifying the law code for some time now. They have their own country and so no longer really need to concern themselves with wizard laws, except as it still pertains to their further interactions with us. They gave me the scheme they'd worked out and I sent copies to everyone at the last meeting. With it as a basis for our discussion, I'm hopeful there will actually be significant progress at the next few meetings."

"Good. I don't want to be stuck doing this for any longer than necessary."

"Here." Adeline offered, passing him a packet of papers.

"What's all this?"

" stuff you should read before we head in tomorrow."

Harry warily opened the packet and began flipping through it.

"Bloody hell." he sighed. "I did my summer homework before we left school, and instead of having extra free time because of it, I'm just given more. Perfect."

He read parts and his face cleared of the thunderclouds that were forming.

"Oh! This is the goblins simplified law scheme. I've got a copy of this already annotated up in my room. This is what we'll be voting on? Oh, that's a relief. We should probably make a motion to make all existing laws, regulations and what have you for whatever section we're dealing with defunct before we vote on each section, or it's just going to add to the chaos rather than smooth it out. We'll probably have to hash out the rights and responsibilities of individual domains and such and how they relate to the province and country as a whole, because that's not covered in any of this, as they used the ministry as it existed on the old world as the basis. We'll have to reorganize the ministry, what's left of it, while we're at it…"

Sirius' eyes narrowed on the young dark lord when he squirmed for a moment in his seat like he was suddenly uncomfortable and slanted a heated look his oblivious godson's way.

The creep got turned on when Harry got political. Way too much information.

He glanced at his wife and saw she was staring at her plate as she ate, though she looked amused. Traitor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Reg yawn and stretch and open still-sleepy eyes to look around.

"You're on my side, right?"

He beamed when Regulus gurgled at him. He looked back at the table and found the rest of them
looking at him oddly. "What?"

"Holy hell…what’s this place?"

"Believe it or not, it used to be the Ministry building." Tom chuckled.

"I was aware of a lot of stuff happening while the move was going on, but I had no idea about this." Harry said, bemused.

"There was a lot going on. It's much more fitting as the center of wizarding government, don't you think? The former ICW building is at the center of the peninsula now. It underwent a few similar changes as well. No more muggle office buildings."

The former Ministry building now looked like a castle--smaller than Hogwarts, white stone with a few towers. It was a pretty place, much nicer and certainly more fitting than the muggle high-rise with its urine-smelling alleyway filled with garbage ever was.

Inside, the atrium looked much the same, with its fireplaces and fountain--though the statues on it were now standing together and looking into the distance together, rather than the magical beings all gazing worshipfully at the witch and wizard.

Sirius led them to the lift which took them upstairs to the first floor, which now seemed to be the Wizengamot chambers, which had been below ground before, if he wasn't mistaken. Dozens of people were already there, filling up the stands, among them many people he knew or was at least familiar with, and quite a few he wasn't.

"What's Dumbledore doing here?" Harry hissed quietly to Tom. "He lives at Hogwarts full time, so I highly doubt he was put in charge of a village."

"You forget, Hogwarts stands above Hogsmeade village. He was on the Wizengamot before by virtue of being Headmaster, he couldn't have had a seat otherwise, as his family was never one of those seated. He's still here by virtue of being headmaster, this time as the representative for Hogsmeade village."

"Great." Harry sighed. "Professor Snape's here too?"

"Lucius convinced him to convert the houses around his like your godfather did around Grimmauld Place. He lived in an old textile manufacturing village. It emptied went the place closed down and he just warded up the whole village and continued living there in the summers. Strangely, the old Prince manor went with the village during the move and all his stuff just transferred there. He didn't inherit it when his mother died, she was disowned by her family, but then the remaining family died out. He's the only one of the bloodline left, and the place pretty much stood empty all this time, though there were still a few house elves looking after the place. He seems to have just gotten it by fiat during the move, and really, there's no one left to contest it. So, yes, he's in charge of what's essentially a retirement village--a lot of old folks who had large houses and lots of descendants moved there because they wanted someplace smaller to look after so they could let their descendants have the big house. He insisted on it really. He said he had to deal with enough children during the school year; he refused to do it during the summers as well. He seems to regret it somewhat now. He initially hid his presence in the village, but now with the big house, he can't do that anymore. He's already got a dozen dates lined up with granddaughters of his villagers. They seem to think he should settle down, and they all know just the perfect girl for him."
Harry snickered, and Snape turned his head to zero in on him and scowl. He just knew the brat was laughing at him. He had a sixth sense for such things. Harry just smiled brightly and waved.

"Hey, Harry, mate. You've no idea how glad I am to see you here! I was afraid I'd be the only one my age here."

"Dean, hey, you're here too."

"Yeah, my dad's house appeared here with the hospital and a bloody village around it, and I got a message that I had to come here for a meeting since I was now in charge of the village, mad huh? Blaise, his dad and his dad's brother are all here too."

"Great, I was kind of afraid of being the only one our age here too."

"We should grab seats before the meeting starts." Tom interrupted.

"We'll talk more after, okay?"

"Don't be silly, mate. I'll come sit with you. Let me just tell Blaise and my uncles and I'll be right back."

"Okay, see you up there then."

Tom steered him towards the steps leading into the stands and then to the middle row, where he took the center seat and pulled Harry down to sit right next to him. Harry unobtrusively glanced around when he heard a faint stirring murmur ripple through the crowd and realized a lot of the people still milling around on the floor were eyeing the two of them, and then Dumbledore who was seated directly across from them on the other side of the room, before huddling together in small groups to whisper.

Lucius and Snape seated themselves in the two seats to Tom's left. Lucius, at least, seemed a little irked that the seat on the right was already taken, though he hid it well. Sirius, Andromeda and Dora sat down in the three seats to Harry's right, just as Dean was heading into the stands, followed by his uncles. Dean went up to the top tier and took the seat just behind Harry. The remaining death eaters took seats around Tom--those just below and behind being more trusted than those forced to take seats further out.

Arcturus seated himself just below and in front of Harry and Sirius. A few minutes later Augusta Longbottom seated herself next to him. The two of them seemed to have become good friends in their time working together on the board of governors. Next to her was her son Frank, who caused a stir of his own when he appeared.

Dumbledore's side was quickly filling up as well; Harry spotted a couple of Weasleys, Daedelus Diggle, Emmeline Vance--who had held Harry's seat on the board of governors until he'd fired her and put Augusta in her place, and a whole lot of old people he didn't know.

Arrayed along the front of the room were the ministry folks: minister Fudge sitting in the center, Scrimgeour and Bones to either side, the head of international relations and the head of the unspeakables to either side of them.

When the last of the milling crowd had taken seats, Fudge stood and cleared his throat to call everyone's attention.

"Alright, everyone, let's get started. When we left off last time, we were trying to decide what to call ourselves, and whether we should be a single country or a federation of states. I've been receiving updates from groups similar to ours meeting among the other settlements, and part of it seems to have been decided already. Consensus from the other provinces seems to be that we
should be a federation of states. Now, we just need to decide on a name for ourselves."

"Kingdom of Wizards." Dumbledore answered promptly. "Simple and to the point."

"Actually, if we follow the trend of the other nations of the world that are already present, we would be the Confederation of Magic. It's still descriptive, fits better with the world we now find ourselves a part of, and includes non-wizard groups like house elves, centaurs, and goblins, among others." Tom objected.

"I'll have to agree with Tom on this one. Confederation of Magic. The other groups already present in the world are the Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes and the Air Nomads. Their names tell not only what element they control, but also their system of government. Kingdom of Wizards not only doesn't fit with the rest, it isn't even properly descriptive. We don't have a king to have a kingdom, and our community encompasses more than just wizards."

"Well then, we have two suggestions. Shall we put it to a vote? All for Kingdom of wizards?"

Dumbledore and about two-thirds of those seated with him raised their hands.

"All those for confederation of magic?"

The remaining third on Dumbledore's side and everyone on Tom and Harry's raised their hands.

"Looks like Confederation of Magic it is. I'll send our suggestion along to the other provinces."

"We should have a flag to represent ourselves too." an old woman near Dumbledore announced.

"Uh…well…does anyone have any suggestions?"

"How about the magical brethren like on the fountain? Not the one we have now, the old one."

"How about a witch and wizard?"

"Just a wizard."

"A wand"

"A crumple-horned snorkack!"

Around the room, everyone began shouting suggestions.

Harry elbowed Tom lightly in the side and whispered into his ear for a bit and then sat back.

Tom drew his wand and tapped it on his knee a few times while he considered things and then pointed it into the air over the center of the room. The shouts quieted down as two rainbow feathered serpents with opposite coloring shot out of his wand and then twisted themselves into a circle that looked vaguely like a yin-yang symbol. Harry glanced over at Dumbledore and saw he had his wand out and unobtrusively pointed at Tom Riddle. Harry dropped his own wand into his hand and unobtrusively pointed it towards Dumbledore.

"Those were the forms magic gave us when we were empowered to bring everyone to the new world. It seems fitting." Tom explained. "At its base it's a yin-yang symbol. It's already a familiar symbol throughout Asia, so I'm sure the Asian populations, which are sizeable, will agree."

"Even if we forego the rainbow serpents and just end up with a more traditional yin-yang symbol, it will still work--darkness and light as two halves of a whole, working together and equally necessary. It think it's a fitting representation for what we hope to accomplish here."
"And what exactly are you hoping to accomplish, Mr. Potter, Mr. Riddle?" Dumbledore demanded, voice thick with suspicion.

"A unified magical world, working together, everyone benefitting. A renaissance, if you will."

"I like it. It's a good symbol, very evocative, and familiar in the west, even if not as much as in the east. I think it's a good choice. It's certainly better than a wizard, a wand or a crumple-horned snorkack." Dean put in his two cents.

"Let's put it to a vote, shall we?" Fudge spoke up, seeing another argument brewing.

The yin-yang symbol won--none of the other suggestions offered really got much of a following, much to the annoyance of those who suggested them.

"Well, we're finally moving right along. Now that all that's out of the way, I'm going to turn things over to Amelia for the time being. Quiet down now."

"Thank you, Cornelius. I'd like to open things with the 'goblin simplified law scheme' I received last night. Did everyone receive a copy?"

"I don't trust anything written by goblins. I refused to read it." A wizened old man seated slightly above and to Dumbledore's left answered, sounding peevish.

Sadly, a number of the old folks seated around him nodded and voiced agreement.

"Well then, you're an idiot and probably shouldn't be here." Harry replied. The old folks bristled indignantly and Dumbledore starting looking old and disappointed.

"The goblins have their own country now, and will have to be dealt with as a sovereign nation from here on out. What are you going to do if we receive missives from the goblin nation? Refuse to read them? I sincerely hope not. If there's another war with goblins, this time it will be the entire goblin nation fighting it, not just whatever clans are close enough by to add their numbers to a local rebellion."

A stir of unease went through the old folks surrounding Dumbledore.

"I have a number of friends among goblins. If you end up starting a war between us and them, I will personally kick your ass. That's a promise." he concluded cheerfully.

The old folks sputtered in indignation, those seated around Harry either grinned, cringed, or bit their lips to keep themselves from laughing.

"He makes a good point, Broderick, I'd listen if I were you." Madame Bones cut in. "For those of you with more sense than him, how many of you read through it?"

A smattering of hands were raised around the room.

Bones sighed and hefted the stack of papers in front of her.

"For those of you who couldn't be bothered, the goblins essentially went through the entire law code and removed all the nonsensical, outdated and extraneous laws that were still on the books. As most of you probably know, there were multiple laws dealing with a variety of crimes that had been added over succeeding generations. In those cases they found the common ground between the list and tried to come up with a single law that encompassed the best parts of the many that had been tried. For those that had exceptions added, they condensed those down into the main law and tried to make it more encompassing. It's a much simplified law code and will actually provide an
ideal starting point for reorganizing the settlements and starting over with a clean slate. I went through it and compared it to the law books we've been working from, and personally, I'm quite in favor of it as a starting point."

"Let's vote on it then." Tom spoke up.

"All in favor?"
"Against?"

"Looks like the goblin scheme wins by two votes. Let's get started…"

"Uh…I can't believe I'm going to be stuck doing this for the foreseeable future." Harry sighed as they entered the atrium.

"Yeah, it does make for long days, but once this part's finished it should be less onerous. Ready to head home?" Sirius asked.

"Home? Hardly. I told you yesterday, I have stuff to do and only a limited time to do it. I hope Barty left me some interns--although we probably only have a few hours till it starts getting dark. It's going to take forever to get anything done at this rate." Harry complained. "First I have to go to another meeting though--board meeting for the corporation. It was already delayed because so many of us were stuck at Hogwarts, and then further delayed because of this meeting."

"That's right, another meeting. Damn. I was hoping for some time to kick back." Dean complained.

"You can do that tomorrow afternoon. Do you both have your portkeys?"

Blaise moved aside his collar to show the golden key with a clear stone that glittered like diamond that hung at his throat. Dean pulled a similar key from his pocket and put it around his own neck.

"Great. Let's get to the Leaky Cauldron and head out while we still have daylight."

So saying, Harry hopped into the nearest floo, the others popping in behind him.

When they arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, they saw that Sirius, Lucius, Dean's uncle--Blaise's dad, as well as the parents of several of the other board members and Tom had all followed them.

"Um…"

"We intend to see the little company you've all put together. I haven't had a chance so far, though I've certainly been meaning to. Don't worry, we'll all just have a look around while you have your little meeting." Pansy's mother tutted, while patting him on the cheek.

"Just…try to stay out of the way of anyone who's working." Harry sighed. "I'm not sure how the heck we're all going to fit on our portkeys though…"

Somehow, they managed to get everyone to squoosh in close enough to lay a finger on one of the keys, and the groups landed in comically staggering groups on the other side. The boys set off towards the building, and the rest scrambled to follow them, many complaining about the heat as they went.

"Barty!" Harry called as soon as he entered the building.

A little ways down the hall, Barty peeked out of his office.
"Do you have anyone available to take a tour group?"

"Tour group?"

As the parents began pouring into the building, Barty's eyebrows rose and he grinned at Harry sympathetically. He ducked back into the office briefly and then returned to take charge of their unexpected visitors, while the three boys slipped away to the board room. They were the last to arrive, it seemed.

"Sorry we're late, the meeting to organize the settlements ran over a bit, and then we gained some baggage along the way."

"What kind of baggage?" Justin wondered.

"Parents, to be specific. Any of you who had a parent at the meeting has probably got a parent outside getting a tour right now."

"Great." Pansy huffed. "Tell me you did not give her a portkey, I'll never get her to stay away if that's the case."

"No, they all rode in on ours. Don't worry, this is going to be a one-time exception." Harry assured her as he took his seat at the head of the table.

"Griphook, why don't you get us all up to speed?"

Griphook set his moveable chair towards the wall and stood on it, before nodding to one of his fellow goblins, Bloodaxe. Bloodaxe set the projector on and had it beam onto the blank wall beside where Griphook was standing.

"We don't have any problems to report so far, and everything seems to be going according to schedule. An image of the island appeared, cut into portions.

"The main resort town has begun construction here. So far we have the foundations of the shops, and the bungalows, the spa and the entertainment districts either laid down or at least have the ground cleared and leveled for construction to begin. We have roving teams gathering up the fruits and vegetables currently growing on the island, and have storage warehouses here, here, here, and here ready to receive everything for longterm storage. Once that's been completed we'll have teams out to begin laying the groundwork for the plantations that we've discussed. Once the construction phase has been completed, we'll begin work on the beaches and watersports. If all goes as expected, everything should be ready by the time the gobstones tournament is scheduled to be held."

"Wonderful. How have sales for the tournament been going?" Theo wondered.

"Far beyond our projections. We have all the bungalows we had planned to build sold out. We've actually had to double the expected construction to meet the demand for spots."

"Wow. I had no idea gobstones was so popular…even with coverage of the gobstones games at Hogwarts being such a surprise hit, I wasn't expecting a gobstones tournament to be such a big seller." Draco murmured in astonishment.

"So you're saying our resort is actually going to be making us money this very summer, not next summer as we originally thought?" Vince spoke up.

"The rental fees for the bungalows will actually pay for the establishment of the resort, and that's
without counting any possible revenue from the shops and entertainment district that we own, and rentals for the shops and such we don't, which should be considerable as everyone is going to be here for a week for the tournament."

"Damn, that's excellent." Neville chortled.

"Indeed. Once we saw the turnout, we immediately began advertising for a chess tournament to take place the following week. While we've yet to get a similar turnout as for the gobstones one, we also haven't yet heard back from all the foreign provinces. Even with just counting the current figures, we think we'll be able to have the resort filled to half capacity at least. If we garner interest among the rest of the European provinces, we might actually be able to sell out the whole resort for another week."

"We could organize conventions for different fields of scholarship, for professional guilds, host beauty pageants, talent searches…"
"If we couple the last with a wireless station, and get the winners to sign on with us as talent, we could corner the market in music."
"We could host seminars, adult education--learn a skill, brush up on ones you're rusty in."
"We could hold crafts fairs, art shows."
"If we try to mix up scheduling a bit so that some of these sorts of things are going on when there's a convention in town, it will make the whole resort more lively, and make people want to come back, or linger if they can."

The goblins were busy making notes of all the kids' suggestions and muttering to each other in Gobbledygook. Knowing the goblins, they were probably estimating how much it would cost to set up each versus the projected profits that might be expected.

"For the professional conventions, it would be helpful for say, potions, if there were wholesalers there for the potioneers to buy from." Pansy pointe out.
"Herbology, folks with seeds, seedlings and the like, new fertilizers, gardening tools…" Neville nodded along.
"Astronomy folks might like a selection of telescopes or something." Greg offered.
"Yeah, if we put some thought into it, we could get a lot of folks with related interests all gathered in one place, and all of them paying us rent for them to meet and mingle." Percy mused.

"You know, it occurs to me that professional guilds meeting in large groups might be especially important these days--we're in a new world. Astronomy, potions, herbology and who knows what else will all be affected by the move. It would probably be of tremendous use to help foster research and communication amongst scholars." Penny added.

"Yeah…you've got that right. I wonder what school is going to be like the next few years?" Padma mused.

"I guess we're lucky we're heading into NEWT studies--we'll be helping figure out what's different rather than trying to learn the basics which might all have changed. Wow, the poor firsties." Parvati added.

"Worry about school in September. Time is money, people." Griphook interrupted.

"How are we doing with foreign markets and trade?" Luna asked.

"There are teams being put together to begin laying the groundwork for that, and we have a meeting set up the Bei Fongs next week to discuss an alliance. Your friend's introduction certainly
helped speed things on that front." Griphook added, nodding to Harry.

"She's their daughter and they're currently estranged. I'm sure they were so quick to set up a meeting in the hopes that we could help them get their daughter back, aside from whatever business opportunities we wanted to discuss."

"Other than that, we have a team in Ba Sing Se setting up things on that front. Again, the papers you acquired sped things up considerably. We had been told it might be as much as six months before we could even speak to anyone, and then all of a sudden we're told come right away." Smashammer, the third goblin on the board added.

"I wrote to the king and asked him to speed things along a bit. I guess he did so." Harry shrugged.

"You have very useful connections."

"You don't know the half of it. I'm going to try to make a visit to Fire Nation before the summer is over, but in the meantime I wrote to the Fire Lord to open up a discussion about trade and such. I'll pass his reply on as soon as I hear from him."

"Excellent."

When the meeting broke up, the kids found the parents that had descended on the island seated in the front parlor drinking tea and looking shell-shocked.

"Mum? Are you alright there?" Pansy asked warily.

"I thought you had set up a little clubhouse. I'd thought it was cute. I wasn't expecting all this." Pansy's mother admitted. "You have employees that are my age…and goblins, and fellow students and…there's just so much going on here and… I had no idea."

"I told you it was a corporation, mum. I told you we had big plans." Pansy sighed. "Are you ready to go?"

In twos and threes the board members collected their parents and started heading outside, where those that had no parents in attendance were already disappearing via their portkeys.

"You ready to head home now?" Sirius asked once the room had cleared out somewhat.

"Uh, no, not really. I've done the board meeting, now I want to get the area I picked for my summer house cleared and prepared for construction. Barty fronted me a team of interns to help get things started, but I've only got them for the next two days. I need to have the place cleared and ready when they get there, not waste the time having them do it tomorrow. I'll head back once I'm done."

"You're going to be here all day for the next two days?"

"Yep. We have another meeting then, and I won't have the help of the interns anymore. I just explained that."

"Need some help?" Tom asked.

"We'd best head out if we want to get done before nightfall" Sirius interjected. "Where are we headed?"
Harry pulled the carpet from his pouch and handed it over before transforming into his animagus form. Tom followed suit a second later. Sirius blanched when he saw the two of them side by side and realized with a sinking feeling in his stomach that keeping the two of them from being friends might be even harder than he'd realized. Glumly, he unrolled the carpet and hopped on, following the two rainbow serpents as they undulated towards the coast.

Sirius pulled in to a stop when he saw Harry land and looked out over a spectacular view in an island full of such places. A small, sheltered cove surrounding deep blue water, with a white sand beach leading down to it. A small cliff led up to where they were, a paradisiacal garden—which they were about to clear and level so he could build a house.

"The whole area looks like this, and we're in the tropics. Anything we cut down will grow back, probably a lot quicker than I want it to." Harry spoke up, correctly interpreting Sirius' look.

"Looks like we have a lot to do. I guess we'd best get started." Tom added, pulling his wand.

"Sirius? Finally! Where on earth were you?"

"I wasn't anywhere on earth, I was here. Ah, not the time for levity, I take it? Blame Harry. It's his fault we're late."

"Did something happen?"

"No. We went to the meeting, then I had a board meeting to go to--Sirius and a bunch of other parents of board members took a tour of the facilities."

"Daisy Parkinson nearly had an aneurysm. The whole damn place is full of people. It's insane."

"After that I headed off to clear the land where I'm building my summer house. I have a team of interns for two days to help me build it, so I won't be around much till then. I'll probably leave early tomorrow."

"You could have let me know you'd be late."

"The phones don't work." Sirius protested.

"I did mention I was going to be doing all this. Either you both have faulty memories or you don't actually listen to me when I talk."

Adeline glowered at him and then sighed. "Go get cleaned up. You're both filthy and you stink. Dinner should be ready in a half hour or so."

Harry gave her a mock salute and hurried off, happy to have escaped further scolding.

"You're filthy and you stink…geez, the magic's really gone isn't it?" he heard Sirius complaining as he ascended the stairs.

Tom was waiting at the building site bright and early the next morning when Harry arrived, with a yawning, disgruntled Sirius in tow. They glowered at each other unhappily. Harry ignored them both, busying himself instead in unloading some of the large scrolls he'd brought with him and instructing the interns in what they needed to do.
They weren't able to glower at each other for long. Harry was a slave driver, and he had very exacting specifications on just how everything was to be done. He gave them regular breaks to drink water and swab themselves down with sunscreen, a break for lunch, but jumped to his feet to chivvy everyone back to work the moment they were done.

Slowly but surely the mountain of supplies he'd brought with him disappeared as it was incorporated into the house. When twilight began to encroach, he let everyone go for the day, but then he was back, bright eyed and bushy-tailed at the crack of dawn the following morning, eager to keep moving, and bullying the rest into getting to work when the sun had barely cleared the horizon. He wrung every bit of use out of the interns he'd been given he could manage, and under his management, his pile of logs, lumber and roof tiles was a grand and imposing house by the time they left at twilight the second day.

"Wow. I helped build it, and I'm still impressed." Joe, one of the interns muttered.

"Aren't we all." Elizabeth, another intern nodded.

Where once had been just a large cleared field atop a cliff, there was now what seemed to be a whole complex of buildings. There was the large, rather imposing "main house", as well as three smaller buildings attached to the first by covered walkways--a dojo, which was just a large empty room, a bath house-slash-laundry, and a kitchen-slash-pantry-slash-elf quarters. Around and underneath parts of the buildings was an ornamental pond and stream that already had several large koi fish swimming in it which one could watch from most of the covered walkways and part of the deck around the main house.

Even the inside was impressive, though not what any of them was used to. Half the main house had regular wooden floors, but the rest of the house had flooring made of some sort of woven mats that smelled somewhat like freshly cut grass. Most of the outside walls had screens that could be opened to the outside, and there were sliding doors on the outer edge of the deck that surrounded the house that could be positioned to keep out rain while still allowing the air to circulate freely through the open spaces.

"It's just how I imagined it." Harry said cheerfully. Unlike the rest of them, he still seemed full of energy and raring to go. "I still have some stuff to assemble in the interior, but now that all the rest is done, that should go quickly. Thanks for your help, everyone."

"Anytime kid." Sirius sighed. He was exhausted. Tom just grunted. So was he.

"It's going to be dark soon. I guess I'll have to come back early tomorrow to finish the interior."

"We've another meeting tomorrow."

"Oh…right. Okay, I guess I'll have to come back after then. Bother. I want to get it done before I head off to visit Zuko in Fire Nation, because I want to be able to move in after that for the remainder of the summer."

"Um…Hello?"

"Moony? Is that you?"

They heard the gate that had been put up to separate the area from the resort and headquarters creak, and a few minutes later Remus wandered into the yard and looked around. After two days of back-breaking labor in the oppressive heat to get the place put together, they all had to admit it was
rather gratifying the way Remus’ eyes bugged out and his mouth dropped open.

"I could see the roof as I approached but… Good lord. You all built this?"

"Yeah. Not too shabby, huh?" Dan, another of the interns, said with pride. "I kinda want a place like this myself someday. Thanks to all this, I actually know how to go about it."

The interns were tired, smelly and hungry, so they said their goodbyes soon after and hopped aboard the flying carpet that had brought them to the site the past two days to head back to headquarters for a shower and dinner. The rest of them gave Remus the tour, and he finagled permission to stay there the rest of the summer in exchange for helping out getting the rest of the interior done.

"Not till tomorrow though. All the beds, furniture and what have you are all sealed away at the keep, and there's no food here either. There's a house elf who'll be moving in now that her quarters are done to look after the place. You can come with me to the keep in the morning and we'll grab everything and then I'll join you and help finish the place after the wizengamot meeting tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan. Will everyone be staying here this summer?"

"Yeah" Sirius agreed "Though the rest of us won't be moving in till after Harry gets back from his trip, so you'll have the place to yourself for a bit."

"You can go swimming, work on your tan and visit the resort when you get bored. You can also work out in the dojo and soak in the hot tub."

"Sounds wonderful. Count me in." Remus said cheerfully.
Hermione and Penny wandered into the Weasley’s yard, and stopped for a moment just to take in the chaos. The whole Weasley family was present—Arthur, Molly, the nine Weasley children, as well as a few extras, such as Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet.

"Percy!"
“Penny!”
“Hermione!”

“Looks like that’s our cue” Penny whispered.

Hermione giggled and followed her into the yard.

The two new babies were in floating infant chairs hovering just off the side of the table, where most of the adults were gathered. Ginny, Angelina and Alicia were helping Molly float out heaping platters of food from the kitchen. Fred, George, Bill and Charlie, and Ron had all been wrestling, or something, when the two girls arrived, but broke off their game to greet the new arrivals.

“Wow, look at all of youYou’re so tan!”

“We’ve both been working outside for long hours every day, it happens.”

"Percy!” Molly greeted her middle son tearfully, embracing him, before turning to the two girls.

“Penny, dear, you’re looking well.” Mrs. Weasley greeted the blonde former-Ravenclaw warmly. “Hermione” she added much less warmly. Hermione blanched, Penny sighed, and then smiled back. “Molly, lovely to see you. Everything looks wonderful.”

“Thank you, dear, but I can’t take all the credit this time, Angelina and Alicia are actually responsible for a good bit of it.”

While they continued making small talk, Hermione edged around them and went to join Ron and Ginny at the end of the table. She was already second-guessing her decision to spend her first free weekend here; she should have just gone to the library like she’d originally planned.

“Look at you, all sleek and tan. The intern thing seems to be agreeing with you.” Ginny noted once she’d sat down.

Hermione smiled, back on firmer ground. “Oh, it’s been wonderful. I have a nice room all to myself and the island is just beautiful, and I’ve been learning so much!”

“You’re talking about this intern thing? We’ve all been rather curious since Ron and Ginny mentioned it.” Arthur interjected. “What sort of things have you been doing?”
“What haven’t I been doing might be an easier question to answer.” Hermione laughed. “The first day there I was sent out to harvest fruit. There are little warehouses all over the island that are practically bursting at the seams. It’s all being preserved so it can be sold in mid-winter to generate revenue. The next day my team and I were given a crash-course in practical house building—from preparing the materials to actual construction. The houses we were working on were just finished a few days ago. They're positively darling, really, and oh, you should see how lovely everything is now that it’s been all tidied up. It’s going to be a resort. The little houses we’ve built are going to be rented out, and there are restaurants, shops, and an entertainment district being constructed right now. The spaces have already been bought or rented. All the shopkeepers and such are just waiting till they're finished so they can move in. I also got a crash course in making a beach—you should see it now that we’ve finished! The softest, finest white sand, and with the dark blue water all around, it really looks like paradise. While we were doing that another team was constructing beach umbrellas, lounge chairs and sight-seeing boats, while another was building docks and a rental office. It’s been ever so interesting, even if it makes for rather long days. I’m rather excited, my next rotation I’m going to be helping out in the telecommunications department. Our first project is going to be helping get the last of the large-relays constructed so that we can have phone service again; we have it on the islands right now, but not really anywhere else, and after that I’ll be helping R & D examine soil, plant and animal specimens to see if they’re useful or dangerous. I can’t wait!”

“Well, it certainly sounds like they’re keeping you busy.”

“Oh, it’s been wonderful, really. I’m really glad I opted for the program rather than getting a loan or something. Personally, I think the people who went that route were foolish, but, they were offered it, same as me. Their loss, I guess.”

“You’re working at the same place, aren’t you Penny?”

“Sort of. Hermione's an intern, Percy's been helping with the trade delegations and I'm in the R & D department. I’ve already been working on the samples that our teams have brought in so far. We’ve found all sorts of strange animals, and odd plants with all sorts of interesting properties. We’ve already found a number of plants and barks that make lovely dyes when they’re processed correctly, and several extracts that will be useful in making perfumes and cosmetics, we’ve also found several plants already that we think can successfully be substituted for other ingredients in a number of common potions.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve all been busy!”

“N.W.E. is a hotbed of activity pretty much around the clock.” Penny agreed with a laugh. “Everyone’s always bustling every which way, either making something, or going on expeditions, or processing what the expeditions bring back.”

“And when we’re not doing all of that, we’re in classes or having team brainstorming sessions.” Hermione added.

“Brainstorming sessions?”

“Yes, everyone throws around ideas for products or services, or uses for different things, or offers suggestions on how to make things run more smoothly…all sorts of things, really.”

“Did you say you were going to classes?” Ron asked, sounding ill.

“Well, yes. We’re doing all sorts of different things that many of us don’t have any experience with, so they have classes to make sure you know what you’re doing before sending you out. It’s a
lot like the Melting Pot, really, though I guess that’s no real surprise when you consider Harry started both of them.”

“Have you seen Harry lately? I tried to floo him the other day, but his godmother said he was on a trip somewhere.” Ron spoke up.

“Oh, yes, he’s in Fire Nation. He’s friends with the Fire Lord.”

“What’s he then?”

“Well…he’s essentially the king of all the islands that make up Fire Nation and their colonies in the northwestern Earth Kingdom.”

“Harry’s off hanging out with a foreign king?”

“From what I’ve heard, he met him before he became the king. When Harry met him he was just a banished prince in exile with a tragic backstory who was trying to capture Harry’s honorary little brother so he could go home again.”

“…”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I said.” Hermione giggled at the look on Ron’s face.

“When’s he due back?”

“We’re not sure. He left several days ago, and he did say he was going to be gone a least a few days…as that was a few days ago, he could be back now, or tomorrow.” Percy replied.

So, how are the new settlements anyway? I’ve mostly been on the island since coming back from Hogwarts, and then here.” Hermione asked eagerly.

“I dunno. I haven’t been anywhere but here.” Ron answered, before refilling his plate.

“Not anywhere? But…you could just take your broom and go look around!”

“Eh, seems like a bother, I mean, we’ve got everything we need right here.”

“Hasn’t anyone gone to look around?”

“I’ve been to the alleys, Luna’s house, and here.” Ginny spoke up.

“I was going to visit Harry, but he’d already gone on his trip. I guess I’ll see him when he gets back.” Ron added.

“I don’t believe all of you, I mean, if I’d had the leisure to do so, I would have gone flying all over to see everything.”

“Well, around here’s new too. We’ve been wandering around our land, getting to know it. We’ve got oodles of space now, and no bloody muggles about. We’ve got the pitch right out in the open, and we can play actual games if we want, without worrying someone’s going to see us. I’ve been off to the Cannon’s stadium a few times too—they let me watch their practice once.”

“We’re going to be busy hereabouts soon. We’re going to build a few houses and expand the barn and the crop fields.” Charlie spoke up.

“Oh? What are the other houses for?”
“Penny and I, for one.” Percy spoke up, with a slight flush in his cheeks. Penny smiled at him and turned to Hermione to explain. “I told you we’re engaged. Well, we’re going to be getting married before the end of the summer. We have rooms at headquarters right now, but we’d like our own space…and Molly and Arthur were kind enough to offer it. All that work in practical house building should come in handy, I guess.”

Hermione had gotten to know the girl since they’d both been working at Headquarters—and though it wasn’t obvious, she realized the girl was perhaps not completely thrilled to be getting installed right next door to her in-laws.

“One for me too. I’m going to need a place to stay between expeditions.” Bill added.

“Expeditions?”

“We’re not sure what happened to all the cursed tombs of Egypt when we moved, so all the curse breaking teams have been being sent out on expeditions to find them and anything else that looks promising. Once we find it I’ll be back on site working, but until then, it might be nice to have a place of my own to kick back in. The Burrow’s getting a wee bit crowded these days.”

“We’re getting our own house too, since we’re almost out of school.” Fred explained.

“We’re thinking of making it with connecting parts, so we can each have private living space, but also some shared spaces—the kitchen, dining room and workroom, mostly.” George added.

“We’ve been drawing up plans. I guess we’ll see how they turn out as we’re building them.”

“We decided we’d best stake our claim on the whole area now, rather than waiting until the area starts getting crowded and squeezing us out. My brothers and their families are doing the same in the connecting fields.” Arthur said.

“Yeah, by the time we’re done, this whole area’ll be Weasley territory.” Ron mumbled, mouth full.

Hermione sighed and worried her lip with her teeth. While everyone else was building clanholdings and villages for themselves, and doing massive land grabs, she was stuck for the next eight years being an intern. What if all the worthwhile places were taken by the time she was done? What was she supposed to do then? Get a nasty little flat over a shop somewhere? Of course, she’d be marrying at some point—and even the poorest family would have riches in land at the very least, which she would get a stake in by virtue of her relation to the family. Once she had an in, she could concentrate on carving out a niche for herself and her children—they, at least, wouldn’t be orphans adrift like she was. That would leave her rather at the mercy of her in-laws, which didn’t sound at all ideal to her…she thought she perhaps understood why Penny might not be completely thrilled to be right nearby.

Molly was a good person, but she was also domineering, nosy, and judgmental. Once Percy and Penny had children, Mrs. Weasley would probably be poking her head in their door every day, and criticizing how the house looked and how her grandchildren were being raised. She would probably have the best of intentions…but it would be rather wearing to be on the receiving end, day in day out. Were Alicia and Angelina to marry Fred and George, they’d be in much the same boat—neither had much family to speak of, and once married, they’d be Weasleys, in Weasley territory—they’d probably find themselves losing touch with what family they had left—the Weasleys were clannish, and really only counted Weasleys as important folks—which would include Angelina and Alicia, but exclude their remaining kin. It’s just the way they were.

Of course, the Malfoy’s, Blacks, and Longbottoms were much the same…all wizards were, she supposed. Even with the wizarding world being forced to modernize somewhat to keep abreast of
the muggle world back home, they’d been more inclined to nepotism and back room deals with trusted family members than to handling things through established channels of law. Being in this new world just meant it was more obvious, because everything had splintered down those lines. The Weasleys were making Weasley territory, the Longbottoms had Longbottom territory, Viktor’s family had Krum territory…

She missed her parents with a sudden, fierce ache that surprised her in its intensity. They had grown rather estranged since she’d entered Hogwarts—the summer party each year at the Finch-Fletchley place helped somewhat, but it couldn’t be denied that they found the whole magic thing to be strange and somewhat alarming, for all that they’d tried to be supportive. The older she got, the more obvious the rift became, and it had all come to a head early third year when they’d had another daughter—a completely muggle one. They had written to McGonagall and asked if she was on the list of magical babies…and they’d been unable to completely hide their relief and elation when it turned out she wasn’t. From that point on, their letters were full of ‘Desdemona smiled today…Desi is teething…Desi took her first steps. She might have been imagining it, but she’d always heard the unspoken ‘and nothing weird happened when she did!’ under every announcement.

When she’d been given a choice to stay or leave, it had been rather easy, really…but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt, or that she didn’t feel an empty spot where they’d been—or that she didn’t occasionally wonder about the little sister she’d never know. If only they’d been magical as well! They could all be carving out a Granger territory right now, together…She understood, suddenly, why Harry had gathered up everyone with even a hint of shared heritage to himself upon first entering the magical world, and why he clung to them so tightly—she hadn’t fully appreciated what it meant, to be an orphan in a world that ran on family ties; not until she’d experienced that disconnect for herself.

“Oi, Hermione, you gonna eat or what?”

“Oh? Oh, sorry…just got a bit lost in thought there for a moment.”

Molly sniffed rather pointedly, as though she’d taken her ignoring the food set out as a personal insult, though she’d contented herself with that after her husband gave her a warning look.

The Weasleys were their usual ebullient selves…but being around a family when she felt like she did right now was more depressing than uplifting…She made her excuses as soon as she was able to while remaining polite, and flooed to the Green Dragon Inn—she might as well hit the Wizarding Public library before heading back to headquarters—she had the remainder of the weekend free, and she was already thinking of going back after just a few hours; how sad was that?

Her time in the library cheered her up somewhat. She got a library card, and a selection of books to read in her spare time until next free weekend. She flooed from the Green Dragon to the Leaky Cauldron and headed outside to portkey back to headquarters, only to run into Harry, who appeared just before she activated it. He had a golden key with a diamond jewel around his neck, and he was dressed in robes that were oddly colorful for Harry, who usually stuck to single, muted jewel tones in his clothing—the robes he was currently wearing, while black at the base, had bits of red, blue, yellow, orange, green, gold, silver, bronze and copper in the embroidery at collar, cuffs and hem. He was also very tan, and had his hair up in a topknot with an ornament on it—it looked like two opposite colored rainbow serpents forming a yin-yang type symbol.

Just like that, all her worries and depression from earlier came rushing back. She took one look at
him and burst into tears. Harry, for his part just looked at her. It only made her cry harder.

Harry looked to the heavens as though praying for patience, then glanced around and saw people were lingering to gawp at the two of them. He sighed, grabbed her arm, and apparated them both to Potter Keep, and steered her inside.

“Free weekend?”

“Yes. Till seven o’clock Sunday.”

“Where were you earlier?”

“The Weasleys, and the public library.” She sniffled, while trying to get her embarrassing crying jag to stop.

“Did something happen there?”

“No…yes… No.”

“Uh…”

“Nothing specific, it’s just things.” She clarified.

“Uh huh.” Harry nodded as though he understood, though really, he didn’t. Hermione had always been weird, so far as he was concerned—this was just more evidence of such.

He steered Hermione into a sitting room off the great hall and into a seat, before flopping down across from her. Hermione tried to compose herself. While she did so, a house elf popped up with a tea tray and some finger foods.

“Welcome home!”

“Thank you Itsy, and this looks lovely, by the way. How have things been going?”

“Oh, very well. We is having the hillies all planted with master Harry’s baby trees, and we is clearing a few fields and making room in the greenhouses.”

“How are Lolly, Simon and Patch settling in?”

“They is being quite content—they is each liking their rooms, and they like having a territory… plus, there is lots of work to be doing!”

“Glad to hear it. I’ll check in with them personally later, but I don’t want to call them away when they might be busy.”

“Master Harry is always being so thoughtful.”

“Just trying to be considerate.”

“Is good thing—we is having friends over for a work party.” Itsy confided.

“Oh, well then, I won’t keep you. Give my regards to your friends.”
Itsy beamed and then glanced at Hermione with a faint furrow in her brow and an air of disapproval.

“If master’s guest is feeling poorly, she should be finding work, not sitting around crying! No good ever came of that, but working hard is curing all ills!”

Having said her piece, she nodded firmly and disappeared. Harry raised an eyebrow at Itsy’s odd behavior, while Hermione looked vaguely stunned and then started crying again. Harry sighed—she had just about stopped when Itsy delivered her lecture.

He busied himself fixing tea for both of them, while waiting for Hermione to calm down a second time. He palmed a calming draught when she was busy wiping at her eyes, and added a measure to her tea. He didn’t know what was up with her, but he could see he was never going to get to the bottom of it if she kept breaking down like this.

He got her to drink down her tea, and then made her a second cup into which he dropped the remainder of the vial, while she nibbled on finger foods and looked pensive.

“Alright, now, why don’t you start at the beginning?”

The calming draught seemed to be doing its job—Hermione rambled on for forty-five minutes about how someone had done something to her to make her obsessed with him, and it had been gone when she’d woken in the new world, then she detailed her visit to the Weasleys and her depressing thoughts while she was there, as well as the subtle cold shoulder Molly had been giving her…and then had gone on to detail her slowly deteriorating relationship with her parents, which had culminated in her leaving the world and orphaning herself in a society that valued family and clan above all, and how it had just really started to sink in what that meant for her future.

When Hermione was done, she had just sunk back into her chair, as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It had felt surprisingly good to just get it all off her chest. Harry, for his part, had just listened to it all, while watching her with hooded eyes from over his steepled hands.

“I see…the first part is well… It was probably Dumbledore. It's complicated, and no longer relevant, but he's had his fingers all over my life--not just here but in alternate universes too, or at least one of them. He seems to have wanted me contained, downtrodden, isolated, and having no access to information that didn't pass through him first. I've been working to dismantle that since I came back to the magical world, and the move seems to have fixed stuff I didn't know about."

"Dumbledore?" Hermione repeated. "But why… What alternate dimension?"

Harry, as he was often prone to do ignored her questions and kept talking.

"As for the rest…well, yeah, I get that. I had a rocky relationship with my muggles too, and when I entered the wizarding world I was quite alone and at the mercy of pretty much everyone. I found connections and fostered them, and created new ones for just that reason. The wizarding world is like a web, and an orphan—especially a muggle-born or muggle-raised orphan, is like a single strand blowing in the wind…although the muggle world was really no better a place for an orphan. Yeah, there were social services and the like, but someone has to give enough of a damn to seek out an orphaned kid and act as their advocate. It’s easy to fall through the cracks there—too easy, even if they had more nets to try to keep it from happening. Even orphans who are caught by the system don’t fare too well, all things considered. You’re pretty much everybody’s meat, unless you learn to fight back effectively—and that’s harder than you might think, and it’s easy to get lost along the way. Be glad it happened when you’re nearly of age. You think it’s terrifying now? Trying having it be the case from infancy. Be thankful you had a family and a safety net as long as you did.”
He stood then, and beckoned her to follow him. She did; he led her outside and pointed to a white building in the distance.

“Head over there. It’s a hotspring bathhouse. Trust me, it’ll make you feel better. There might be other folks inside—the old folks around here love the place. It’s a public place—the women’s baths are clearly marked. Head back when you’re done. I’m going to change”

He glanced up and roughly gauged the time.

“Dinner’ll be in about two hours. I’ll see you then.”

Harry headed back inside. Hermione dithered at the gate for a bit, then sighed and started towards the bathhouse.

As she started walking, she started to take in her surroundings—the sudden apparation earlier had kept her from really registering too much.

It was beautiful, and the whole place just seemed to radiate peace and contentment.

She was standing on the shore of a good-sized lake, on a small peninsula that stuck out into it. A red, curved bridge led to shore on either side, and on the far side of the lake was a vaguely Chinese pavilion, which hung over the lake partway. There seemed to be tables and chairs scattered about inside, as well as benches lining the rail. It was probably a lovely spot to while away an afternoon, or have a small party. There was another such pavilion further down, sticking off the side of a hill, which gave a good view of the waterfall there, and another larger one that spanned the river that bisected the village. It was raised on a bridge, and a curved opening over the river meant small boats could still travel down it. All of the pavilions were filled, with folks from the village—old people watching the view in the lake pavilion, couples in the waterfall one, and kids and parents in the large one in the village center. She could see people and house elves bustling about—clearing fields, planting trees and other landscaping projects, as well as others bringing in grazing animals for the night. People were wandering around, some going into the shops, others gossiping over fences with their neighbors, others playing a game of pick-up quidditch on a pitch that had been erected in an open section of the valley, and she could hear people in the pub when the door opened. On looking closer, she spotted fairies in the trees, a trio of fauns playing music and dancing among the trees. She even saw a flash of white that may have been a unicorn.

Everyone here had obviously been quite busy since they’d arrived, making this valley a home they all could enjoy. She couldn’t help but compare it to the Weasleys’ place—which looked pretty much the same as it had in the old world, except they had a larger field and no muggle neighbors…oh, and the quidditch pitch was out in the open, rather than hidden in a clearing in the trees.

They’d been in the new world for going on three weeks now, and they were only just now talking about maybe expanding a bit and making a ‘Weasley territory’. In that time, this valley had been transformed into a paradise home, she and the other interns had transformed their little island into a resort, and headquarters was just bursting with drive and creativity. The area around the train station had been gussied up and prettified since she’d been there last, same with the area around the alleys and the village that had sprung up around it. The summer was half over! She didn’t remember details of the weather where they all were at—she knew the islands were in the tropics along the equator or just about, but she wasn’t sure about this place or where the Weasleys were at now. While she doubted it would be a Scottish winter, or even an English winter…it would still eventually be winter. What were they going to do then? She supposed it was a good thing there were a lot of them, or they’d be in serious trouble!
She was woolgathering again. She turned her feet back towards the bathhouse and stepped inside. There was an elderly woman in the changing room wrapping a towel around herself before stepping through the next set of doors. She had obviously just come out of one of the showers along the wall, as she was dripping wet. A wave of steam rolled out as the door opened.

There were cubby holes along the wall, as well as a couple of stools scattered about. Shrugging, she began to strip down, took a quick shower, and wrapped a towel around herself.

Inside the next room was a pool of hot water bordered by rocks, which formed little niches and smaller pools of different size. There were four women in there—the old woman, who was sitting by herself, looking blissful as she soaked, and three others who were chatting on the far side of the pool. A wall ran along one side, and she could hear men’s voices faintly through it. She found a little niche for herself and climbed down, hissing as she did so at the surprising heat. She didn’t even want to think what her hair was going to look like after being in all this steam…

Bit by bit she sunk down and felt her bones turn to water and her muscles unknot. Harry had been right; this was just what she needed. She stayed in the water as long as she could manage and then heaved herself out. When she got back out to the changing room though, she discovered her clothes were gone.

The old woman from earlier was in the midst of putting on a cotton robe with a colorful wildflower print on it and slipping on thronged sandals when she exited.

“What’s the matter with you, dearie?”

“My clothes are gone!”

“Oh, that. First time? No worries, love. One of the little elves that’s hearabouts took your things to wash them and put them away. There’s robes in the cubby there. Just put your wet towel in the bin and grab one. There’s sandals provided as well, for the walk home. One size fits all. One of them will take them back when you’re done with them and leave them for someone else to use.”

“I don’t have any underwear!”

“The robes reach nearly to your ankles dear. I don’t think it’s really a problem for the short walk back. It’s strangely liberating, really. Why, I felt ever so naughty the first time!” she giggled.

“Well, I’m for bed—the heat is lovely, why my old bones haven’t felt so good in years—it does make me sleepy though. Have a good night, dearie.”

“You too.”

Hermione stood there dripping for several minutes, before she finally accepted the inevitable. She discarded her towel, wrapped up in a robe and got herself a pair of sandals. She jumped a bit as a stray breeze traveled up the robe as she was walking back to Harry’s house. She wrapped the thing a bit more firmly around herself and tightened the belt, before sticking her shoulders back and her nose in the air. She could swear people were leering at her—but then, they all knew she wasn’t wearing underwear, didn’t they? Just what sort of perverse bohemia had Harry made here?

Upon arriving back at the castle, her natural curiosity got the better of her, and she decided to have a look around. There was now a dairy and cheese-making operation in one of the stone pens around
the courtyard, as well as a brewery in another, and miscellaneous machinery she couldn’t guess the purpose of in the next two, while another held a couple of looms, and some large pots which she assumed were for dyeing cloth.

Harry seemed to be making his home a manufacturing plant.

She found the greenhouses next; they had stood empty while she and her parents had lived here; now, they were positively filled with greenery—most of which she recognized from herbology class, and from a few books she’d read on common plants for potions across the world. He had an apothecary’s dream here in this room.

She wandered the downstairs of the keep, peeking in the rooms as she went, and wondering where Harry had gotten to.

She passed a room where an elf was busy washing and drying her clothes—she had wondered where they’d gotten to—while whistling, while another elf was busy cooking in the kitchen. She passed what should have been a dry-goods pantry and slowed her steps…the whole place was full of cubbyholes, each packed with scrolls. Her fingers itched and she crept inside, thinking she’d found a secret library—but instead, each of the cubbies was labeled with the name of some food. Curious now, she lifted down one of the scrolls, and found not a treatise, but a row of ornate seals, each identical.

“Might I ask what you’re doing in our pantry?”

Hermione jumped and nearly dropped the scroll; she managed to keep hold of one end, but the rest still unrolled across the floor.

She turned and found a tall, good-looking teenage boy leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed and his eyebrow raised. It was Tom Riddle, Harry’s mysterious friend who’d come out of nowhere, and was probably the grandson of Voldemort.

“I saw the scrolls…”

“Long term storage.” Tom replied in a clipped voice, before flicking his wand at the scroll. It pulled itself from her hands, re-rolled itself and put itself away in its niche. “We’d prefer they were left alone. Harry went to a lot of trouble, sealing those away. It would be a shame to undo his hard work…not to mention it would spoil our emergency food stores. As he and I both like to eat, we would highly object to that happening.”

He straightened from his spot and gestured for her to preceed him. Hermione tightened her robe again, once again self-conscious about the fact that she wasn’t wearing any underwear, and scurried past him and back upstairs.

Harry was back, waiting in the great hall.

“Oh, there you are. I was beginning to wonder if you’d fallen in. I need some of your blood.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Blood. Seven drops. Here, put it in the potion.” He explained, while handing over a penknife and a beaker of beige potion that had billows of steam coming off the top. Once he’d handed over the stuff, he unrolled a parchment on the nearest table and then dug out a book, which he consulted as he began casting charms on it.

“The stuff is only potent for an hour after it’s made; get a move on, would you?”
“But what is it?”

"Heritage potion, one that shows magical heritage as well as bloodlines."

"But why?"

"Muggleborn can just be made as our time here before proved. Magic just picked some to be witches and wizards. I was just curious whether you were born or made with magic. My mother, it turns out, had magical heritage, though very far back. Tom and I are actually very distant cousins through both of my parents, not just my father. I was just curious…and with your rambling confession earlier, I figured you would be too."

Hermione bit her lip, nicked her thumb, and squeezed seven drops of blood into the potion, which began bubbling and changing colors. Harry snatched it up as soon as it had, and dumped it on the parchment he’d prepared.

“Alright, while we wait for that to finish, let’s eat. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Tom wandered into the room and peered down at the parchment in curiosity.

“Heritage potion?”

“Yes. We’ll see if she has relatives in the world when it’s done. Hungry?”

"Starved."

She found herself in a small dining room with a round table set for three. Once they were all seated, food appeared—food she wasn’t familiar with.

“Fire Nation cuisine?” Tom said in surprise.

“I know you were rather fond of it during our stay there, so I brought home some things.” Harry answered with a smile. “It’s on the spicy side, I should warn you.” He added to Hermione.

It all looked delicious, but Harry was right, it was rather on the spicy side, though thankfully the drinks served with the meal—some sort of minty, milky concoction, seemed to help, as did the yogurt dip offered as a side dish.

“How was your visit, anyway?”

“It was fine. I didn’t get to see Zuko as much as I would have liked—he was busy FireLording most of the time. I did spend some time with Mai, and Azula—Ty Lee went back to the circus, as well as Toph. She’s staying there for the time being. She tried going home after the war was over, but she’d only been back for a few months when she couldn’t take the coddling anymore. She was traveling with Aang, helping out with Avatar stuff, but he’s preoccupied for the moment with all the new airbenders.”

“How did your trade negotiations go?”

“Pretty well, actually. I have a list of things they’re interested in, both goods and services, and a list of things they have available for trade. I took some sample foodstuffs along as gifts to help generate interest. I think we might have a booming trade in pineapple just from Iroh alone, and Mai seemed to like the coffee, and Azula and Toph made quick work of the chocolate I brought. I did
get one thing definitely finalized. They're going to convert some of their war machine factories to making trains for us.”

Hermione sat back, burped a bit, much to her embarrassment, and then smiled.

“That was really good. I don’t think I could manage to eat like that more than once in a while, but it was really good.”

“Yeah, it makes a nice change, and they do have some tasty food once you get used to how hot everything is. Earth Kingdom has some tasty dishes too, though it changes depending on what part of the country you’re in. Some parts favor very bland dishes and sauces—tasty enough, but nothing really complex, while other parts have food nearly as spicy as Fire Nation. The water tribes food…eh. I wasn’t really a fan, though I was polite enough to eat everything put before me and thank them for it. They live on an iceberg; they don’t really have a lot of choice in their daily diet, not without extensive trading for things they can’t grow or produce on their own. It’s basically fish, seaweed, sea prunes, the occasional seal or other iceberg dwelling animal, and the occasional wild roots and tubers that can be scavenged from the nearest landmasses. They do a lot with what they have available, but their diet is so very different, I honestly couldn’t see eating nothing but that all the time.”

“Sokka’s seal jerky rather grew on me.” Tom offered.

Harry snickered and nodded. “I didn’t say it was awful, just that I couldn’t eat nothing but what they do all the time. Don’t get me wrong” he added to Hermione “if you ever get a chance to visit the place, you definitely should, if only to see it once. Bring fresh fruit or something with you—they’ll bring you in and offer to feed you, but they’re often living on the edge of subsistence down there. It’s beautiful in a stark, primal sort of way, and I’m very fond of the people, really…but in the end it’s an iceberg with nothing else really around but them and their igloos and more icebergs. It’s not a place for the faint of heart.”

“I’d like to see it someday. I’d like to see everything this world has to offer, really. I could hardly believe the Weasleys—none of them has gone out flying to take a look around! The Weasleys…I don’t even know what they’ve been doing with themselves since we all arrived! Their house and the surrounding area looks exactly like it did before, and the surrounding area looks like it hasn’t been touched at all. They mentioned they were thinking of maybe putting up a few more houses, because the Burrow is a bit crowded. Ron mentioned they’ve been forced to eat all their meals outside because the kitchen just won’t hold everyone anymore. It seems all they’ve been doing is eating Mrs. Weasleys cooking around the clock and playing endless games of quidditch!”

“Isn’t that what they always do? Why are you so surprised?”

“There was some excuse in the old world—there were muggles everywhere and most of them weren’t comfortable enough with them to regularly venture into muggle areas, and they were always rather poor, so venturing into wizard areas all the time wasn’t something they could do much of either—but we’re in a whole new world, and it doesn’t cost anything to fly around on their brooms! You’d think, if nothing else, they’d want to have some idea of what the rest of the peninsula looks like!”

“I’d venture a guess that the twins, at least, have taken a look at the surrounding area. I’m sure they just didn’t mention it, because, of age or not, Mrs. Weasley would be having kittens about it. Ginny too, most likely—and she probably kept her mouth shut for much the same reason the twins did.”

Harry checked the time.
“Come on; the parchment should be ready by now.”

Hermione peered over Harry’s one shoulder, while Tom peered over the other.

“What do the colors mean?”

“That, my dear, is magical creature heritage…and you have far distant giant heritage, which is funny, considering how short you are. You also have a bit of veela, goblin, kelpie, and hag. oh, centaur too. It's way back. I almost missed it.”

“What?” Hermione gasped, quite shocked.

Yep. Oh, it’s pretty far back, as you can see. And look at that.”

“We're cousins.” Hermione said in surprise

“Yeah, distant ones.”

Hermione nodded, still reeling from the revelations.

“Do you have magical creature heritage as well?”

“Of course. I have naga, goblin, veela, kelpie, nymph and giant.”

“What about you?” she asked Tom curiously.

“Naga, gorgon, giant, goblin, veela, kelpie, nymph.”

“Gorgon?”

“Apparently they're the result of a long ago mating of a naga/basilisk offspring who mated with a nymph.”

“I see.” Hermione said faintly.

They realized Hermione still seemed to be in shock.

“It’s not a big deal—all wizards have some magical creature heritage—it’s just a fact of life among our people. In fact, had witches and wizard kept interbreeding exclusively with muggles, magic would have died out long ago.”

“They’re not human.” Hermione whispered.

“So? You’re only part human yourself, remember, which means from a purely genetic point of view any of the creatures in your heritage are as viable a choice of partner as a human is, though we tend to spark with people who have a similar genetic makeup to ourselves it seems. I don’t know what Viktor Krum’s genetic makeup is, but I know the Weasleys have veela and giant in their background, I’m not sure what all else, but I’d bet anything it’s similar to what you’ve got. You’re the same person you always were, you just know more about what makes you who you are, that’s all. What you don’t seem to appreciate is that the original ‘pureblood wizards’ weren’t human at all—they were fairies, same as the rest, who just looked closer to humans than they did some of the others, and you’ll note I say closer, not that they looked human.”

“The old world wasn’t the original home of the fairies, we came there from somewhere else. Magic bonded itself to the earth so that we could live there—it wouldn’t have been possible otherwise. Over the course of the last year, magic was detaching itself from the old world, and
wrapping itself around all the magical places, plants and creatures to prepare for the move. The only reason we were able to coexist for as long as we did is because magic wove itself into the very fabric of the world, which made the muggles within those magical fields feel just familiar enough that the fairies were able to crossbreed with them, which was a necessary step to keeping us all there.” Tom agreed.

“How do you know all this?”

“We acted as magic’s avatars for the move. We picked up some stuff along the way.”

“What were your plans for the rest of the weekend?” Harry suddenly asked.

Hermione sighed and looked down at her hands. “I was going to visit the Weasleys…but they’re so crowded there, and Molly is giving me the cold shoulder. I figured I’d just head back to the island.”

Harry sighed and rubbed at his nose while he thought. He glanced at Tom who just arched an eyebrow in response.

“We were going to head back to what used to be Grimmauld Place and is now Pleasantville—my godfather’s house and village. They’re having a party there to celebrate having decided on a name. You’re welcome to come along if you want; they certainly have the space, even with the rest of the guests they’ll be hosting.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“If you were, I simply wouldn’t have mentioned it; I would just have popped you back to the alleys to portkey back to the island.”

Hermione’s eyes got teary, and Harry stared at her with such consternation that she started giggling.

“In that case, thank you, a party sounds nice.”

“Good. Um, your clothes should be in the first bedroom at the top of the stairs, along with your library books and your satchel. You can just leave the robe and sandals there; they’ll be returned to the bathhouse.”

The newly named Pleasantville seemed to live up to its moniker on first sight. Hermione looked around in interest as they left the apparition zone—a simple small square of grass with a low white picket fence around it.

There were rows of houses on three sides facing the gothic mansion that seemed to be the Black’s house. It could easily have looked grim and forbidding—in fact, probably did at one time, given the family’s reputation; but at the moment it seemed a happy home, with flower boxes at all the windows, warm candle light spilling out from the rooms facing the square and sparkling off the stream that separated the Black’s house from the rest of the village. There were shops lining the square, and a merry fountain in the center that depicted dancing nymphs and satyrs. Colorful paper lanterns were strung across the square, and beneath them were tables filled with villagers, all eating drinking and talking. Part of the open space had been left empty and was filled with couples dancing to the music of the band perched at that end. There were a lot of children, laughing and shrieking as they ran around the edges of the crowd and occasionally through it, playing some game or other. There were booths set up here and there with games of chance that offered prizes, a puppet show, and a storyteller for the children.
It seemed like a nice place to live—and again, she couldn’t help but compare it to the Weasleys’ place. Although, perhaps she was being too hard on them—Molly would have been preoccupied with the twins, Arthur had probably been looking for work, Percy was working for N.W.E., so he and Penny had probably been on the island more often than not…Bill had mentioned expeditions for Gringott’s, so perhaps he’d been doing that…Charlie she had no idea about, the twins had probably been off on their own developing prank items like they always did, Ginny had been running around at least part of the time, which would have just left Ron—the least motivated of the Weasleys—at home doing chores, watching Cannons practice, and eating. Even so…Arthur had said his brothers were in the area too; couldn’t one of them have helped out if none of his children were available? Or maybe they were going to now, because they’d already done their own areas? She just didn’t know. Maybe she should just reserve judgment until her next visit, once she’d seen what all had been accomplished in the meantime.

They waded through the crowd, and found Sirius, Adeline, baby Regulus, Barty, Dora, baby Eridanus, Remus, Andromeda and Ted, sitting with Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, and Professor Flitwick.

“Evening, all.”

Harry noted professor Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose upon seeing himself, Tom and Hermione approaching together. Had he not interfered in his life and plotted his death, he might have felt sorry for the old guy, who’d been so out of the loop for so long. It was plain to see he still didn’t know what to make of Tom. Tom had been vehemently anti-muggle, anti-muggleborn…anti-pretty-much-anything-that-wasn’t him the first time around. It must have been terribly confusing to see him walking around so sane and laid back the second time around, when one considered he was an evil-red-eyed-snake-man-with-no-nose on a rampage in between.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, Tom, how are you all this fine evening?” Dumbledore asked.

“Fine, professors. I must admit I’m a little surprised to see you all here.” Hermione answered.

“The Blacks mentioned they were celebrating naming this fine village here, and invited us.” McGonagall explained.

“Speaking of names…Barty, Dora, what did you end up calling your place?” Tom inquired.

“Well, the house we’re in used to be the Riddle place, so we decided to call the village Conundrum.”

“The Riddle place? What ever happened to the Crouch place?” Flitwick asked curiously.

“I gave it to Harry who gave it to Tom there in exchange for the Riddle place. My old home had too many bad memories, and it was my prison for a while on top of that. We took it over when Dora and I married, and we had Eri there. It’s become home to us, so we just decided to swap for good.”

“I see…quite understandable.” Flitwick murmured. “Are you going to be living in the Crouch place then?” he asked eyeing first Harry then Tom.

“No, I’m going to live in Potter Keep, which is currently residing in a lovely place now known as Blessed Valley, though for the time being I’m living here…well, for the most part. I, Sirius, Tom and a few others just recently finished constructing a summer house. I’m going to be spending at
least some of my time there, at Marauder's Cove.

"That's actually where I'm living now, while school is out." Remus spoke up.

"I'm currently residing in the old Crouch place in Avalon, though I'll probably be living at least part of the time at Marauder's Cove for the remainder of the summer. I helped build it, though I've yet to see the interior as that part was finished later. I want to get a look at the place and see the final product."

"We're heading out there too. It should be quite the party." Barty nodded

“Does the invitation extend to the rest of us as well? We’ve not gotten a chance to see too much of the new settlements.” Flitwick asked.

“Sure, if you want to.” Harry nodded.

Hermione bit her lip, obviously wondering if she should just head back to NWE.

“Barty will be there, and he has to report in the same time you do, to make sure all the interns got back safely. You can head in with him if you want to come. We'll be right there on the island, just on the other side from N.W.E.”

Hermione smiled and nodded happily.

Hedwig flew down and landed on Harry’s shoulder.

“Clever girl, you just have a sixth sense about these things, don’t you?”

Hedwig puffed out her chest. Harry dug out some parchment and dashed off a couple of quick notes, which he handed over, and then she flew off.

“Who’d you write to?”

“Neville and Luna; I figured I’d let them know we were all headed down there tomorrow. I’ve already told Neville and Luna they were free to drop in if they wanted a seaside vacation, and as we’re planning on using it as a staging ground for our longboat project as well, I’m sure they want to be there. Besides, I told them both I’d let them know when I returned from my trip to Fire Nation and I hadn’t done that yet.”

“Longboat project?” Sprout prompted.

“Oh, remember the catamaran the three of us made?” The three professors nodded--McGonagall with an air of annoyed resignation. “We were originally going to make a Viking longboat, but we realized something that size would be a much bigger project than any of us really wanted to do at the time, so we settled for the catamaran, as all we’d really wanted it for was to tool around the lake a bit. We still want to try our hand at the longboat—we were thinking of giving it cabins below decks so we could live on it for an extended period, and using it to go exploring in. We all live inland, so really, Marauder’s Cove is the best place to build it at.”

“Professors...” Hermione spoke up hesitantly. “Um…with all the changes…”

The professors sighed rather tiredly. "Muggle studies, astronomy, and what is currently NEWT history are outdated and not at all relevant to the new world. We know. We’ve actually been having meetings with the board of education about that very fact. There’s been talk of setting up a five year study compiling facts about the muggles of this world, their customs, technology and the
like. It’s hoped that when we’re done we can reintroduce the subject of muggle studies with relevant information. History is going to be similarly restructured. The board is already trying to compile a rough outline of information on how things have been proceeding here and the changes in laws, geography and whatnot for NEWT study. It will probably be years before we have anything resembling a comprehensive field of study in either subject.”

“It’s a shame Wan Shi Tong took his library back to the spirit world.” Tom remarked. “He had a pretty good selection of books, correspondence and history of all the nations and peoples of this world. It would have saved a lot of time and effort on everyone’s part.”

“Maybe we can finagle some way to get a hold of him and convince him to bring his library back to the world; you’re right, it would be a great help in smoothing over some of the bumps.”

“Wan Shi Tong?” Dumbledore prompted.

“He’s a knowledge spirit, looks rather like a giant owl. He has a bunch of foxes that work for him who wander around collecting bits of knowledge for him to put in his library. He brought his collection to the world eons ago, as he hoped it would allow people to understand one another better, and allow them to better themselves. The land to the northwest of here became a desert during the time the library resided there, and the library complex got buried under the sand, so of course people stopped coming to it. Recently it was found twice, both times by people looking for a way to destroy their enemies. He got offended and took the library back to the spirit world.”

“If you can figure out a way to convince the spirit, please do so. A place like that would be a tremendous boon to all of us.” Flitwick said excitedly.

“I’ll write to Aang once Hedwig gets back, and see if he’ll help. He’s supposed to be the bridge to the spirit world, so he should be able to find and talk to Wan Shi Tong for us. I’m sure the prospect of whole reams of new knowledge will at least bring him to the negotiation table.”

McGonagall looked rather excited by the prospect, though her reaction was nothing to Flitwick, Hermione and Dumbledore’s; they were all practically salivating at the idea of a library filled with books no other witch or wizard had read before.

“I just hope he’s able to bring the library out to a place of his choosing, not just the spot where it was. The whole area is a trackless desert—sand dunes everywhere, hot as anything.”

“If it is, I’m sure we could figure out some way to either move it to a place we like better, or do a bit of landscaping to make the area more pleasing. Anyway, it isn’t like we can’t just apparate right there; given that, it hardly matters if it’s in the middle of this world’s version of the Sahara.”

“I’m going to go try the games.” Harry announced. “And get something to munch on.”

“We just ate dinner not long ago.” Tom objected.

“I know that; I can’t help if everything smells good.”

“Have fun.”

“Hermione?” Harry asked. Hermione shrugged and rose to follow him.

“You’re not going to join them?” Dumbledore asked him curiously, his gaze measuring.
“I spent most of the morning and early afternoon landscaping and prettying up the area around my house. With all the long, boring meetings I've been attending, I haven't had many chances to do that, but I'm finally getting to the point where place is really coming together.”

“Perhaps I’ll get a chance to see it before the summer is over.”

“I’m sure we can manage a flyby on the way to the cove tomorrow.”

“While there are a couple of windows on the tent, it is rather hard to see much when you’re inside of it. I wish we could put seats on it so we could have an unobstructed view, though I’ll be the first to admit, having a kitchen and a bathroom right within reach is quite convenient when travelling with a baby.” Adeline mused.

“That shouldn’t be too difficult to arrange.”

“Harry’s carpet isn’t very big; there’s really just enough room for the tent—which is a very basic model, which looks like a one man pup tent on the outside, with a bit of space left over on the front end for one or two people to sit.”

“I think there’s an old Axeminster in the attic…Oddment!” Sirius called.

“You is calling?”

“Yeah, can you get the large flying carpet from the attic and bring it out here?”

When Oddment returned with the thing a minute later, Sirius wasted no time unrolling it nearby.

“Oh, that’s much bigger. We can probably fit benches enough to seat everyone and the tent as well if we arrange everything right. Is the carpet sound?”

“That’s what I’m finding out.”

“Um…What…?”

“They’re fixing up an old Axeminster carpet for our trip to the cove tomorrow.” Tom explained.

Harry and Hermione had returned from trying out the various games, to find most of the group standing around a carpet and transfiguring things into chairs and benches and arranging them in different configurations on the carpet—all except for Tom and Dumbledore, who had been left with the babies.

Tom turned to glance at them and he found himself staring. Harry and Hermione were wearing large musketeer hats with sweeping feathers, strands of gaudy necklaces with beads of different colors, some of which were glowing, and Hermione had earrings that consisted of a small glass ball that hung from her earlobes which contained tiny, glowing fish that swam around in them.

Dumbledore snickered at the look on his face.

“A very interesting choice of fashion” he commented.

“Prizes for the games; they’re transfigured odds and ends that will vanish in a few hours. Don’t feel left out though.” Harry said, while dropping a hat on Tom’s head as well. Tom gave him a look, but as always it seemed to roll right off him. Tom sighed, but decided it wasn’t worth arguing about—though he was tempted to stick his tongue out at Dumbledore who was twinkling at him in
amusement.

“I also won this little guy…though I don’t know what we’re going to do with him. I’m afraid if I take him home, Hedwig will want to eat him.”

He held up a small cage that held a cream-colored furball that seemed to be purring.

“I have the same worry about Crookshanks.” Hermione admitted as she held up a similar cage. “I don’t want the poor little thing to become a cat toy.”

Harry pulled his puffskein out of its cage “It’s a shame, because it’s sort of cute in a fur-bally sort of way. Turn Reg this way so he can see him. Ooh, what’s that, huh? Is that a bogey-eating furball? Why yes it is!”

Regulus started cooing and gurgling, and waving his chubby little arms around.

“I’m guessing he likes it?” Tom said uncertainly.

“Either that or he’s just an attention whore.”

“Harry!” Hermione huffed, though she sounded more amused than angry.

“What? It’s a perfectly valid possibility—look at who his father is!”
It takes a village

Chapter Summary

The Weasleys decide to get themselves on the Wizengamot.

In the morning, after breakfast, everyone gathered on the lawn to board the carpet. It had undergone some changes since it had been brought out the night before. It now had benches lining the outside edges, seats inward, forming a wall; Adeline and Nymphadora, new mothers as they were, had been afraid of the possibility of the babies tumbling off, and nothing anyone said would convince them otherwise. Poles had been affixed to the four edges and an awning installed to give shade during the trip, and the tent installed in the center. There was even a coin operated viewfinder, like one sometimes saw in muggle areas in the old world at scenic locations mounted on the front, and cheerful looking paper lanterns strung along the edges of the awning in case they ended up travelling in the dark.

“Man, when you all decide to trip out a carpet, you don’t do things halfway, do you?” Harry said with some bemusement, staring at the viewfinder. Where did they even get that thing?

Hermione found herself giggling quite a bit as she climbed aboard; even after a couple of years in the magical world, things like this still seemed a trifle absurd to her muggle-raised sensitivities. Even given the large size of the carpet, things were rather crowded with so many people, so Tom and Harry opted to fly under their own power.

The carpet took off without too much fuss, with two rainbow feathered serpents accompanying it like a strange honor guard, while some of the village children chased after them for a bit, pointing and laughing.

Neville and Luna were splashing around in the shallows when they arrived. Sirius landed the carpet on the beach a short distance away from them, while Tom and Harry landed and transformed nearby.

The guests all froze in stunned disbelief at the sight of the Japanese style palace that crouched above them overlooking the beach.

"You built this?" McGonagall demanded.

"I had help, but yeah."

"It's just like the little house you made for that contest a few years back." Adeline realized.

"I used it as a model. I just did some calculations to see what all I'd need to make a life-sized version. It took us two days to assemble."

"Two days?" Andromeda marveled.

"I already knew what all was needed, how much and in what sizes. I had a lot of the pieces pre-cut and measured. It literally just needed to be pieced together and took us two days to do so, even with magic helping. Even then it wasn't quite finished. I still had to come back a few times afterwards to put the finishing touches on it. It turned out great though, didn't it?"
"You never do things by halves, do you kiddo?" Dora laughed in disbelief. She wasn't sure she could do what he'd done now, at her age. It was always so damned humbling being around the kid. It kind of pissed her off, actually.

"It also helped that the team that was with me already had experience doing this. They'd already done it once before on a smaller scale. The goblins used my idea for a prefab house to speed up construction for the resort. They had a group put together a few designs and then had the pieces made and sent to the construction sites so they could be put together in short order by interns without extensive training. It worked quite well. The resort was up and running just a few weeks after we arrived."

"We're going to be marketing pre-fab houses to the public, since the idea worked so well. You'll probably be hearing about it before too long." Hermione added.

"Enough chit-chat. Come on and I'll show you around the inside."

Severus Snape was not a happy camper. When he was a child, growing up in Spinner's end, and listening to his mother's stories of growing up in Prince Manor, he had dreamed of living there himself one day—being wealthy, respected, a man of consequence. Never in those childhood imaginings had he pictured himself being held hostage by the husband-hunting granddaughters of his villagers.

The interfering old folks had made good on their promises of match-making; unfortunately, they'd all chosen to send their granddaughters on the same night. It was quite unintentional, he was sure, but that didn't really help anything. Each of the girls had been offended to find themselves one of a group, though they'd each quickly come to the conclusion that he must be worth quite a bit if there was so much competition for his hand. The house elves he'd found himself in possession of, along with the house, had thrown together a feast for everyone—himself and all seven women.

The food was delicious, the company wasn't to his taste. The silly chits had done nothing but snipe at one another since they'd gotten there, in between batting their eyes at him and trying to sell themselves as his ideal bride. None of them liked potions, or liked to read. They were all social butterflies who talked too much and seemed to have little on their tiny brains than shopping and parties—pastimes they were hoping he'd start footing the bills for at some point in the near future. It was utterly maddening.

The worst part was there wasn't a single redhead among the lot. He hated his life.

While he was lost in his brooding, one of the elves popped up beside him to whisper that there was a visitor. Puzzled, he excused himself to go investigate. He wasn't expecting anyone. Dumbledore was off doing Merlin only knew what with Black of all people. Lucius was hosting a party to try to convince younger relatives of some of the dead weight in the current Wizengamot to oust their grandpas and grandmas and take over so they could get more done before the August deadline when the peninsula-wide meetings were due to start. It was the fourth of such parties, and already there had been three substitutions among Albus' cohorts—something he was none-too-pleased about.

He came to a surprised halt when he spotted her. She had her back to him, giving him a nice view of the curve of her spine as it disappeared into low cut v-neck back of her dress. Her auburn hair was upswept, though a few unruly curls had escaped to lie tantalizingly along her bare shoulders.

"Madame Maxime. This is a surprise."
"Ah, Monsieur Snape. I was in the area, and I thought I would drop in to see the charming 'ouse I've heard so much about. I do hope I'm not intruding." Her words trailed off as the women in the dining room began arguing and their voices rose, carrying them clearly to where the two of them stood.

"Ah…it seems I am intruding. I'd not realized you were forming a harem."

"It's nothing like that, I assure you." He protested, quickly explaining how he'd come to find himself in his current straights.

Maxime's visage brightened a bit and she smiled slyly. "Would you like some assistance with your leetle problem, Monsieur Snape?"

"I would be much obliged, though I'm not sure what you'll…"

"Leave zhat to me." She assured him before gliding off, squaring her shoulders as though preparing for battle. After he'd recovered from his surprise, he hurried after her, only to arrive as she was shutting the double doors to the dining room in his face. She smiled and gave him a wink as they clicked shut.

He heard nothing for a few moments but a low murmur of voices, and then all hell seemed to break loose inside. He could hear women screaming, crockery smashing, chairs tumbling to the floor. He blanched and drew his wand, and then dove to the side as the doors opened and his unwelcome guests hurried from the house, not a one of them looking back. He turned back to find Maxime looking pleased with herself and dusting off her hands.

"Zhere you are, Monsieur Snape. Problem solved."

"What did you do?"

"Ah, a lady never reveals her secrets. Eet looks like ze elves are serving ze next course. Eet would be a shame to let zhree hard work go to waste, non?"

"But…I…"

"Did you read ze latest issue of Potions Weekly, Monsieur?" She asked as she seated herself daintily to the right of his seat at the end of the table and put a napkin across her lap. "I found Monsieur Beaumont's research to be quite fascinating."

Snape allowed himself to be distracted and retook his seat. "Yes it was. I was especially intrigued by his speculations on fluxweed's uses in healing potions."

Maxime smiled to herself as she poured them each a glass of wine, and settled in for a nice, long visit.

"Just set them down there, boys. I'll figure out what to do with them later."

"Arthur? Arthur what on earth…"

"Molly dear! Are the babies sleeping? I guess they must be or you wouldn't be out here. Where are the boys?"

"Arthur what is all this stuff? What's it doing here? We can't afford whatever mad scheme
"You've…"

"Molly! Calm down. It wouldn't be here if we couldn't afford it."

"We haven't any money!"

"We have five galleons. We had more earlier after I sold my muggle collection. You always said my hobby was a waste of time, but we're in a new world and all my 'junk' is now rare collectibles! No one else in the new world has anything like it. I sold off the whole collection for a mint!"

"You just said we have five galleons left. What did you do with the rest of it?"

"I bought these! Pre-made houses! Rather clever if I do say so myself. These are their most basic models, but they're perfect starting points for a small, basic family home. They're going to be the start of what I hope will be the first of many villages here in Weasley Territory."

"Villages!"

"Molly, listen to me! My father and my eldest brother are on the Wizengamot because they each have a large house in the midst of a village made up of their children, grandchildren and cousins. That's all you need to qualify! If we play our cards right, by the time we're done, myself and all our children will be on the Wizengamot with them! We outnumber pretty much every other family out there. It will be Weasleys that are deciding the fate of wizards in the new world. Gotta love Albus; it was him that gave me the idea, and explained how things were working now. Little Harry Potter is on the Wizengamot! He's a child! And it's all because he inherited a large house that stands over a village! It's a ridiculous way to do things, if you ask me, but it will work in our favor. I've been busy these last weeks, not only finding buyers for my collection, but finding people to move into our new village once it's set up. Think of it, Molly, you'll be the only mother in new Britain with an entire brood on the Wizengamot, and you'll be making money collecting rents from our villagers, while I'm out working! It's perfect! ...Molly!"

Molly Weasley keeled over into a dead faint as it seemed all her dreams were coming true at once—wealth, respect, importance, and all of her children living right nearby along with many, many, grandchildren…who would each one day have a village of their own, until she and Arthur were effectively king and queen of the new wizard settlement. It was wonderful…

"Geez. I think everyone hates my house." Harry commented glumly as they waved goodbye to Ted, Andromeda, the four teachers, Nymphadora and baby Eri. "They took off as soon as humanly possible."

"They were here all day yesterday and most of today." Neville objected. "They all agreed the place was great. They were really impressed with all the painted screens, panels and cupboard doors. Mrs. Tonks was saying how airy it all was, and how nice it all looked."

"Don't take it badly, but we need to take off too. It's almost time for the interns to check in." Barty interrupted. "Your house is marvelous. Stop fishing for compliments."

"Is it just me or is it really damned busy around here? Are all those interns? If so, there's even more employees than I realized." Sirius wondered.

"They're not interns." Hermione objected.

"Oh! They must be here for the gobstones tournament. It should be starting tomorrow." Harry
realized.

"Gobstones tournament?"

"Yeah, we've been advertising it on our wireless station. There's going to be a weeklong gobstones tournament. Everyone competing paid a small entry fee, and for lodgings at the resort for the week. In between games they can take advantage of the shops, the clubs, the spa and the beach and water sports we have available. There's going to be prizes and what not and the event is going to be covered on the wireless, so whoever wins will be known all over as the international gobstones champion. We were really shocked by the kind of turnout we got, even with having to buy lodgings and all. We actually had to double the planned size of the resort to accommodate everyone."

"You're kidding…all that for gobstones?" Sirius said, bewildered.

"Yeah. It has a big following, though that was really only known to the people who played it, because it doesn't get the sort of attention or coverage that quidditch does." Neville nodded.

"Huh. Who knew?"

"None of you have seen the resort, have you? We should go have a look around, since we're here."

"Have fun, we need to get going."

"Bye Barty, Hermione. See you around."

Barty and Hermione waved and headed inside the castle while the rest of them climbed back aboard the carpet. Sirius, Remus and Adeline all looked around and shook their heads in astonishment at what all the children had accomplished in such a short time. Dozens of small houses dotted the landscape, with meandering pathways connecting them. At the center were several larger buildings--restaurants, shops, pubs, tea houses and nightclubs. Further out, along the coast they could see beach umbrellas, lounge chairs and small boats for rent, along with stands selling snacks, drinks and souvenirs. The whole place was crawling with people…in fact…

"Is that Snivellous? I think it is…and he has a woman with him."

"Professor Snape?"

Neville, Luna, Harry and Tom all peered over the edge and sure enough, spotted Snape wandering the crowd, alongside a tall woman in a sun hat and sunglasses.

"Is that…Madame Maxime?" Neville wondered.

"Isn't she a giantess?" Adeline asked.

"Didn't I tell you she lost that during the move? She's human now. Apparently she and Hagrid were the only half-giants in the world, and with him dead, she realized she was going to have a hard time finding anyone, so magic gave her a choice of which side of her heritage to follow. She chose to leave rather than stay behind with the giants. Her and Snape, huh? I didn't see that coming."

"I don't think any of us did. The wretch has been holding out on us." Tom chuckled. "I can't wait to tell Lucius…though he probably already knows. Narcissa always knows all the gossip and he usually gets first dibs on anything juicy."

"I didn't know Professor Snape liked gobstones." Luna commented.
"His mother used to be the Hogwarts gobstones champion, if I'm not mistaken. I guess he picked up his love of the game from her." Adeline answered. "Stop staring and leave the poor man alone. He's trying to enjoy his vacation, just like everyone else."

"Everyone looks to be enjoying themselves, and the shops and all seem to be doing a brisk business. If the tournament goes well, our resort should be a success. Everyone here that enjoys themselves will probably want to come back."

"You'll soon have competition on the rest of these little islands hereabouts." Sirius pointed out.

"Nope. We've got plantations on the next larger island along with a fishing village that will be mostly supplying the town and the resort, and an employee village on the smaller island to the south. There's already a dedicated staff living there to look after the plantations. We're mostly testing out crops there to see what will grow well in the climate. We haven't used up the whole island, so I suppose someone might set up shop on the parts we aren't using, or on the last island… but if we can't handle a little competition, we're doing something wrong."

"You've got an island full of plantations?"

"Not just here; we've got farming initiatives set up all over the peninsula. Small farming operations don't usually fare well over the long term, because if you have a bad year and things go wrong, you end up mortgaging everything to the bank to get you through. If there's a blight or bad weather that ruins crops on one area of the peninsula, it still shouldn't ruin all our crops, so we'll still have something to show for the growing season, or at least that's the idea. We'll sell some to the shops and such, and export the rest. We've already got a trade deal in the works with Ba Sing Se, and we're working on another with Fire Nation."

"You kids are unbelievable."

"Nah. Really, the goblins and the adult employees they hired have done most of the work. All we really did was put up the money and throw out a lot of big ideas." Should we go down and visit?"

"Yeah, why not."

They had been wandering for a while, seeing the sights, when Harry spotted Percy Weasley and Penny Clearwater seated together at an outdoor café, holding each other's hands across the table top and looking glum.

"Hey there, Percy, Penny. Why the long faces?"

"Oh, Mr. Potter" Percy said sounding flustered, before rising to his feet to shake his hand. Penny grinned a bit and managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. She was used to Percy's ways by now. Harry gravely shook Percy's hand, trying not to grin himself. "At ease there, Perce. Seriously though, why the long faces?"

"Oh, it's nothing really. No need to concern yourself."

"We were visiting his family for the weekend. We just got back, actually. His mum has been telling us for some time that they were going to build a house for us nearby since we're getting married in a few weeks. We had talked it over and decided we'd rather live in the employee village that's been forming up on the little island. The thing is, they're building a village around the Burrow and want each of us to have a house nearby so another village can be built around it. The
plan is for all the Weasley men to be on the Wizengamot before the end of summer. If we say yes, we'll be living practically next door, and neither of us wanted that. If we say no, then any future endeavors Percy tries in the Ministry are going to be made far more difficult than they need to be, because his family holds grudges, and honestly they seem to delight in holding them against Percy in particular." Penny answered in his stead.

"When did they decide to start building villages? Hermione was just there the other day and she said they were talking about houses for all the grown kids, but so far nothing of note has really been done anywhere."

"It was apparently Dumbledore's idea. Dad sold his muggle collection--nothing else like it in the whole world, so he actually made a good profit on it. Then, instead of using it to improve the lot of the family, he bought a bunch of those pre-fab houses we just started offering. They tried to rope us in to helping set them up, but we told them we had to get back to work."

"I guess Dumbledore must be getting desperate" Tom snorted.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"His group of supporters has been going through some changes. Lucius Malfoy has been working to get some of the younger relatives of the more troublesome ones to take their places. He's gotten four of five of them to do so."

"I guess I can't blame Dumbledore for trying to bolster his side if Lucius Malfoy is playing dirty pool and trying to erode his support."

"First of all, it isn't that simple. The new changes are more amenable to compromise than they're outright on Lucius' side, but he still felt it was worth doing, and for good reason. The first meeting I attended, Madame Bones offered up a simplified law code the goblins have been working on for several years. They'd been making plans for things they wanted to change or see done when they eventually won rights and a voice in government. Since they have their own country now, they're done with waiting. They have control over the laws in their own territory, and a voice at the confederacy-wide level. They offered the simplified code to us in hopes we'd adopt it and get rid of some of the problems. The folks Lucius has been working to get rid of outright refused to read it because goblins were mentioned in the introductory notes" Tom disagreed.

"They wanted the combined magical states to be called the 'Kingdom of Wizards', and have either a picture of a wizard or a wand, which until recently the non-humans weren't allowed to have... I told the fellow that spoke out that he was an idiot and I'd kick his ass if he ended up sparking a war with the goblin nation. Even with the changes made recently to Dumbledore's side of the room, he still gets things passed. A lot of the neutrals on my side of the room tend to vote with whoever they agree with, they don't just hold with one group. Things he's had shot down have mostly been lost by two votes. He's probably hoping your family will give him enough extra votes to bowl over any objections." Harry added.

Percy and Penny exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

"What?"

"Oh, is that what happened? To hear dad tell it… Mum thinks you shouldn't be there, and were probably overwhelmed by the responsibility. Dad seems to agree."

"I'm somewhat annoyed by the responsibility, but hardly overwhelmed. So, that's his plan, is it? Get rid of me, Blaise and Dean in hopes of destroying our coalition, and then in time wedge a few
Harry mused. He shook off his thoughts and focused on the pair in front of him. "Just how many pre-fab houses did your dad buy anyway? While they're not overwhelmingly expensive, they're not cheap either."

"I think I saw eighteen? Yes, probably about eighteen."

"All the folks who are on the Wizengamot now because of a village have a minimum of fifty households around them. Eighteen isn't going to cut it for one person let alone several. Maybe Dumbledore didn't realize there was an actual numerical value put on the term village...but eighteen isn't going to be enough. Your family would have to have a minimum of a hundred and fifty families living in 'Weasley Territory' for your dad and two eldest brothers to get seated, two hundred if they want you to be as well. Unless your dad gets another windfall, he'll have to either save up all the rents you collect to put it towards new prefab houses one at a time and slowly build up numbers, or they're going to have to pretty much decimate the forest around the Burrow to build enough houses to make up the numbers...or maybe Dumbledore was expecting you all to portion out your extended family in a way that would get more of you seated, so you just had to make up the extra numbers, not wholesale villages. I don't know. But you can tell your family honestly that you've found other lodgings and it's likely to be several years before getting you seated is even an issue."

"I think I'd better write to dad. He seems to think he's going to the next Wizengamot meeting."

"That would probably be a good idea."

"Ugh. I'm exhausted." Ron moaned as he piled his plate up.

"We only finished one house, little brother. There's still seventeen more to go." Bill sighed.

"Twenty-one. You forgot the houses mum and dad already bought for all of us." Charlie reminded him.

"Mwahh, don't remind me. I was hoping to go hang out at the Cannon's stadium tomorrow, not be putting up stupid bloody houses." 

"It's an investment for our futures, Ron. Just think, all of us on the Wizengamot." Charlie chided him.

"I notice no one's making plans for me to be on the bloody Wizengamot." Ginny grumbled.

"Stop complaining, Gin. No one made you help put up the stupid house either."

"What if I want to be on the Wizengamot? The twins don't want to and Ron's an idiot, but it's just taken as a given that they all will be."

"Get bent, Gin. I'm not an idiot!"

"Yes, you are."

"Kids, that's enough."

"Hey, isn't that Percy's owl? Why's he writing? He just left a few hours ago." Bill wondered.

"Oh! I hope nothing's wrong..." Molly fretted as she hurried to open the window to let in Hermes,
Percy's owl.

The family stirred uneasily watching Molly's face as she read through the missive.

"Molly? Is everything alright?"

Molly, still frowning, handed the letter to Arthur and retook her seat, only to poke at her dinner glumly. Her earlier excitement and animation seemed to have drained right out of her.

"Two hundred! We're not even anywhere close to fifty…"

"Dad? What's going on?"

Arthur sighed and laid aside the letter after he finished reading through it, then rubbed his eyes tiredly beneath his glasses.

"Albus seems to have left out a few things when he was explaining the new system. Apparently each seat is for a representative of a village with a minimum of fifty households. That means even after we fill up the houses I just purchased, we'll still have to have another thirty-two before it's worth a seat, and likewise for the rest of you. Even if I use the remaining money… I suppose we could always just build a few extras from scratch… that plus the rents… Even then it will still take a while."

"So… we're not all getting on the Wizengamot?" Ron wondered.

"No, genius, you're not. Tch, and you think you should be allowed to decide the laws for all of us?"

"Ginny, that's enough." Molly interjected quietly. The sudden loss of 'royal' status had obviously hit her hard.

Ginny rolled her eyes and snatched up the letter to read it herself.

"Percy and Penny are going to live on the island somewhere so they can be close to work. Well, that's one less house to build, I guess."

"What's it to you, it's not like you were going to be building them."

Unnoticed by the others, Bill the eldest Weasley son, sat quietly his eyes agleam with speculation. Bill was a curse-breaker for Gringott's. He made good money and got a cut of the treasure he recovered--a small cut, but a cut nonetheless. He'd been living on the worksite since beginning his job, and squirreling the majority away so he could set himself up properly when he eventually decided to settle down and raise a family. His current girlfriend, while not super-rich, was nonetheless comfortably wealthy… which meant a comfortable dowry. If he played his cards right, he at least might still be a Weasley of consequence before the year was out. It looked like it was time to talk to Fleur's father about their future…

"Hey, Ron… it says something in here about a chess tournament. You know anything about that?" Ginny suddenly spoke up from where she was still reading Percy's letter.

"Oh, yeah, it's some big international thing. There's a huge cash prize if you win. What's it say?"

"It says the resort is sold out, but Harry Potter said you could stay with him for the week. His house is on the island somewhere. Percy paid your entry fee and everything-- you have to pay him back with interest if you win. You have to be at the Leaky Cauldron at 9 am next Monday if you want to take part."
"Oh good. You still be around to help build the rest of the houses then." George said cheerfully.

The big smile that had split Ron's face vanished like mist in the morning sun.

"Bloody hell."
Chessmaster
Chapter Summary

Aang gets some advice, there's a party at Harry's place, Ron takes part in the chess tournament.

"Damn, man, look at you. That's some tan you're sporting…whoa, Nev, you too. Wow, Luna as well. What have you three been doing since we've seen you last?" Dean marveled.

"Hanging out on the beach mostly, and building a ship." Neville laughed.

"Yeah? What kind of ship?"

"Viking longship. We're planning to expand the inside of the hull and build some cabins in there. If we get it done before the summer's over we'll probably take it out for a jaunt." Harry explained.

"Alright, enough chit-chat. Time is money." Griphook grumbled.

"Speaking of money, how's our take for the gobstones tournament?"

"It was a rousing success all around. If the chess tournament is only half so successful, we've still more than exceeded our goals for the resort for this summer. We sold out the entire expanded lodgings for both events, all the restaurants and shops did a booming business. We've had day-trippers coming by in droves to spend the day at the beach and renting equipment to go out on the water, and all of that is above what we made on the tournament itself."

"Excellent. We should give all our interns a small bonus for getting everything up and running so swiftly."

"Two of the employees will be mating soon. We had thought to give them the day off so they could attend the mating ceremony and celebration." Bloodaxe said.

"That'll work." Harry chuckled. "How goes the employee village on the little island?"

"Construction is in its final phases. We figure we can have them start moving in sometime next week."

"How many houses are there altogether?"

"Hmmm…fifty seven. We figure about half of them should be empty sometime early next year as they all begin mating."

"You've got mating on the brain there, Bloodaxe. Fifty seven, huh? I guess we should put out word to them to hold an election among themselves to have someone to represent them on the Wizengamot, they have the numbers for it." Harry made a note to send out a memo to that effect.

"How about the phone relays?" Pansy asked.

"They're just about done constructing the last of them. Once they're finished they'll just need to be
installed somewhere." Penny informed them.

"I've already got the perfect places in mind--the four air temples. They're at the four corners of the world. That should allow for worldwide coverage if everything works correctly. We'll be paying a nominal fee to the temples for renting their spires."

The goblins grumbled but nodded agreement.

"Trade talks?"

"Proceeding afoot. We already have an agreement for produce this winter, but no lasting agreement after that. We think they're waiting to see if we can deliver before making any long-term treaties." Percy replied.

"Alright, as for the Fire Nation trade talks, as I said last time we have a firm agreement for them to make trains for us. They already have factories set up to do large-scale metal working, they just need to be refitted somewhat for trains rather than war machines. This will allow us to not only transport goods across the continent, but it's also a way to corner tourist trade and get some of the Earth Kingdom folks to our resort, and possibly to the mystical library if Aang can convince the spirit to bring it back."

"We've been mapping out routes and making plans on how best to fit out the trains when we get them so that they'll be both be comfortable and not too shocking to the sensibilities of the non-magicals in the world." Griphook nodded.

"If we could start plotting out rest stops for along the way, each offering souvenirs and amenities from the area to entice some of the tourist gold along the way all the better." Blaise spoke up.

"If we can get locals from the area to carry the bulk of the expense in building such places and just get a cut for bringing them customers it would be even better. Don't forget we're going to have to build a railway first, and we're already carrying the expense of getting our movie industry underway." Theo reminded him.

"True. I suppose getting some of the natives involved will make them welcome the railway rather than see it as an intrusion as well."

"Alright…ah, the test plantations on the big island. How are things going there?"

"The climate and soil seems to be amenable to the crops thus far. It looks to be a good harvest. The farms on the mainland are faring well for the most part, though it looks like the potato crop might be a poor one, and we've been having some problems with the sugar beets and carrots. We're not sure yet how much said problems will impact the harvest yet. Given the problems, we've been seeking out native staple crops and have been quick-growing them in the greenhouses for seed to bolster the farming initiatives next season."

"It will probably be easier to sell the native crops overseas in any case, though the ones we chose to focus on are all either the same or similar enough that it shouldn't be a problem in any case. Okay, the movie houses. Right now it looks like they're scheduled to begin rollout next summer. Is that still the case?"

"Yes, we're focusing on getting several movies filmed and copied first so we can get them up and running, and the first casting call isn't going to be until later this month." Smashammer spoke up.

"What movie did we decide to make first?" Draco wondered.
"Nightfall" Padma answered. "A screenplay based on my book was put together. It's still selling well, so it should be a draw for fans."

"We're also going to be working on a documentary about the move, and we were considering some historical pieces about the other countries in the world, if that owl guy ever brings his mystical library back. Have you heard anything more on that front?" Theo wondered.

"I wrote to Aang and he said he'd try to contact him for us. I'll write him again and see if he's gotten an answer yet. I should be seeing him at one of the temples when the relays for the phones are up and running, and I can pin him down then if I haven't gotten an answer yet. Alright, last thing left is the pre-fab houses."

"There's been quite a run on those. We've been having to go pretty far afield to find lumber for all of them without too severely impacting any of the forests. They've been selling a lot better than we ever expected. We've just gotten three orders for fifty each." Penny replied.

"People trying to put together villages so they can get on the Wizengamot. We make money regardless, so more power to them." Harry nodded.

"Is that all it takes now? Well…something to think about." Justin mused.

"You'll have to find people to live in the village too, otherwise you'll just be shelling out money for houses that will become a ghost town." Pansy reminded him.

"We could help find people. Our curse breakers normally live on the worksite and then stay with relatives between jobs. Many of them will be looking for homes of their own. I'm sure we could swing a few your way if you do this." Griphook offered.

"That would be very helpful. I'll have to take a look around and find a good spot to set up. This is very good news. My father was part of the house of Lords in the old world. I had always expected to follow in his footsteps in some manner. I'm glad to know there'll still be some way for me to do so…even if he'll never know about it." Justin said with a wan smile.

As the board left the boardroom, they could hear the sound of celebrating filtering down the stairs.

"Wonder what that's all about?"

The group started up the stairs and found the telecommunications department and assorted interns toasting one another with cups of juice and having a small party.

"Is this a private party or can we come too?"

"Hey, boss man. Good news. We just finished the last of the large relays." Graham said cheerfully.

"You did? Excellent. I do miss my phone. Where are they? I'd like to see what you've all been working on for the last year."

"Well then, come and have a look at our babies. Presenting…the large relay array." The telecomm group made crowd sounds and posed around the four bowling ball sized orbs that lay on the table at the end of the room.

"These are going to carry phone service?" Justin asked.
"Yeah, there's another like it on top of the central tower on this place."

The orbs were incised with runes all across their surfaces.

"These are the single most complicated things any of us has ever done. Look at this." Graham tapped the nearest one and it opened like a flower, revealing an interlocking puzzle of rune-encrusted pieces. The board gathered around and their eyebrows rose almost as one. Every square inch of every piece was completely covered in intricate runes, hieroglyphs, cuneiform, kanji.

"We made them upgradeable…well, in theory anyway." Alex explained as he tapped the inner puzzle and split it apart. "The idea was that we could swap out pieces and upgrade the system over time should it prove necessary.

"Wow…there's runes on every inch of every piece." Luna noted.

"Yeah. It took some doing, and with it being so complicated, any upgrades or swap outs will have to be done very carefully and with a lot of forethought, but in theory it should be quite possible. We put every protective charm we could think of on these things. They should last at least twenty years, even if they're out in weather. They're all ready to go, they just need their activation rune completed right here and they should come online" Alex explained, showing the group the half-completed run at the top of each globelike structure.

"Great. Let me see if I can get a bit of help and we can get these babies installed." Harry exclaimed before moving to a corner of the room and digging out a small mirror. Several of the group shuddered slightly when Harry hissed at the thing, while others watched in fascination. While it was generally known that Harry was a parselmouth, he didn't usually go around using it. It was a rare treat for some (a mild horror for others) to see his talent in use.

Harry had a quiet conversation with the person in the other mirror and then returned.

"Alright, I've got help coming in about an hour or so. I'm gonna go get some clothes on." Harry explained, with a wry glance down at the sandals, shorts and Hawaiian shirt he was wearing.

"Why? If you're just going to be installing the globes…"

"I'm going to be hitting the northern and southern air temples. The northern is just a short distance below the north pole, the south is a short distance above the south pole. I'm not dressed for the climate change, and I'd probably really feel it after lounging around in the tropical sun for the last week or so. You should all head over to my place after you're done here. Sirius, Adeline and Regulus are still there. We can have a little party to celebrate. I've been to all the air temples before, so once I'm dressed and ready I should be able to just pop off and back in short order, so I'll be around before too long."

"Sounds great."

"Hey, are we invited to this shindig as well?" Dean wondered.

"Sure. My and Neville's birthdays are tomorrow and the day after. We're not having the usual big party this year--we figured with the move, things were still too disorganized. We can make it a combo celebration."

"Even better. We'll see you later."

"Will do. Let me grab these babies. I'll head out once Tom swings by."
"One of these days you're going to regret your sudden penchant for walking around naked."
Adeline warned from her place on the beach. She was ensconced on a beach chair beneath a large umbrella, reading. Baby Regulus was taking a nap in a basket beside her--his infant skin couldn't stand up to the tropical sun, so she and he had been spending their time in the shade, while her husband ran around naked whenever he could get away with it.

"No tan lines! How many times do I have to explain this? Anyway, Harry's off doing whatever Harry does, and Moony is off for the day as well. You should join me instead of always complaining." Sirius declared as he strode out of the water and stood proudly on the shore.

Adeline held up a hand for quiet and listened a moment. "Do you hear people?"

A crowd appeared on the bluff, seemingly heading for the house. They spotted Sirius on the shore, and the woman and baby beneath the umbrella and stopped dead. The crowd and Sirius stared at one another for a moment, then Sirius realized he was still naked, yelped and scuttled back into the water and sat down. Alex and Graham exchanged a grin, several of the teenage girls there giggled, Adeline sighed, gathered up her son and went to see what everyone wanted.

Sirius sidled into the house a few minutes after the others, wearing shorts and a sheepish smile.

"So, uh, what brings you all here? As you may have guessed, we weren't expecting company." The group snickered, each grabbing drinks from the table when they appeared, courtesy of the local house elf.

"Apparently Harry is off installing the relays to bring phone service back up and he invited everyone to come celebrate."

"Damn kid, he could have sent some warning."

"You're always complaining that he's not a merry prankster like his father was. It's your own fault, really."

"Nevermind. I'll fire up the grill. Who's hungry?"

While Sirius did that, Adeline offered to give everyone a tour of the place. The day was balmy and mild, with faint cooling breezes filtering through the area off the ocean. As she led the group through, she had them open up the screens that faced out onto the gardens and let them explore, after steering them away from Harry's room, Remus' and her and Sirius' room. Soon the whole house was filled with people sprawling across the lawn, the tatami-matted rooms, trying their luck against the swordsman-dummy in the dojo, and soaking in the hot spring, while the smell of cooking meat began to waft across the area.

After they'd been there about an hour or so, the sound of ringing phones filled the area. A cheer went up from the telecom group and they began hugging and shaking hands.

"We set it up to signal all the phones the first time all the relays went online so everyone would know the phone service was back up, without us having to track everyone down one by one. I guess they'll be back soon. They're all installed now."
"Um…hello?" Percy called out tentatively as he kept a grip on his little brother's shoulder.

"Sounds like a party!"

"Yes, it does. He didn't say anything about a party…I don't want us to intrude. Maybe you should just come hang out in my room for the night. I can transfigure a cot for you."

"Don't be barmy, Perce. I'm sure I'm invited." Ron scoffed, throwing off Percy's restraining hand and striding towards the gate.

"Ron! You don't just barge into people's homes!"

"I'm not. This is just the gate. HELLO!" he called loudly as he started around the house towards the sound of voices.

"Ron? Hey, what are you doing here?" Neville said in surprise.

"Harry invited me to stay for the week. I'm going to be in the chess tournament, but the resort was all sold out. What's goin' on here?"

"We're celebrating. The large relays for the phones were just finished and actually just got installed a few minutes ago. The whole mainland should have phone service now, not just the island."

"Really? Smashing. I shall have to fetch mine. Sorry to intrude." Percy added.

"Come on in, take a load off." Sirius brushed off his apology. "You might as well, everyone else on the bloody island has."

Ron had already grabbed himself some food and a drink and had wandered off to make himself at home.

"Shoes off." Luna warned as he started towards the house. "There's no shoes allowed in the house."

Ron eyed her a moment before rolling his eyes and continuing onward, assuming it was just one of Luna's lunacies. Everyone knew she was kind of barmy.

"Bloody hell! Where's the sodding furniture?" he demanded upon reaching the covered walkway that ran along the side of the house.

"You're supposed to sit on the floor." Neville told him helpfully. "Oh, and take your shoes off before coming in. No shoes allowed in the house."

Ron scowled and settled on the edge of the walkway, wondering what sort of weirdness he'd let himself in for. Maybe mum was right and Harry was losing his mind from getting saddled with too much responsibility.

"Poor bastard." he muttered, before biting into his hamburger. "Mmm, this is good."

Tom and Harry followed Aang back into the courtyard after being given a whirlwind tour of the Southern Air Temple. Harry actually found himself getting a bit misty-eyed as he looked around at all the new airbenders roaming the place. He could hardly imagine what it must be like for Aang.

"It's really great seeing the place so lively. It was such a melancholy place before. How is everyone's training coming along?"
"Good, really good. Longshot's just about to start on the thirty-second tier. He should be a master by this time next year. I have a feeling Argus and Arabella will be right there with him. They've only been with us a few weeks and they're already on the fifth tier. They've both been working really hard." Aang commented, while gesturing to the two former squibs--Argus Filch and Arabella Figg--who were down on one of the training grounds doing forms.

"It doesn't surprise me. They were both born into wizard families and weren't able to use magic themselves. It's been a lifelong source of pain for them both. Being given such a chance as they were, of course they're going to embrace it for all its worth. They seem to have gone native as well, I notice."

"What do you mean?"

"I've noticed some of the others still are dressing in their own clothes. Mrs. Figg and Mr. Filch are both dressed like Air Nomads. Filch even shaved his head."

"Most of them actually do dress like Air Nomads most of the time. We've just been a bit lax about laundry and um, kind of ran out of clean clothes." Aang laughed embarrassedly. "We really need to find more clothes though. We had enough to go around for everyone, but there aren't really any extras."

"Have you all been collecting the shed bison fur?"

"Yeah, but none of us knows how to make stuff out of it like you did."

"I can take care of that, if you have the stuff laying around somewhere."

"We have gobs and gobs of it tied up in bundles. We were thinking about getting rid of it, actually, since it's just taking up room."

"Don't. Give it to me for right now. There should be something in your archives somewhere, I would think, on what your people used to do. You should try to find that. Then, you'll have clothing enough for everyone, and what's left over you can trade for staples that you don't have available at the temples."

"Yeah, I guess. I really wish some of the elders had survived. I don't really know what I'm doing. Had things just gone the way they were supposed to, it would have been years and years before I was even allowed to take students, let alone have to worry about stuff like running the temple."

"You're doing fine, Aang. No one expects you to have all the answers. You have a small enough group here, you should be able to have discussions on things that need doing and get ideas from the others. You don't have to worry about everything yourself. Let everyone do their part. It will not only reduce the stress on you, it will make your group a more cohesive whole."

Aang nodded thoughtfully.

"Oh, Aang, did you ever speak to Wan Shi Tong about bringing his library back to the world?" Tom wondered.

Aang smiled sheepishly. "Um, no…I kinda forgot, what with all the new airbenders. I'll get right on it, okay?"

"Fair enough. Look, we should probably head out. We told everyone we'd be back soon."

"Oh, okay." Aang sighed with some disappointment. "It was nice seeing you."
They made the rounds, saying their goodbyes to everyone, gathering up and sealing the masses of bison fur bundles into a couple of scrolls, and then headed down to the bison landing at the base of the temple and apparated away, only to reappear just outside the Leaky Cauldron, then portkeying to HQ, then transforming to fly to the gates of Harry's summer house. They could hear music, laughter and voices from here--obviously the party was in full swing. Harry transformed and was already stripping out of his warmer clothes as he headed inside.

It was quite dark by the time the party guests started heading off. Harry waved the last of them off, and then wandered around the garden alongside the house elf, Tilly, tidying up and putting the garden back to rights and cleaning up the empty plates and cups that seemed to be strewn everywhere. The house was quiet and mostly dark when he returned to it, but for the moonlight spilling through the open screens.

When he opened the screen that led to his own room, his heart gave the peculiar skip that it always seemed to every time he saw Tom in his bed, waiting for him. He was clad only in boxers, in deference to the heat, and lay in a spill of moonlight from the open screen by the futon. Harry stripped out of his own clothing, and was already aching for his touch before crossing the short distance to settle beside him. He could only assume Tom was in the same state, as he was pinned to the mattress and devoured before he'd even had a chance to lay himself down.

"Ow, ow, ow! Bloody, buggering hell." Ron whimpered as he slowly settled himself on a shady part of the deck. His entire body, minus the parts that had been covered by clothing, were all bright, lobster red and somewhat swollen.

"I did warn you to put something on." Harry told him unsympathetically. "The sun's a lot stronger here than it was back in England. Here. Start doing your front, I'll get your back. It should have time to work before you have to leave for the tournament."

"Oh, hell, that's right…" Ron moaned as he began gingerly applying burn cream and whimpering everytime he touched some new part of himself. "I feel like one giant, throbbing wound, and my head is killing me. How am I supposed to play chess?"

"I'll get you a hangover cure when you've washed all this off. I warned you about excessive drinking as well. Don't forget the back of your legs."

"I'm completely orange! I look ridiculous." Ron grumbled.

"Better than lobster red. Don't go doing this again. This is going to take up our whole supply of burn cream that we have on hand. I'm going to have to make more."

"It's not like I was planning to end up in this condition."

"Your back's done. Finish your legs and then wander around outside for a bit so the stuff will dry. I don't want it all over my house."

"Yeah, yeah." Ron muttered before stomping off.

Harry rolled his eyes and headed back towards the dining room, where the others were already gathered for breakfast. He'd put in a regular table and chairs, guessing that Sirius, Adeline and Remus wouldn't want to spend all their time sitting on the floor, though there was also a table in the front room with pillows around it if they did.

"Where's Ron?"
"Completely orange. I told him to let the stuff dry before coming back in."

The table was laden with a selection of breakfast foods. Harry began helping himself while taking a deep breath of the early morning air. It was early enough that it was still relatively cool, and the dew-laden grass and flowers outside let out a pleasing aroma. Ron wandered in some minutes later, covered head to toe in dried burn cream and looking miserable, though he predictably perked up when he spotted food, though his face fell slightly as he took in what was available.

"What the bloody hell is this?"

"What? Muesli, fruit, yoghurt, tea, juice, scones."

"Where's the bacon and the sausage?"

"We eat light here, except in the evening when it cools down some. Believe me, you'll appreciate it later. It gets so hot here, eating a bunch of heavy foods really weighs you down and leaves you kind of lethargic and miserable."

"Rabbit food." Ron grumbled, though everyone noted it didn't stop him from taking a healthy bunch of everything on offer.

When everyone was done eating, Ron was shooed off to wash off the burn cream and get ready to head out to the tournament. When he returned, he was sent back to put on some lighter clothes--some of Sirius', slightly resized to fit him, and given a balm to help head off further sunburn and a hangover cure. Ron had brought his broom along, so he was able to just fly off afterwards, his head already filled with plans about what to do with the fifty galleon prize he'd be getting once he won.

Remus patted his mouth with a napkin after finishing off the last of his breakfast.

"I really need to get going as well. I still have lots to do, and the end of summer is fast approaching."

"Where do you keep disappearing to everyday? Do you have a new girlfriend?"

"No"

"Summer job?"

"No."

"Are you secretly evil?" Sirius demanded while fixing Remus with a beady eyed stare.

"What? No! You'll find out soon enough."

"Moooooony! I can't stand it! Tell me where you go!" Sirius demanded while wailing dramatically and flinging himself at the other man's legs when he rose.

"Padfoot, you're being ridiculous. All in good time."

"Never! Tell me tell me tell me tell meeee!" Sirius whined, allowing himself to be drug along as Remus tried to escape.

A small tinkling laugh suddenly broke the tableau and everyone in the room turned to look at baby Regulus, who was perched on his mother's lap and watching his father's antics with evident enjoyment.

"You laughed!" Sirius exclaimed, letting go Remus' legs to turn his full attention to his son. "Atta boy, champ!"

"Good job, Reg."

"Well done. Gotta go, bye!" Remus said hurriedly, making his escape while he still had the
chance.

"That settles it, I need to get a hat, some sunglasses and a trenchcoat."

"Why?" Adeline sighed.

"So I can stalk Moony and find out what he's hiding of course!"

"Why do you need a hat and…"

"So I can look mysterious!"

Regulus laughed again.

"I know, he's a big, silly daddy isn't he?" Harry commiserated. Regulus cooed, he seemed to be agreeing. Sirius pouted.

"Fine, be that way. I'm going down to the beach to get naked!"

"Again?"

"Great, I'll just call up all my friends." Harry chirped. "I'm sure Alex and Graham will come running if they know you're naked again." he added with a sly smile.

Sirius shuddered and slumped down at the table looking grumpy. Regulus squealed and sort of clapped his hands.

Tom snickered, and Sirius fixed him with a half-hearted glare. "Don't you start."

"You must admit, you're being childish. He'll tell you what he's doing when he's good and ready."

Sirius stared at him a moment and then pointed at Tom with outrage. "You know where he's going! How do you know and I don't?"

"Harry told me."

"What! Harry you traitor! Why are you telling him stuff about Moony and not me?"

"I didn't know it was a big secret. I mentioned it while we were at the Air Temples yesterday."

"What is it?"

Harry shrugged "He's building a village so he can be on the Wizengamot. Bloodaxe mentioned at the board meeting that the pre-fab houses are selling like hotcakes and they'd gotten in three orders for fifty each. At the time I just said, well, great, more money for us, but later I realized that it might be a good idea to have some forewarning about who might be joining us so we could work out a gameplan to deal with them if they were troublesome. Remus was one of the three, Renault Borgin was another"

"Borgin? As in Borgin and Burke's?"

"Yeah, him. The last was Charity Burbage."

"Charity? I thought she went muggle?"

"So did I. Believe me, I was surprised when I heard who it was. But, yeah, she apparently changed her mind and came with us. The problem is, we don't know if she had a change of heart, or if she's
still a muggleborn supremacist with delusions of grandeur. I didn't mention it to Remus. For one, I don't like her and I think he can do better, for another, I wasn't sure if he was going to get weird or depressed or something...although, I suppose it's only fair to give him some warning before he heads off to the Wizengamot."

"Why didn't he tell anyone?"

"I don't know, maybe he wanted it to be a surprise, or thought you'd rib him about it or something. Ask him."

Ron let out a sigh as he put his opponent in checkmate. The battle had been far more difficult than he'd been anticipating. His shoulders relaxed as he was declared the winner. He would never have lived it down if he'd been eliminated on the first day. His opponent frowned cutely and climbed down out of his chair, before offering his hand to Ron to show there was no hard feelings. "Good game, mate." Ron told him jovially, willing to be magnanimous now that his victory was assured.

"I'm going to crush you the next time we meet." The six year old told him, face serious. His threat was rather undermined by the fact that he was missing his two front teeth and had a lisp as a result.

"Yeah, whatever brat. Go away, you bother me."

The kid's mother hurried forward to fetch him and glared threateningly at Ron before hustling her little darling out of there.

"Alright, you've got a half hour for lunch, and then you're due back to start your next game."

"Only a half hour? Bugger."

Ron hurried outside and started to draw out his broom, but then he hesitated. "If I go all the way back to Harry's, I'm going to use up most of my time...oh, wait...there was a refreshment table."

He hurried back inside and saw, to his relief, that there was still stuff laid out. He grabbed a few bagels an apple and some juice and began wolfing it down. The bagels were a little stale from sitting out for hours, but it filled him and that was all he cared about. He loaded up his plate a second time, when the official came and tapped him to let him know he was due back at the table. He filled another cup of juice and took the lot with him.

His second match went a lot quicker than the first had--his opponent kept wincing and staring at his mouth for some reason, instead of focusing on the game. The guy left with a huff and a glare at Ron.

"Psh. Sore loser." he scoffed.

He looked down at the board and realized it was littered with crumbs and glanced around, before casually wiping them off with his hand. The tournament official led him to another table after conferring with another guy carrying a clipboard and he was thrust directly into his third match of the day. He liked chess as much as the next guy, but this was going to be a grueling pace to keep up all week. He looked around the floor and saw that the ranks of hopefuls had already been thinned out quite a bit. There were a few less game tables on each side of the room, less players overall, and a lot of disappointed folks standing around the edges of the room watching those who remained. When he sat down, he was surprised when his opponent was revealed to be a girl. She was tall, thin and lanky, wore thick glasses and had her hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was dressed in a loose robe of white cotton with a tropical flower print on it. She was also slightly
sunburned across her face and neck. It looked pretty painful, especially considering the terrible acne that was already there. His third game was a bit of a challenge, but not an unbeatable one. He kept getting the sense that she could have fought a better battle, but she was distracted—probably in pain from the sunburn, or just not used to the heat. Either way, it worked out for him. He’d have to remember to thank Harry for the burn cream. Had he still been in such a state when he arrived this morning, he probably would have been easily beaten in his first match with that brat kid.

"I think I saw some stands selling burn cream on my way in here. If you come again next year, I expect you to have your mind on the game. I’m pretty sure you could do a lot better."

"I know that I can." The girl assured him, staring at her checkmated king with sadness. "Next year, I won’t go so easy on you." She reached out and toppled her king, before rising and holding out a hand to shake.

The sound of clapping drew Ron’s attention, and he realized all eyes in the room were on he and the girl, and the pair of two men on the other side of the room that had just finished playing shortly before them. It seemed the remaining matches still going on had ended, and everyone had been waiting on the four of them to finish so they could call an end to the first round of the tournament. There was a large screen running along one wall that was covered in chess boards, showing the progress of all the matches as they were going on. The board showing his last game was now overladen with the words ‘Winner, Ron Weasley’. His chest puffed out a bit in pride at the sight. The tournament official that had been shadowing him all day came forward to congratulate him on his day's success.

"We're breaking now for dinner. Be back bright and early tomorrow for round two." He told him before handing him a new badge, different than the one he'd been given earlier: it was yellow rather than white, though it still said "Ron Weasley no.62"

"Make sure you don't lose it. You'll need it to get on the tournament floor tomorrow."

Ron took his words to heart and carefully tucked the thing away in his pouch where it wouldn't get misplaced, and headed outside.

Once outside, instead of immediately boarding his broom to head back to Harry's, he found his feet taking him on a winding path through the resort. There were shops and restaurants and all sorts of places scattered all around the large hall he'd just come out of—Convention Hall, according to the sign over the doors. There were people everywhere, walking, talking, laughing, eating, sitting under colorful umbrellas, browsing shops. He saw a lemonade stand and fished out some of his limited pocket money to buy one. The tall, frosty glass was just what the healer ordered.

There were signs posted at intersections, pointing every which way. He wandered over to take a look. They said things like "Bungalow A-F, Entertainment Alley, Arts and Crafts Bazaar, Beach"

He found himself wandering down the meandering path that led towards the beach and found another sign at a split in the path about halfway down "Sunbathing, Water Sports" Curious now, he headed down the path marked 'Water sports'--was it quidditch, played on the water? He wanted to find out.

He was nearly to the beach when he saw her. She was tall, though not nearly as tall as he, willowy, with a golden tan that made her glow in the sunlight. She was wearing a tiny bikini top that barely seemed to restrain her perky, jiggling bosoms, and had on a long skirt that was slit high on one side and gave a glimpse of a long shapely leg every time she took a step. She was also blonde, and she went walking by—he really loved it when they did that. He tried to follow her, but walked face first
into a tree. Nose, throbbing, eyes stinging with the threat of tears, he still had the presence of mind to hide when she slowed and looked around. The girl frowned and continued walking. Ron peered through the bush he was hiding in and watched her walk away until she disappeared around another bend, presumably to the beach.

"Definitely the best view on the island." Ron muttered, still entranced by the memory of that swaying backside.

He was torn—he wanted to follow her, engage her in conversation, impress her with his wit and charm and success in chess…but he was self-aware enough to realize that it would be asking Fleur to the Yule Ball all over again—completely and utterly humiliating. How could he talk to the girl when the mere sight of her sent him stumbling into trees and hiding in bushes?

"Harry has calming draughts, I'll bet. I'll just get some of them and try my luck tomorrow. What if she leaves though?"

He crouched there, frozen and trembling until at last with a sigh he unloaded his broom and flew back towards Harry's house. It was just like chess, really. Sometimes you had to be patient and take risks—and as today proved, he was a master of the game.

When Ron returned to the house, Adeline and baby Regulus were the only ones there. She was seated in the garden, holding her infant son around his chest to steady him as he valiantly pushed himself to into a wobbly standing position, looking quite impressed with himself as he did so. Regulus' legs got tired and he tumbled back to the ground, his little face scrunching up in determination to try again.

"Hello, Ron. How went the tournament?"

"Good. I played three games and won them all. I'm supposed to go back early tomorrow for round two."

"Well done."

"Where's everyone else?"

"Out and about for the moment. Sirius went home for a bit to check on things, since we've been here all the last week. He's been making a point of keeping our village apprised of new developments in the Wizengamot and the Confederacy Council."

"Confederacy Council?"

"It's this world's replacement for the ICW. They decided to change its name since we're all essentially one country now. The delegates from New Britain returned early yesterday from the first round of meetings."

"Who are our delegates?"

"Algernon Covington-Smythe, head of international relations, and Horace Slughorn."

"Professor Slughorn?"

"The very same. He won the vote because he's a middle of the road sort of person, he has lots of international ties already. From what I heard of the vote it was a rather fierce competition. Albus
Dumbledore and Tom Riddle were both put forward as possibilities as well, but the votes were too evenly tied. Tom withdrew from the race to throw his weight behind Slughorn, and that was enough to tip the balance, as he was an acceptable candidate to both ends of the spectrum.

"I'm kinda surprised, I guess. ICW at his age would have been a real coup."

"I think he realized that Dumbledore's faction would never back him and even if he should somehow win, they would make his job far more difficult that it needed to be. On top of that, the folks in Slughorn's camp saw him as a good compromise between their two factions, and would likely never back Tom because of his youth. Those in Tom's faction wouldn't back Dumbledore, and without their support he wouldn't win the three way race, but they were willing to back Slughorn as an alternative. Everyone's certain he can do a credible job--his networking skills are rather legendary, and he usually has pretty good instincts."

"I don't understand why Dumbledore just didn't win outright. He was on the ICW before. You'd think they'd want someone with experience, and anyway, he's Dumbledore!"

"Dumbledore is an old man, very set in his ways, and honestly his work at the ICW before never really did Britain any favors."

"How could you say that? He's the greatest wizard of the age!"

"He has the largest cult of personality, I'd agree." Adeline offered neutrally. "Slughorn has pro-pureblood leanings, but it has never stopped him from recognizing talent and ability among halfbloods and muggleborns, he has no strong non-human prejudices, and has always been friendly to and appreciative of foreign cultures and people. We need someone who will build bridges to the other provinces so that we can eventually form a single united country. Honestly, I think Horace Slughorn is a good choice for that."

"Still, it's barmy innit, voting out Dumbledore!" Ron muttered, shaking his head.

It didn't compute. For as long as he could remember, Dumbledore had always been the guy in charge, the greatest wizard of the age, everyone knew that! It was unthinkable that he wasn't able to win a three way race against some weird friend of Harry's that was just a bit older than them and some old professor he'd never even heard of before this last year.

"Ah, well, when my dad and the rest of us eventually get our own villages, Dumbledore will be back on top where he's supposed to be. We'll see to that, eh?" Ron reassured her.

Adeline just raised an eyebrow at him.

"You seem to be under the misapprehension that we're part of Dumbledore's camp. We're not. We're part of the neutral faction technically, though we're more closely allied with Tom's faction than Dumbledore's."

"But…but…Harry's the boy who lived! Sirius was in the Order, same as Harry's parents! Of course you're on Dumbledore's side!"

"What does any of that have to do with anything? They were part of the Order because they were fighting a war, that doesn't mean they automatically agreed with all of Dumbledore's plans or politics, especially not now when so much has changed. No, Sirius and I, Harry, Arcturus, Augusta and Frank Longbottom, Barty and Nymphadora, Adromeda and Ted, The Zabinis, Dean Bonham, Slughorn, we're all among the moderates. We don't always agree with Tom's faction, but we do quite often, surprisingly, especially considering who he is…"
Ron was confused for a moment, but then remembered Hermione's assertion that he was likely Voldemort's grandson.

"Yeah, that is weird, especially considering Harry and all."

"You have no idea." Adeline agreed dryly.

It was another hour at least before the others appeared. Dinner was waiting on their arrival, so Ron wandered the gardens and tried not to think too much about his empty stomach. He was starving--the rabbit food that morning, and the bagels that afternoon really hadn't done enough to fill the black hole that was his stomach. They'd better have real food for dinner--he couldn't live like this!

He was salivating and trembling like a leaf by the time dinner was laid out on the table. They each were given a small bowl of soup, a plate with a bed of rice and a couple of fish filets, and a selection of odd vegetables. Ron plowed through his dinner at top speed, even finishing the soup though it wasn't to his taste, while the rest were picking through their own dinner at a leisurely pace and chatting about the day's events.

"...so yeah, a couple of shops on Diagon Alley and the general store here will all be carrying Blessed Valley goods in a few months. It's frustrating in the extreme that I won't be there to oversee everything, but I've hired myself a seneschal and a small staff to keep an eye on things for me. We're also going to be running the local schoolhouse out of the keep as well. Apparently that's what used to be done, back in the day, but after the place got closed up they started rotating it among several people's homes. Parents sending their kids in for lessons will each pay a small fee for their children to take lessons, while I'll be providing room and board for the teacher, space for the schoolroom, and providing books and such for use by the school. That way the burden isn't too much for any one person to cover."

At long last, they finally finished and the plates disappeared. Ron nearly whimpered--he'd been hoping for seconds, at least--though thirds would have been even better. He was slightly mollified when little dishes of chilled fruit appeared at each setting, along with little glasses of something or other.

"Elf wine, winter brew, to be exact. It's nicely cooling when it's so hot. It's like drinking down a bit of winter. It tastes like Christmas."

Ron eyed the little glass dubiously, but took a sip. It made him think of sitting in him mum's kitchen during the holidays, roasted goose and gingerbread and hot chocolate by the fire, though it tasted like none of those things--it was actually cool with a faint hint of mint and berries. Finding it to his liking, he downed the whole little glass and gobbled down his little dish of fruit and looked around hopefully to see if anything else was on the way.

Apparently not. The rest took their sweet time finishing and then stretched and went their separate ways--Sirius and Adeline to put Regulus to bed for the night, Remus to read a bit. Ron watched them go and rubbed at his stomach with a mournful look on his face. He was still hungry.

"What's with you?"

"I'm starving, mate, that's what!"

"We just got done eating!"

"You all eat like birds! Bloody hell! Even Ginny would be crying at the portions you lot eat!"
"It was a full meal and dessert!"

Ron's stomach started growling loudly and he covered it with his hands, trying to stop it from eating through his spine, which it felt like it was about to do.

"Tilly?"

"You is calling?" the small female house elf asked curiously when she appeared.

"Is there any food left that isn't already slated for breakfast or lunch tomorrow?"

"Yes, young master, but we is running low!"

"Don't worry, we can get more tomorrow. Could you make Ron something, and have a good-sized lunch ready tomorrow morning before he leaves?"

"Yes, we is having enough for that."

Tilly disappeared and reappeared about twenty minutes later with a couple of hamburgers with all the fixings. Ron pounced on them and began tearing into the first immediately while Harry watched bemused, Tom with disgust, and Tilly with tearful shame that she'd failed the guest so badly.

Seeing her distress, Harry rose and smiled at her kindly. "Why don't we get a look at the stores so we can figure out what all we need to get in to last us the rest of the week, huh?"

They left together. When they were far enough away they wouldn't likely be overheard, Harry explained what he thought was going on.

"Don't feel badly, Tilly, I'm certain you did nothing wrong. Ron's family is really poor and there are a lot of them to feed. I think his mum is using some trickery to make a huge feast for every meal."

"If yous is doing that you isn't getting all the stuff yous is needing to grow good."

"Yeah, which means they have to eat a lot more to get that stuff. I think years of doing that stretched all their stomachs and now they have to eat a whole lot to feel full. It's not reflection on you."

Tilly nodded, appeased.

"Make him a big lunch for the morning, and give him a hamburger or something extra for dinner tomorrow. I wonder if a stretched stomach can be fixed? Hmm. Maybe I should swing him by the infirmary once the tournament's over? Something to think about."

"They was being the last hamburgers I gives him."

"No worries. After breakfast tomorrow just restock from the keep, just be sure to let Itsy know what all you've taken so we can keep track of everything."

"Tilly will do so."

"Alright, have a good night."

Tilly beamed and trotted off to finish cleaning up.
Charity Burbage shut the door behind the last of her new 'villagers' as they gathered in her 'big house' at the center of town. A couple of weeks of backbreaking labor had finally paid off--they were now housed and ready to take the first step in their conquest of the wizarding world.

It had been a difficult decision to return to the wizarding world--they were so backwards, so silly, so illogical…but a few weeks of being stuck in traffic and being cited for even the most minor use of magic had decided her. She wasn't a muggle after all, she was a muggleborn witch, which was a whole different animal.

She, and her friends, hadn't been keen to be dragged off against their wills to some backwards world stuck in the dark ages, but knowing the choice was to do so or be left behind to be ordinary muggles had decided all of them in the end. She had pulled all her savings back out of the muggle bank she'd put it in and gotten a vault and then settled at the Green Dragon inn for a week to await the move. Most of her friends were in similar straights--they had all been living in the muggle world, though most had jobs with the Ministry. They'd all had to scramble to pack their belongings and take up residence in the wizarding world at the last minute for fear of being left behind. Several of her compatriots had ended up at the Green Dragon with her, and after arriving in the new world they'd sought out the others to figure out what they were going to do in the place they'd all found themselves in.

Hope had arrived in the form of a rumor that they'd quickly tracked down and verified--a seat on the Wizengamot for nothing more than a big house in the center of a village of fifty. Charity had put up the bulk of the money, those friends that could do so had bought a house outright while the rest would be slowly paying her back over time--all with the understanding that she, the only one of them that was currently out of a job and not already connected to the Ministry would be the one to get the seat. It was only the first step in the plan, of course. Ultimately the idea was for all of them to hold seats-- the only seats.

They were muggleborn--they were just inherently better than purebloods. They were smarter, more powerful, more special--after all, they were chosen to have magic, they didn't just inherit it along with their eye color. It was obvious they were the next step in evolution, the natural leaders of the wizarding world. Charity's seat would be the first of many, and would be the start of their longterm plan to eventually oust all the so-called 'purebloods'--inbred imbeciles is what they called them. One day, when they were in charge, they would finally pull these silly wizards out of the dark ages and into the modern age--kicking and screaming if they must--and usher in a new age of enlightenment.

"We're finally ready for the first step. I can't wait. I'm eager to get started. It's just so ridiculous the hoops we've all had to jump through to get this far."

"What do you expect of wizards? Not an ounce of logic between them. We should hardly be surprised--it was a very wizardry plan. "Oh! Let's just tap the folks in the big houses, it's obvious they should be trusted with the government!" her good friend Charles said in a 'backwoods yokel' voice while the rest of them snickered.

"I know, it's appalling! They have children on the Wizengamot, and a bunch of crusty old fogeys that should have been put out to pasture decades ago!"

"Oh well, it works for us at the moment, though obviously not as quickly as any of us might have hoped. It's finally our moment."

"My work is obviously cut out for me--first step, get rid of the children. I absolutely refuse to even
take the whole circus seriously until that's done. I mean, look at this! Harry Potter, Blaise Zabini, Dean Bonham--I note he's dropped his muggle father's name, the wretch. They're like fifteen at most! Tom Riddle...I don't know him but"

"Isn't the fellow they said had been You-know-who? They let You-know-who have a bloody seat? The utter gall!"

"He looks like a teenager. Couldn't be more than eighteen or so."

"So...his son or grandson? Spawn of you-know-who and they just give him a ruddy seat because he's part of their precious pureblood old guard? Bastards."

"I know, it's infuriating. The rest of the roll reads like the roll call from 'Nature's Nobility'" Charity added with scorn.

"That load of tosh. Counting their family trees back a hundred years and think it makes them important. They actually admit to hundreds of years of marrying their cousins and aren't even properly ashamed of themselves."

"All the filthy death eaters that claimed imperious along with all their feeble-minded inbred cousins. Lucius Malfoy, Severus Snape..."

"Oh, him."
"He makes me sick, prancing around in his robes, apeing the inbreds manners and looking down his nose at all of us, him and that bitch friend of his."

"Lily Evans, bloody collaborator. Sucking up to whatever inbred would have her and then swanning around after like she was one of them. Both of them made me sick."

"Well, once we clean house we can get to work making this place somewhere worth living...I mean look at this place! We're off in the middle of a muddy old field, not a decent road in sight, nothing but trees around for miles! I can hardly sleep at night from all the noise from the insects and god knows what."

"I miss London. I shudder to think it might be years and years and years before this place is worth living in. I'd give anything for a phone, or a television..."
"Take out--I'd kill for a pizza, or even a decent curry right now."

"Obviously we're going to have to make those things. Wizards waste their time worrying about inconsequentials--prophecies and moon phases."

"Do you know they drug bloody Stonehenge and any number of bloody barrows with them? Stupid sods are out there dancing around, playing at being druids--not a single proper church to be seen though."

"I was never religious, so I don't care much about that, but it's just more proof that the silly buggers need us to point the way."

"Hello the village! Anyone here?"

Those gathered stiffened and fingered their wands, watching tensely as Charity approached the door and peeked out. Were they here already? The inbred supremacists that hated them for no good reason and wanted to keep them down?

"Hello?"
"Oh, there is someone here, I was beginning to wonder. Ted Tonks. I was passing by and saw this place and thought I'd drop by to say hello. Did you just put it up? I was by this way a few weeks ago and I'm pretty sure this place was empty..."
The Wizengamot gains several new members, Ted Tonks makes a report on the result of his James Bonding

"Well, good luck at the tournament today."

"Thanks. I hope I can stay focused till it's over. I wanna see that girl again. What are you gonna be doing all day?"

"Me and a few of the folks from the Melting Pot are gonna head out and help out Justin-Finch Fletchley. He's building a village and needs some help getting it set up." Harry shrugged.

"How the hell is he doing that?"

"His parents were stinking rich, and he had a huge trust fund which he turned over to Gringott’s when he started Hogwarts. His dad was in the house of Lords back in the old world, and he'd always thought he'd be headed there himself someday. He was going to wait till he was out of Hogwarts, but realized with all the villages and shuffling going on right now he might have trouble finding enough people in a few years, so he's doing it now. We put out word through our people that it was being built, so he's already got villagers ready to move in as soon as the place is ready. He's even got a few shops ready to open up, and a seneschal all lined up to keep an eye on things while he's at school."

"Bloody buggering hell. At this rate, I'll be the last of our set to get seated."

"No worries, mate. You'd probably hate it, honestly. Here, take a look at this."

Harry dug out a stack of papers and tossed them to him. Ron started reading, but his eyes glazed over almost immediately.

"Yeah, that's the kind of stuff you have to read, understand and be prepared to argue about at every session. It's not like you just get to sit around and be important, there's work to be done, and a lot of it is boring."

Ron grimaced and handed the packet back. "Bloody hell. I'd best get going, I don't want to be late." He gathered up the generous lunch Tilly had made for him and headed outside to mount his broom.

"I guess I'd best be getting going as well." Tom offered as he rose from the table. "Are you coming? You wanted to hear Ted's report on that Charity Burbage woman as well, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'd like to have some forewarning if Remus' is going to be being all tragic and whatnot. I'm still not sure whether to hope for it or not. On the one hand, she got to be really annoying…on the other hand, tragic Moony is really annoying as well." Sirius agreed.

"You called?" Remus asked as he came into the room.

"I said I wonder where Moony is this morning."
"I had myself a bit of a lie in. Is there breakfast left…nevermind." Remus laughed as a selection of light breakfast food appeared on the table. "Where are you all off to this morning?"

"Chatting about Wizengamot stuff, nothing you'd be interested in."

"Try me. I might be more interested than you think." Remus riposted casually.

"Ted Tonks spotted a new village yesterday and dropped by to meet the locals. He said he had some interesting stuff to tell us about the rep for the place. That's all we know for the moment, actually. He was being mysterious for some reason." Tom explained.

"I would think it was obvious; he's James Bonding. Let him have his fun." Sirius chuckled.

"I'd be interested when you know more." Remus said equably, though with some disappointment.

Sirius and Tom appeared outside what used to be the Crouch house, and was now Tom's sometime residence and death eater central. An imposing Georgian manor house, it looked quite impressive backlit by the low-hanging morning sun, surrounded by rolling hills and trees, with a broad lawn in front and behind. Sirius had been to the house a few times in his youth, so he noted the changes the new owner had made immediately. The central downstairs rooms had been opened up somewhat to allow large groups to congregate and mingle with ease, and the surrounding rooms reinforced to allow for private meeting spaces. The already spacious dining room had been enlarged slightly to allow for a prodigiously long dining table to fit. Upstairs, the west wing had been closed off to allow only Tom Riddle access, while the east wing was open for guests. The place was tastefully furnished, though in an odd mix of styles--some he recognized from the Crouch house of old, some from the Riddle house, while the rest seemed to be new acquisitions. The place had a very masculine feel, though he could spot numerous softening touches that had been added--likely Narcissa's work, unless he missed his guess. Lucius was already present, sipping tea and chatting with some dark-haired swarthy fellow. The guy had his longish hair in a ponytail, and was casually dressed in darkish blue robes.

"Lucy! Hey where's Snape? I thought he was going to be here?"

"Lucius, Severus." Tom greeted.

Sirius spun in place and gaped at the swarthy fellow with the non-greasy hair.

"Holy hell! Look at you! Damn, Snape. You should have done this years ago, it probably would have made your life a lot easier…then again, it might have made your life ten times harder. I can't see Prongs having taken it well. You need to hold on to your Frenchy babe, she's done great things for you."

Tom snickered quietly as he sat himself down and started fixing himself some tea, while Lucius bit his lip to keep from laughing and acted as though his own cup was the most fascinating thing in the room. Snape gaped, his face twisted up in anger, loathing, and a lot of confusion…it almost sounded complementary, but this was Black, and he knew better.

Ted arrived a short time later, and after fixing his tea, and making small talk for a bit, finally got into making his report.

"Sadly for Remus' sake…or maybe not, she's definitely a muggleborn supremacist. There's actually a whole village of them. I had thought everyone was being a bit silly worrying so much about who was going to approach, but after chatting with them for a bit, I take it back. I'm muggleborn myself,
but that didn't help me much--the fact that I'm muggleborn, lived in the muggle world and worked in muggle television is what clinched it, but even then… I don't know that they would have attacked anyone, but I doubt they would have let anyone talk to them at any length. They're a secretive lot, very cliquish, though prone to bragging a bit, or I wouldn't have learned even the bit I did. Charity Burbage was the only name I knew going in, and frankly it's still the only name I know--they all introduced themselves with nicknames--"Call me Skipper, all my friends do" that kind of thing. They have a plan, and Charity is just step one. They're planning to take over the Wizengamot and pretty much pushing everyone else out, to hear them tell it. They seem to think they're going to bring about an age of enlightenment. I doubt they'll be very successful."

"Well…that's a relief?" Sirius said uncertainly.

"I have a feeling Charity is going to make a fool out of herself at the next Wizengamot meeting. She received a packet of information when she registered her village, but it seems the only part any of them actually looked at was the list of current members. They seem to have spent the last week building up a head of steam about the fact that it's heavily weighted with purebloods and halfbloods, and they're particularly offended at Harry's and Dean Bonham's presence. She's planning on introducing an age limit as the first order of business."

"That was already…"

"Which is why I'm assuming none of them has been doing their homework. I don't know what they've been doing since we all arrived, but they've been really out of touch with events. One of them was rhapsodizing about how they were going to bring muggle technology to the world as part of their revolution--phones were their first choice."

"The phone system is back up" Snape said slowly.

"They all had muggle phones, and had assumed the phones the kids had were as well. They thought the bit about muggle technology not working at Hogwarts was a lie that had been perpetrated to keep them down."

"Right, because the staff at Hogwarts has nothing better to do with its time than sit around plotting ways to keep muggleborn children from bringing their little whirlygigs to play with in their spare time." Lucius sneered.

"That was kind of my thought as well. They're a nasty bunch, really, and they've got a real superiority complex--talk down to you, kept reminding me they were muggleborn like, every five minutes or so, and I was like 'yeah, so am I. So what?'. It's kind of funny really, looking back… while we were still in school, Bellatrix once told me in all seriousness that there was a muggleborn conspiracy afoot and they were trying to destroy the wizarding world. We got into an argument. I told her there was no such thing and I should know, being muggleborn myself. She told me I was lying, and I couldn't be. "

The other men snorted in amused disbelief.

"She said muggleborn were odious wretches and really quite annoying and they were planning to destroy everything and steal all the magic for themselves and needed to be stopped at all costs. She must have been talking about these folks. I gotta say, I honestly can't believe that lot survived the war when so many others died. After listening to them for an hour, I kind of wanted to kill them myself, or at least get far away from them. They probably won't ever accomplish much--I can't imagine anyone could stand to listen to them for long--but they probably bear watching. Bunch of nutters."
"Well, they sound kind of tiresome--I often found Charity so, and kept hoping Remus would find someone else, I couldn't imagine a whole village of her--but, well, there isn't actually anything wrong with them plotting to get seats like they are. They're hardly the only ones doing it. Remus is building a village right now, so is Renault Borgin, and one of Harry's friends. Arthur sold his muggle collection to raise funds to do so himself, with the idea of he and his boys all getting seats eventually. Just wanting a voice in things isn't exactly evil." Sirius objected.

"You don't understand. All the others you mentioned are working to be included as one voice among many. They want to get rid of everyone else so that only they have a voice. They hate everyone that isn't part of their group. Purebloods? They despise them, I mean really, really despise them. Half-bloods? They hate them too. Muggleborn that aren't part of their group, they hate them as well, and forget non-humans--they find them too contemptible to bother hating. It's what all their conversation revolves around, and they steer it back to how utterly contemptible the rest of magical society is if you try to change the subject. I mean really, even at the height of the war, the anti-muggleborn rhetoric tended towards the 'they're stealing magic' and the 'they're trying to change everything and we don't like it' spectrum. There were those who ranted and raved and frothed at the mouth at the thought of muggleborns, but they were a minority. These folks are all of the frothing mouth variety and they hate everyone who isn't them. They bear watching, they really do."

"I don't get it…if she really hates non-muggleborn so much, what the hell was she doing with Remus?" Sirius wondered.

"She tended to run roughshod over him; maybe she was on a power trip?" Snape suggested.

"There's only so many staff members, maybe she was just lonely. If all her friends were elsewhere, they weren't there to rain on her parade. It happens sometimes." Ted shrugged.

"You know…it occurs to me that there were a lot of deaths during the war that were blamed on the death eaters that weren't authorized or known about until they were reported in the paper." Lucius noted. "Now, we have a hidden group of muggleborn supremacists of the frothing-mouth variety with plans to take over the world. It makes one wonder, doesn't it?"

"Shall I give Yaxley a call and get him to start looking in to those old case files?" Snape offered.

"Yes. I have a feeling it might be enlightening." Tom agreed

"Oh…hello. I wasn't expecting anyone to be here. Excuse me a moment, I just need to put him down." Adeline said with some surprise when she entered the house and found it occupied. Regulus was dozing fitfully and she wanted to get him laid down before he woke, crying and cranky, so she excused herself and went into the back where her room, and Regulus' bassinette both were, leaving Ron and his guest alone once more.

"Who was that lady? Your mom? You look nothing alike."

"Nah, that's Mrs. Black and her baby. She's staying here for a bit this summer. I did tell you there were houseguests."

"This place is big enough, I imagine you could have a whole battalion of guests and hardly notice."

"Yeah, I guess. We don't have a battalion of guests, so I couldn't say for sure."

The girl laughed and tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder, giving Ron a nicely unobstructed
view of her bikini-clad torso. He thanked his lucky stars that the calming draught was still working, or he imagined he'd have difficulty concentrating--it was hard enough even with it in his system.

"The panels and the cupboards are really amazing. Where did you get them?"

"Oh those things? They were actually specially commissioned just for this place."

"Really? Who was the artist?"

"A bunch of different ones. The panels there are by Dean Bonham, the cupboards there are Adrien Pucey, Harry Potter did the sliding screens, and the flower arrangement, oddly enough."

"I've never heard of any of them...well, Harry Potter, but not as an artist, just as a medical oddity."

Ron was ashamed to admit it, but he was considerably cheered to hear famous Harry dismissed as a medical oddity by the hot girl that was currently sharing his company and seemed to enjoy it. She stretched in a really interesting way and glanced with disinterest at the delicate gold watch on her wrist before making a face.

"I'm going to have to leave. Mother and Father want to go out to dinner tonight. They'll be unbearable if I'm late."

"Oh. I can fly you back if you like. It's kind of a long walk back to the resort."

"That would be acceptable."

They headed outside and Ron mounted his broom. He swallowed with difficulty--his mouth had just gone quite dry--as she hopped on behind him sidesaddle and pressed her chest tightly against his back before wrapping her arms around him. He realized with some horror that the calming draught was quickly wearing off. He did his best to stay focused and reminded himself he just had to stay cool until they'd landed. It was the longest broom ride of his life. He went nearly limp with relief when they landed just on the edge of the resort, not far from where her family's bungalow was situated.

"I had fun today. You're a very interesting person. Will you be around tomorrow?"

"Yeah, once the tournament is done for the day."

"Oh? You're in the tournament? That's actually why my family and I are here. My brother was competing, but he's already out of the running. We'd already paid for the week, so we just stuck around to enjoy a nice vacation."

"Yeah? I'll have to play him sometime. My brother Percy plays chess and my uncle Bilius used to, but no one else in my family really plays."

"Oh, we all play--some more than others. It's kind of a thing with us." she said dismissively before leaning in. Ron's mouth went dry and his heart started thudding in his chest. He actually felt himself start trembling when she laid a hand on his arm and stepped even closer. "I'll be seeing you tomorrow then?"

"Yeah" Ron's voice cracked and ended on an embarrassing squeak. He cleared his throat and tried again, though it wasn't much improvement. "Yeah, I'll see you then."

"Good, I'll be very disappointed if you don't" she whispered huskily before pressing herself even closer
closer and stretching up just a bit to kiss him. Ron's brain short-circuited at that point, and all he could really hear was the roaring of blood in his ears. Happily, his body went on automatic and seized the opportunity that had just been presented.

Tom and Harry glanced up from where they were playing with baby Regulus when Ron stumbled in the front door. He had a knot on his forehead, a few scratches on his arms, leaves in his hair and he was limping slightly. He also had a wide, stupid grin on his face.

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Huh? Oh…I might have crashed into a tree" Ron admitted sheepishly. "I was a little distracted."

"The girl?"

"Yeah…she's brilliant."

"What's this paragon of womanhood's name?" Tom asked wryly.

"Rebekka. Rebekka Quisling."

Tom choked and then snorted in laughter. Harry frowned when he heard the name, it sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't imagine where he'd heard it before.

"What's so funny?"

"Is she Norwegian?"

"Her family is yeah, originally, but she and her parents grew up in Greece. Why, you know the family?"

"They're somewhat infamous. They're the biggest bunch of bloodtraitors Norway ever produced. Even the muggle side of their family is despised in Norway."

"That's where I know the name! Quisling collaborated with Hitler to take over Norway. He was condemned post war and died a traitor. His name even became a byword for traitor. There was something similar on the wizard side?"

"Yes. It was an enormous scandal--a muggleborn wizard that was conspiring with Grindlewald and led to the overthrow of the Norwegian Ministry."

"So she's got the same name, so what?" Ron protested. "She wasn't even born then."

"She's probably a dark witch, you realize." Tom teased.

"She's not evil" Ron scoffed. "She doesn't have any of the signs."

"The signs?"

"Yeah. She doesn't wear leather"

"We're on a tropical island"

"Wouldn't matter. Evil fashion sense trumps good sense."
"Uh huh. Do go on, Ron, this is fascinating." Harry replied.

"She doesn't walk around sneering, or slap people in the face, or indulge in melodramatic rants, or talk to her dad in a weird voice."

"Weird voice?" Harry snickered.

"Yeah, you know…"Hello father. I've come to crush your regime and take over, blah, blah, blah"

"You've put way too much thought into this."

"I think about things sometimes. I like to be prepared."

"Oh…Penny. You're here too?" Percy said with some surprise.

"The wedding is just a week away. I wanted to make sure our new house was ready for us."

"That was my thought as well. Shall we take the tour?"

The employee homes on the small island—recently named Tir nan Og—were fairly simple basic houses. To personalize theirs somewhat, theirs sported window boxes at all the windows—which Penny had been filling with colorful blooms when he arrived. She dusted off her hands and cleaned up once she finished the last of the bottom row, and sent everything into the open upstairs window so she could complete her work after their tour. Percy ceremoniously opened the front door and they stepped inside, sharing a giddy grin as they did so.

This was a momentous occasion for them both—their first home. It was small and simple, but to them it was beautiful beyond words. Downstairs was a long room—a combination living room/dining room, a smaller room with a door—which could be used as a study or library—and a small kitchen—perfectly sized for a young couple just starting out or a small family. Upstairs was a master bedroom, two small bedrooms and a bathroom. They had been saving money and buying small things over the last year to furnish their house. After doing their walkthrough, Percy began unloading and resizing the things they’d bought: gleaming pots and cauldrons for the cupboards in the kitchen, china, and a cabinet to hold it, a matching dining table and chairs, a small colorful rug for the floor of the living room, a small couch and chair set. Slowly but surely it was starting to look like a home. Upstairs, there were fresh linens for the closet, a large double bed for the master bedroom, which Penny covered with a homemade quilt—made by Penny's mother, one of the few things she had of hers. Upon passing the bathroom, Percy's face flushed red at the sight of their toiletries mingled on the shelves. After taking a moment to bask in it all, they separated again—Penny back to her window boxes, while Percy got to work furnishing the study.

Once done with their separate tasks they locked up their house and headed back to headquarters with a sigh. They had no food laid in at their new place, and had to return to the main island for dinner.

"Ready for the Wizengamot tomorrow?"

"Yes, as ready as I can be. It was jolly good of everyone to elect me."

"They knew you'd already been following what had been going on there, and actually understood it all. You were the obvious choice." Penny assured him. She didn’t add that most of the rest of their fellow employees who would be living on the island were like themselves in their early twenties and were more interested in going clubbing and having fun than worrying about arguing laws with a bunch of old men and didn't want to be bothered. Percy was thrilled at the chance, which was all
"I say, we should swing by the convention hall and see what the standings are for today's round of the tournament. I'd like to see how Ron's been doing."

"Sure. Let's go."

"Oh, look, there he is. On to round three. Good show."

"Did you think he wouldn't have?"

"I wouldn't have fronted him the money if I thought he had no chance at all. Now, whether he'll win the overall tournament, that's still to be seen, but he certainly has a shot at making it to the final round at least. If he does win here, I'm hoping he'll consider trying to get in on the chess circuit and try for the championship. He's so unmotivated. I really despair of him sometimes. He could have gotten an internship for this summer, you know. Instead of doing that, getting some work experience and easing the financial pressure on mum and dad, he chose to stay home and eat them both out of house and home. Ginny at least is helping out with the new babies, and she hasn't sat her OWLs yet in any case, but for Ron there's no real excuse."

"Aren't you being a little hard on him? What about Fred and George? They're not working either."

"Actually, it seems they have been. They had a mail order business selling prank items they'd invented. N.W.E. has actually signed a contract with them to market some of the stuff for them for a cut of the profits. They weren't going to do it, but they realized they didn't have enough to open a shop themselves right now, and with the company's backing they can market their products across the provinces, not just locally."

"Really, that's wonderful."

"Yes, they could end up doing very well for themselves if they play their cards right."

Penny got distracted by a conversation she heard going on nearby and focused in to figure out what had caught her attention.

"Penny?"

She held up a hand for silence and indicated the family of blondes seated nearby at an outdoor café with a tilt of her head.

"...he'll be the youngest professional player ever, even younger than Viktor Krum when he started. He must be rolling in it. I really hit the jackpot."

"What did you say his name was again?"

"Weasley. Ron Weasley."

"That's quite impressive for someone his age. His own house, a yacht...and he's in the process of getting a Wizengamot seat as well?"

"All that and he plays chess. Still, I don't like the idea of you running all over with some teenage boy none of us has ever met."

"Oh father!"

"What's he look like?"

"He's tall, has red hair and freckles..."

"Your boyfriend is the jerk who beat me?" the little boy next to her lisped in outrage. "Traitor!"
"Hush now. You know we don't use that word where people can hear."

Percy sighed, and Penny did as well. It seemed he did have reason to despair over his little brother after all.

Everyone halted mid-dinner as a knock sounded at the door. "Was anyone expecting visitors?" Harry asked as he rose to go answer it. He received bemused shakes of the head from everyone.

"Percy? Penny? Hi. What brings you here?"

"We're very sorry to intrude. We were hoping to speak to Ron."

"Sure, come on in. We were just eating dinner. No shoes, remember."

Percy's lips tightened in annoyance when he spotted his brother. Everyone else had a plate with salad, a bit of meat and potatoes. Ron had a portion about double the size of everyone else, and a couple of hamburgers stacked on a plate beside it. The others all seemed to be working very hard to not watch him as he ate.

"Pershy whuat are oo ooing ere?" Ron asked around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. Penny winced slightly and Percy bristled.

"We need to speak to you about a matter that's just come to our attention. I'm very sorry to drop in on all of you like this."

"No worries. Have you both eaten?"

"We had dinner earlier, thank you. Ron?"

Ron rolled his eyes, stacked his burgers on top of his plate and took it with him as he followed the two of them out to the garden.

He returned a short while later, sans Percy and Penny who had returned to headquarters for the night, while finishing off the last of his second burger. He spotted that dessert had been laid out in his absence and threw himself down in front of the table after stuffing the last of the burger into his mouth.

"Everything all right, Ron?"

"Fine, no worries."

"What did they need to speak to you about?"

"They overheard Rebekka talking to her family earlier. There's a misunderstanding they want me to clear up, is all. It's not a problem. She totally digs me."

It was obvious he wasn't going to say more on the subject, so they let it drop.

Remus finished off the last of his sorbet and set his dish aside, before rising to his feet and moving till he stood framed by the open door to the garden.
"I have an announcement to make."

The others exchanged surreptitious glances before turning their attention to him. "Oh?"

"I'll be joining the rest of you at the Wizengamot tomorrow. I have a village, and a home of my own."

"Congratulations."
"Good job, Moony."
"We look forward to seeing you."

"Bloody buggering hell. At this rate there won't be seats left by the time I get there!"

"Ron."

"Sorry. Congrats, professor."

"Thank you. It's a bit disappointing to have things getting finished so late in the season...I'll be heading back to Hogwarts next week to prepare for the upcoming school year, but there was no real help for it." He trailed off and looked at them suspiciously. "You already knew, didn't you?"

"Yeah, sorry. Bloodaxe told me. You weren't the only one that bought fifty prefab village houses."

"Oh? Who were the others?"

"Well...Borgin was one."

"As in Borgin and Burke's?"

"The very same."

"And the other?"

"Well...the other...the other was Charity Burbage."

"Charity?" Remus murmured in shock, before turning to lean heavily against the open doorway and stare unseeing out into the night.

"Moony, this isn't a good time for dramatics."

"You're really ruining this for me."

"Moony."

"Sorry. But this is good, right? She must have had a change of heart after living in the muggle world for a while. It would have been nice if she'd sought me out though. I mean, I realize we parted on bad terms, but..."

Sirius sighed heavily. "I'm afraid not. Ted went to chat up her and her villagers to feel her out a bit. She's not had a change of heart, if anything she seems to have dug her heels in further. It's a whole village of muggleborn supremacists, and they're planning on taking over and getting rid of the rest of us so they can rule over us, apparently."

Remus' shoulders slumped and he settled heavily against the wall, a pensive look on his face.

"I still don't understand where all that came from. She seemed perfectly reasonable when I met her.
All that stuff really just seemed to come out of nowhere…and now there's a whole village of them? Where have they been all this time? You'd think someone somewhere would have noticed… unless these are the people Bellatrix Lestrange was always going on about? If that's the case, how did they all survive the war?"

"We have someone looking into that."

"I see." Remus sat quietly for a while, staring with great concentration at the table in front of him. Eventually, he roused himself and pasted a smile on his face. "I'm in the middle of a book at the moment. I think I'll go read for a while."

After Remus had shuffled tiredly from the room, Sirius cursed, slamming his hand on the table angrily.

"I could throttle the woman just for putting that look on his face. He just can't catch a break, can he?"

"Look at it this way--at least they're already broken up. I'm sure it would have been a much harder blow if they were still dating and he discovered she and all her friends were a bunch of nutter that secretly despise him for being a half-blood." Harry pointed out.

Adeline shuddered. "We can only thank our lucky stars for that. He so used to putting up with bad treatment because of his years as a werewolf, I can only imagine the sort of damage they could have done to him if he were with them all the time."

Sirius' face darkened as he took in the truth of her words. "Yeah, thank goodness for small favors."

"Hey Justin. You look tired."

"I am a bit. I spent most of the evening after everyone left setting up my new house to my liking."

"Must have been quiet there after living with Hannah's family."

"It was. Mrs. Abbot wasn't keen to let me go. I think she only agreed because she knows the fellow I hired to be seneschal--he's apparently quite solid, to hear her tell it. She knew he was going to be living with me, so she eventually agreed. It was still quite the battle, and I had to promise to stop by regularly for dinner so she can see for herself that I'm getting by alright."

Justin and Dean reached the doors to the Wizengamot chambers. Justin straightened his shoulders, smoothed down his spiffy robes and strode in like he owned the place. He wanted to make a good first impression--he'd heard from Dean and Harry about the moves to remove the two of them from their seats due to their age. He wanted to be sure everyone saw someone willing and eager to work hard and make a difference, not just someone too young to be there.

Percy Weasley arrived at the doors to the Wizengamot and felt a stupid grin stretching his face. He took a moment to compose himself and don a more dignified air before straightening and striding into the chamber. He had worked hard, played by the rules, and it was finally paying off. He had a good job, his own home, he was getting married in a week, and now he was at the Wizengamot as a seated member. He would help make the laws that would see their new settlement to greatness.

Charity Burbage strode towards the Ministry with a firm, determined stride, her lip curling occasionally at the inbreds that gawped at her as she passed. The day was coming when these backwards yokels would learn to not behave so rudely to their betters, but it was disheartening all
She and the others had made such strides in shaping the world to their liking, and it seemed now that it had all been undone. She reached the Wizengamot chambers and threw back her head before striding inside. Today she would strike the first blow for the revolution.

Remus Lupin slowed slightly as they neared the doors of the Wizengamot. This was it--the start of a new chapter in his life. There had been so many changes over the last few years, and all of them good--the return of his friend who had been innocent all along, making a new friend, having the child of his two dearly departed friends in his life, the loss of his curse, his first steady job, now a new home and a chance to be a voice in government. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but thus far it seemed clear sailing ahead.

"You coming, Moony?"
"Yes, right behind you."
Troubled waters

Chapter Summary

Issues thought laid to rest begin to bubble up

The gathered members of the Wizengamot sat in stunned silence as they watched one of their newest members be drug from the chamber kicking and screaming and vowing vengeance on all those assembled for 'keeping her down'. The doors shut behind the aurors and their erstwhile charge, though their bulk didn't keep them from hearing the woman howl bloody murder.

"What the hell was that?" Amelia Bones demanded as the sound of Charity's screams grew fainter. "Well? Anyone care to enlighten the rest of us? Albus, speak up. She's one of your teachers, isn't she?"

Dumbledore sighed tiredly and climbed to his feet.

"She was the muggle studies teacher at Hogwarts for the past two and a half years. She left rather abruptly in the middle of the last school year. So far as I knew, she had moved to the muggle world and planned to make a life for herself there. Until this morning I was quite unaware that she'd come with us."

"Why on earth would you hire that shrieking harridan to be a teacher?" Fudge blustered. "Until she left she was a perfectly normal, sensible girl. She was a competent teacher, the students liked her. I try not to delve too deeply into the personal lives of the staff under my purview. If you want a more intimate accounting I suggest you call on Mr. Lupin. I believe he and Miss Burbage were dating when she had her….breakdown."

All eyes in the room swung to look at Remus, who was lost in his own thoughts, so appalled was he by Charity's behavior in the chamber that day. He glanced up and realized everyone was staring at him--except for Sirius and Harry who were glaring at Dumbledore for some reason.

"Yes?"

"What can you tell us about that woman? You were dating? Is this correct?"

Remus flushed in embarrassment as it seemed everyone leaned forward a bit, not wanting to miss any of the juicy details. He slowly stood as Dumbledore retook his seat.

"Yes, we were dating for about six months. We were both working as teachers at Hogwarts. We broke up rather suddenly a few hours before she left Hogwarts mid-school year to go make a life in the muggle world. I only learned that she had come with us last night."

Remus fidgeted under everyone's stares. He wasn't used to being the center of attention like this.

"I'm sure Sirius Black can tell you more about that." he added hurriedly before retaking his seat.

Sirius rolled his eyes and stood. He didn't mind being the center of attention.
"We discovered a few days ago that she had purchased 50 prefab houses and surmised she was making a bid for a Wizengamot seat. We were all curious as we, like Albus and Remus did, thought she'd gone off to be a muggle. We parted on bad terms--she accused myself and my wife and Remus of being 'pureblood supremacist death eaters' in between ranting about how she as a muggle born was the next step in evolution and inherently better than all of us. I asked my cousin by marriage, Ted Tonks, who is muggleborn himself if he would approach and feel her out a bit for us. He did so, and reported his findings to us yesterday afternoon. He said it was an entire village of muggleborn supremacists, that they pretty much hate everyone who isn't them, and that they were planning on taking over new Britain at least--I don't know if their plans go further than that. After speaking with all of them for a bit, he made a hasty retreat. He thinks they're a bunch of nutters and was rather disturbed by them and thought they might bear watching. We figured we should contact an auror and maybe have them keep an eye on them. This just happened yesterday so I don't know whether he's actually looked into the matter at all, you'll have to ask him."

"Who did you speak to?"

"Auror Yaxley. He's an old friend of mine from school." Snape spoke up.

Bones sighed, not liking what she was hearing at all. "Well, at least the woman waited till we were nearly done for the day to have her tantrum. Let's call it a day, shall we?"
She glanced at Fudge who jumped slightly and then grabbed up the gavel. "Meeting adjourned."

Bones, Scrimgeour and Fudge headed towards the department of magical law enforcement after leaving the Wizengamot chambers. The further they went through the building, the more distracted Scrimgeour seemed to become.

"Rufus? Something wrong?"

"No…I was just thinking it seems to be oddly quiet around this place for being mid-afternoon. Everyone should already be done with their lunch breaks by now."

Now that he'd drawn their attention to it, they noticed it themselves. There did seem to be far fewer people and much less activity than there should be.

"Where's Kipper?" Rufus asked, seeing the records room unmanned.

"He left a few minutes ago. Said he wasn't feeling well."

Rufus grunted and continued on to his office, calling for Yaxley as he went. He slowed when he got there, seeing his secretary missing as well.

"Where's Reenie?" he asked a passing auror.

"I don't know. Must have stepped out. I saw her earlier."

Scrimgeour frowned but continued onwards. "Seems everyone decided to call it an early day."

Auror Yaxley, a big beefy blonde of a man, arrived several minutes later.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yeah, you done any investigating into Charity Burbage?"
Some of the heretofore unnoticed tension in Yaxley's massive frame melted away. "Oh, you know about that, do you?"

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"Given the climate in recent years I thought it prudent to hold back on that until I actually had something to report. Let's be honest, sir, how would you likely have reacted if I were to tell you there was a possible muggleborn conspiracy afoot?" Yaxley riposted bitterly.

"Point taken, auror. Do you have anything to report?"

"Nothing concrete at the moment, though the little I have is beginning to paint a disturbing picture."

"Let's hear it then."

Yaxley took a moment to organize his thoughts. "When I came in this morning, I noticed something odd. I spotted one of the secretaries. On first glance she seemed to be doing paperwork, but then I realized she was just pretending--she was actually listening in to a conversation going on across the room. I just dismissed it--all the secretaries love to gossip. The thing is, the further I went through the building the more of the same thing going on I kept noticing. I'll be honest, it sort of gave me the heebie jeebies. Anyway, I got down to archives to see if I could find Burbage's file. The archives clerk, Kipper, got rather insistent that I tell him what I wanted to look at. I told him I could find the files I needed myself and he could just go back to whatever he'd been doing. I searched the whole bloody 'B' section and couldn't find head nor tails of any Burbage. That's when I remembered something--Ted Tonks said none of them introduced themselves by name, they all gave a nickname. He said they all called Burbage 'Cha-Cha' and I got an idea. I headed for the 'C' section and started looking for Cha-Cha. Bingo. That's when I noticed that, the archives clerk was poking at the 'Bs' where I'd been searching. When he caught me looking at him he pretended he was doing something, but he wasn't--he wanted to know what I'd been looking for. He got nervous and slipped off. That's when I realized one of the nicknames he told me had been Kipper. I grabbed his file too. His name is Jack Abernathy. His file was filed under 'K'. I was starting to get a bad feeling about things, so I went looking for the rest of the nicknames Tonks told me--he could only remember a couple, but I figured it was a start. I found "Whitey", "Slim" and "Snaps"--all filed under the nickname not their given name. "Kipper" was gone when I left. I headed back to my desk to see what I could find out. "Whitey", "Slim" and "Snaps" all went from entry level positions to middle management practically overnight. They were all promoted over others in the office with more seniority because they were muggleborn. They got their job because whoever had been in it was killed by, it was believed to be, death eaters. The muggleborn was promoted, the pure and half bloods in the office were investigated. The reasoning that was given is that, as they were muggleborn, it was obvious they weren't either Death Eaters or sympathizers and were therefore trustworthy. Even after the others in the office were cleared they were never investigated beyond a quick once-over to be sure they weren't under potions or imperious. "Kipper" started out as an assistant to the head of archives. He died, by death eaters it was believed, and "Kipper" cheerfully took up the slack and has been running the place ever since. He's getting paid what the old head was getting plus a bit extra since he's running the place by himself, and he's turned down any offers of an assistant or extra staff."

"What about the others?"

"They all seem to be making a bit above the normal pay grade, more than any purebloods or halfbloods at the same level."

"Really. Let's go talk to accounting. I'm rather curious to see how many nicknames are down
there."

"Two--the head of the office and the senior accountant. I just got back from there when you called me in here. They were both out, but the clerk there called them "Nibs" and "Gentry"--they both claim to be descended from aristocrats apparently."

"That's plenty to justify issuing warrants on that bunch. We should have the clerks left in accounting go through the books and see if there's any more making exorbitant salaries--we can bring the whole damned village in on embezzling charges and question them about their plans and activities."

Amelia nodded and started for the door. "I'll get started issuing warrants. I'll send some people down to accounting on the way."

"Yaxley, why don't you head out to St. Mungo's. If Burbage is calm enough for it, question her. If she gives you any trouble, bring her in. A few hours in lock up might loosen her tongue a bit."

Yaxley nodded and called his partner on his way out.

"What about the villagers? What if they're violent?" Fudge wondered.

"That would be why I'm putting out word for the aurors and hitwizards to muster up. I'm not going to send in two or four men to try to arrest a whole danged village, man, use some sense! And if they are violent, better the firefight take place in their village than in the middle of the ministry."

They had all stayed up late the night before talking about Charity Burbage's outburst at the Wizengamot and the possible muggleborn conspiracy she was a part of. Given the late hour they went to bed--made later for Adeline when Regulus woke up shortly after she'd gone to bed--the three adults in the house had all decided to have a bit of a lie-in that morning. Ron would have liked to have done so as well, but he had another day of chess ahead of him and couldn't afford to be late unless he wanted to miss out on his chance to win. It made for an oddly subdued breakfast with only he, Tom and Harry being present.

They were just finishing up when a couple of owls winged their way into the house. They flew off as soon as they were relieved of their burdens--Nagini had opted to join them this morning, much to Ron's distress. The owls took one look at her looking at them and decided to take their chances elsewhere.

"Hogwarts letters? Rather late this year, aren't they?"

"Well, the move did happen shortly after the OWL and NEWT tests were finished with. When you consider that Hogwarts is also now on another continent, I think I'd have been more surprised if they'd gotten here on time. Anyway, it's still two and a half weeks till school starts up again--we've all got time for school shopping."

"No prefect badge?" Tom said with some surprise as Harry pulled his letter free.

" Doesn't look like it. Ron?"

Ron was already looking hopefully through his letter and shaking the envelope. His shoulders slumped and he shook his head.

"That means it's either Dean, Seamus or Neville."
They looked at each other and nodded. "Neville" they said in unison.

"Well, that should make his gran, and his parents, happy."

Ron scowled at the tabletop.

"Why are you so bummed? You were planning on trying out for the quidditch team right? Having to do patrols every night would have cut into whatever free time you had that wasn't already getting taken up by practices."

"Hey, yeah." Ron brightened. "That's alright then."

Harry rolled his eyes as he started going through his letter. They had mostly trained him out of flipping out over other's good fortune. If they could only train him up to always look at the bright side all would be well.

"Blimey, I'd almost forgotten we'd be getting our OWL results…"

"How'd you do?" Harry wondered as he looked over his own results.

"I managed nine-- I only got A's on Divination, Astronomy and History, but I still got the OWL for them. I got E's on the rest."

"Not bad, man. Good job."

"How about you?"

"I got twelve. E in divination, history and CoMC, O's on the rest."

"I managed twelve O's." Tom interjected casually.

"Yeah, well you're just mister smarty pants aren't you? I'm quite satisfied with my results."

"What classes are you going to take for NEWTs?"

"I figure I'll drop History and Astronomy--with the move they're pretty much irrelevant right now. I'm definitely dropping muggle studies and divination as well--I only took the tests and studied up on them so I could get twelve OWLs. I'll probably drop CoMC too--I don't plan on raising or training magical creatures for a living. I can learn enough to get by and protect myself from books. So--transfiguration, charms, potions, herbology, runes, arithimancy, DADA. That should be plenty to be getting on with."

"Crimeny! I better get going before I'm late. I can look over all this later." Ron suddenly announced as he jumped up. He grabbed his lunch and hurried outside, drawing his broom.

Harry gathered up his letter and his OWL results, which he'd left scattered across the table in his hurry to leave and put them back in their envelope.

"So, what are you going to be doing today?"

"Hmm…school shopping. If the letters all just went out today, I'd like to beat the rush that'll likely be happening in a few days."

"It looks like they're still out there."
"Still? I can't believe the lengths those wretches will go to."

"Bastards."

"So what do we do now? I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't fancy living out the rest of my life stuck in this mudhole under a bloody fidelis charm."

"We tried working with the system, but obviously it's too corrupt and too loaded down with inbreds for that to work. I mean, look at what they did!"

All eyes travelled to Charity, who was staring out of the window, stony-faced, watching the battalion of aurors and hitwizards that were tromping all over the area and had been since the night before, looking for all of them.

"We had to rescue her from being institutionalized! They tried to say she was mad! Surely we're not just going to sit back and take it!"

"What would you have us do? They must have the whole auror and hitwizard corps out there!"

"We need to do something! I didn't come to this mudhole so I could live as a prisoner!"

"Yeah, what about the revolution?"

They had slept fitfully the night before, all of them too aware of the enemies gathered just outside their doorstep to rest easily. Tempers were running high as half their number urged them to take a 'wait and see' attitude and the rest urged action.

"I still cannot believe they would be so brazen in their bigotry. To have me drug from the room like a criminal! All because I'm muggleborn. They shot down every proposal I made, refused to let me speak, and when I dared speak out against them..." Charity grated from her spot at the window. "They're loathsome! They tried to insist that blood didn't matter, tried to tell me I was wrong, that there were muggleborn among their number! As if I wouldn't realize the little boy in his fancy robes was Draco Malfoy, son of a murderous death eater! The time for playing by the rules is gone. We cannot allow this outrage to pass unanswered. They want to play games, we can play games too."

"What do you have in mind?"

Charity's eyes lit with an inner fire.

"We strike at the center of our woes."

There was confusion among the ranks for a moment, but one by one they caught her meaning.

"Harry Potter."

"YES!" Charity snarled. "It was he that saw to the reversal of all the gains we'd made. It was he that masterminded this wretched move. If we destroy Harry Potter and all his works, the rest will fall into place."

A stir of excitement rippled through the ranks as their imaginations caught fire.

"Destroying our enemy is only the first move, and we need to make it big enough and showy enough to draw away all the wretches camping on our doorstep."

"Polyjuice. I've got some bit already made. It should last us long enough to make more."
"Explain." Charity ordered curtly.

"While the inbred's guard dogs are trying to clean up whatever mess we leave we hit some of the old fogey's houses and take their place. We still take over the Wizengamot, but we do it in disguise."

"Yes. Yes, that will work. Once we've made the necessary changes we just reveal ourselves and take our rightful places as rulers of this world. We'll need a suitably big distraction to draw away the heat…"

"Fiendfire."

The word fell into the center of the room and left a waiting silence in its wake.

"Not even the filthy death eaters dared…"

"Exactly. Let's show the inbreds what they'll have coming if they continue to work against us. It'll destroy Harry Potter's company and everyone in it. Everyone available will be called away to quell it. They'll be terrified. While they're all running around trying to contain it, we'll have the leisure to pick and choose who to target and take their place."

One by one they began nodding, in spite of their initial disquiet.

"If we're going to march out as an army and strike out against our oppressors, we'll need a uniform."

"We also need a name."

"How about M.O.D.E.R.N."

"What's it stand for?"

"Um...well...Oh! How about uh, Muggleborn Organization to uh, Demand Enlightenment and um...Revolution Now?"

"Yeah, that works."

"Sorry I took so long. That was the last of the correspondence I needed to answer. We can head back any time." Tom told him from his place behind the desk. They had gone to Diagon Alley and gotten Harry's school shopping out of the way. Several owls had delivered letters to Tom while they'd been there. He'd suggested they stop by his house briefly to not only let him answer the letters, but so Harry could look around as he hadn't been there before. Tom stretched and then sat back regally in his seat to watch Harry as he wandered around looking at everything. He was standing now before one of the large windows that looked out over the surrounding grounds, smiling with his face alight as he watched a pair of baby cat-squirrels playing in the tree outside. Tom found himself leaving his seat and crossing the room without ever deciding to. He had that kind of effect on him. He felt sometimes like a stray asteroid that had gotten caught by the overwhelming gravity of the sun. He already had Harry pressed against the window and was swallowing down the truly addictive whimpers he was prone to make before he was even quite aware of his sudden presence behind him. Tom let out a helpless groan as Harry eagerly reciprocated, and all but melted into his arms with truly gratifying abandon.
"Are you about ready to go?"

"Let me double check my stuff and get it organized first."

Tom very reluctantly let him go. He'd been hoping they could leave and continue this elsewhere. He was at least cheered that Harry seemed as reluctant to leave his arms as he was to let him go.

"I like what you've done with the place. I see Narcissa had a hand in things as well."

"A bit of a woman's touch to soften the rough edges, but not so much that it will scare off other women, *wink wink, nudge nudge.*"

"She's still trying to play matchmaker and get you married off, huh?"

"Every time I visit, I'm surrounded for hours by young, unmarried women that her friends just happened to mention in passing that she thought she might invite to stay for a bit--just to introduce them around and widen their circle of friends, of course."

"Of course." Harry agreed blandly, before busying himself with pulling out the various bags filled with his purchases from his pouch and looking through them.

New robes, check. Parchment, ink, sealing wax…school books, refill for his potions kit, broom servicing kit and wand polish, copper cauldron—which sadly he didn't already have at either his own home or Grimmauld Place--everything seemed to be in order. He took his time repacking everything to give himself a chance to regain his composure.

He'd been rather thrown by the return of the marriage issue, though he supposed he shouldn't have been. It was just that, he and Tom had spent the whole summer together—as in together. He was sleeping in his room at the summer house for Merlin's sake! Now granted, their relationship hadn't progressed very far, for all the intimacy of their sleeping arrangements. There had been a lot of kissing, some groping, some frottage and a bit of fumbling beneath each other's clothing, but that was it. Their clothes, or pajamas, had always stayed on. He'd been fairly satisfied with the rate things had been going, and Tom had never pressed for more. The idea of going further than they already had terrified and elated him by turns. He had assumed they were just taking things slow, letting things develop naturally… Now, with the return of the marriage issue, he wasn't so sure.

What were he and Tom to one another? They were friends, partners in several ventures--the move and currently the Wizengamot to name a few. Were they more than that, or had he just been fooling himself? Were they lovers, or were they just a couple of blokes relieving tension with the closest available body? Did any of it mean anything? Did he want it to?

A tremor shook his hands just a bit before he mastered himself and bid them be still.

It would seem that, yes, he wanted it to mean something.

He should be happy, really. He'd been ambivalent about the idea of he and Tom being an open couple, becoming like Graham and Alex, or those old aunts Neville had mentioned once in passing. There was no stigma against same-sex relationships in the wizarding world, but years of hearing uncle Vernon ranting, Aunt Petunia sneering, or childish mutterings at school against the practice weren't so easily dismissed as he might have liked.

If Tom went and married one of the pureblood witches Narcissa seemed determined to throw at him, he could marry a girl in a few years and have a couple of kids with a clear conscience and no
ambivalence, just like he'd always imagined he would someday.

It would be easier if he could imagine seeing Tom with someone that wasn't him without either wanting to throw up or kill something.

He was rather offended that, apparently, Tom could countenance letting him go without having the same problem-- he must or he'd have put a stop to the matchmaking, wouldn't he?

His lovers, such as they were, seemed all too eager to leave him behind.

Maybe there really was something wrong with him, just like the Dursleys had always said there was.

Neville shut the door to his room behind him with a soft click and let the wide, false smile he'd been sporting for the last hour drop from his face. He leaned back against the door and slid to the floor with a quiet thump and sat there unmoving and staring at the far wall.

His mum and dad were having a baby.

His gran was over the moon. All his aunts, uncles and cousins had gathered as soon as they'd gotten word and held an impromptu party to celebrate the happy news. His dad couldn't cross the room without being patted on the back. His mum was glowing.

He'd always been a dutiful boy. He had smiled and expressed his joy at being a big brother, just as was expected, received his own few thumps without complaint and kept his smile fixed on his face till it grew painful. He had slipped away when he realized no one was really paying attention to him, he'd been quite thoroughly forgotten in the wake of the news. His parents were full of plans for the little bundle of joy. He'd heard uncle Augie exclaim that the baby was sure to be 'a thumping good wizard'--unlike himself, which was heard for all that it remained unsaid.

He had gone downstairs with his school letter, ready to show off his twelve OWLs, and his prefect badge, and had been blindsided by the news. He still hadn't told any of them. Everyone was too eager to talk about the baby. He'd been gently nudged aside when he'd tried to get his parents attention, teased that he was already experiencing sibling rivalry, and how it was unseemly in a boy his age.

What did they expect?! He'd just gotten them back himself and had barely gotten to spend any time with them before being hustled off to Hogwarts. He'd been looking forward to making up for lost time this summer, but instead of father-son quidditch, or mother-son love advice, dad had been going to the Wizengamot and sitting around with others from there smoking cigars and discussing laws, and mum had been knitting baby booties and receiving blankets.

The room slowly darkened as the shadows elongated across the room, and still he sat there, staring with unseeing eyes at the far wall until he could no longer see anything at all.

Alice sighed and put her feet up. It had been a long day--the last of the relatives had just left a few minutes prior. The house elves were already bustling about putting the house to rights.

"Alright, Alice?"
"Just a bit tired. It was nice to see everyone in one place."

"Yeah, it was. I'm just about done in myself."

Augusta joined them, seating herself nearby. Frank noticed she seemed distracted.

"Mother? Something wrong?"

"I was just wondering where Neville's gotten to. It seems strange him slipping off like that—he's quiet, but when there's a party he's usually right in the center of things. Of course, that's usually when he's with his little friends."

"He has friends? I had begun to wonder. We've never seen any of them."

"He was over a friend's house the other day, remember? He said something about a boat."

"Oh, that's right, isn't it? Still, we've never seen them around here."

"He's had friends over from time to time, though usually he goes to their house. I don't mind having youngsters about in small doses, but it gets to be too much after a while. I always preferred he go to their homes, where there were young parents to look after them. I'm not as spry as I used to be you know."

They were distracted by a small commotion going on among the house elves.

"Tofty? What's going on?"

"Oh, mistress! The young master's hoggywarts letter is being here. He is doing very well and is getting a badgy!"

"The Hogwarts letter? Well, it's about time. Give it here. I want to see how the boy did on his OWLs."

"OWLs?" Alice laughed nervously. "Neville's not a fifth year…is he?"

"He'll be going into fifth this year." Augusta replied absently as she read through the results. "Oh, well done, Neville. Twelve OWLs and Prefect. Good show!"

"Twelve…"

"…OWLs?" Frank and Alice said with some chagrin.

They honestly hadn't been expecting that. He didn't exactly strike one as a scholar.

"I'd have thought he would have…. He didn't bandy it about much that he was trying for them. He didn't want to be teased if he didn't make the mark. Augie can be a bit of a tool when it comes to Neville. You'd think he'd have cleaned up his act somewhat after the boy walloped the family jewels that time."

"He did what?" Frank choked. "I'm going to have to give that boy what-for, treating the dear old fellow like that!"

"He had it coming, honestly."

"Stuff and nonsense! There's no good excuse for a fellow aiming for another bloke's tackle, it's just not the done thing!"
Augusta frowned pensively as she stared at her grandson's OWL results, then turned a searching look on her son and daughter in law before beginning.

"He terrorized the boy most of his life. He nearly drowned him in Blackpool, was always jumping out at the lad till he was afraid of his own shadow. The offense that got him whacked in the tackle was dropping him out a window. Thank all the good spirits the lad bounced or he might not be here today."

"What?" Alice whispered horrified. "Why on earth would Augie do such a thing?"

Augusta sighed heavily.

"We all spent most of the lad's childhood fearing he was a squib. Until he bounced, not a one of us could recall a single instance of accidental magic. Why, compared to you as a boy, he was a muggle, so far as we could tell. Given what happened to you two…Neville was all that was left and he wasn't living up to his forebears. Augie took offense, and took it upon himself to try to force his magic out. Looking back, we were all blind. He might not have been making things float, or change colors or shape, but that boy could take a dead tree and have it thriving and bearing fruit in a year. I had to keep adding space to the greenhouses, and then extra greenhouses, and even then there were still enough plants about that he all but turned his room into another. His magic had been there all along, we just didn't see it. Now, years later, the results speak for themselves. Twelve OWLs, O's and E's…the plants in the greenhouses pine when he's away and perk right up the moment he returns and start sprouting flowers and fruit and seeds like there's no tomorrow. The most ornery plants curl around him, meek as a purring kitten while he's working out there. It was right in front of us all the whole time."

She turned another searching glance on the two of them, and this time seemed to be getting upset.

"Why don't you know all of this already? I mean, I know he was away at school, but for Merlin's sake, you two have been back for a year now! Haven't either of you talked to the boy?"

Frank and Alice exchanged a glum look and shifted guiltily in their seats.

"He might have told us all that when we were first recovering" Alice allowed, "but neither of us can really remember a whole lot from those days, and then he was at school."

"He was home for the holidays, and the summer!"

"Yes, well…"

"Mother, cut us some slack would you? It's been difficult."

"Too difficult to say a handful of words to your only child?"

She didn't miss the protective hand Alice placed on her stomach or the dirty look she gave her for saying that.

"Mother…he's only a few years younger than we were when it happened. We keep looking for our son, but our son should be a toddler, just starting to walk and talk, getting in to everything."

"He's so quiet. He's nothing like either of us were at his age."

"Quiet, likes plants and he's friends with Hufflepuffs! The few that make it to the auror corps are alright, but the rest of them are a bunch of duffers--and yet, this is who our son chooses to associate with."
"And Slytherins." Alice added with a dark look on her face.

"And his hobbies are so disturbing."

Augusta looked at them incredulously. "Disturbing how?"

"Mother, do you know how many ruddy dark wizards we ended up having to chase into greenhouses, how many raids on death eater houses went deadly because of their ruddy plant collections? Herbology would be banned like the dark arts if it wouldn't negatively impact healers.” Frank growled.

"We had a lot of friends that met their ends on the teeth and thorns of plants. I can't even go near the greenhouses. I took the tour once, and I had to steel myself not to just start firing and burn the place down. Seeing all those things reaching out to him like they do... the last time I saw that two good men died at the hands of a murderous death eater. I had nightmares for days after walking through the place." Alice agreed.

"And don't get us started on the puppets!" Frank burst out desperately. "We couldn't even watch the whole performance. It's like imperious"

"Or infieri. Walking around, but never quite right, like people but so, so wrong."

Augusta’s growing anger sputtered and died out. She, like Neville, had been so focused on being happy that their lost ones had returned to them, she hadn't thought too deeply on how difficult the adjustment must be for them.

Unlike the rest of them, they hadn't had years to slowly put the war behind them, they had been locked in their own minds, lost in the horrors they'd faced for years and years, only to emerge to find everything changed, their infant son gone and replaced by a young man. She had just wanted to forget any of it had happened and focus on the joy of having her lost son returned to her. It seemed it just wasn't that simple.

"So you see, she totally digs me, just like I said." Ron concluded triumphantly.

"Well, good on you, Ron. I'm glad she didn't just turn out to be a gold-digger."

"Things are going well for you, aren't they? You're halfway through the tournament and still competing, and now you have a new girlfriend with a penchant for running around in bikinis all the time. Good show." Sirius said cheerfully.

A knock sounded at the front door, causing everyone to turn and look.

"Are you expecting Percy and Penny again?" Harry asked as he rose to his feet.

"No."

"We're not expecting anyone either." Adeline added.

"I hope it's not Charity; I have no idea what to say to her after her behavior at the Wizengamot."

"Professor Burbage? What'd she do? Didn't she become a muggle?"

While the others were filling Ron in, Harry opened the door and found Neville on the doorstep. He looked brittle, as though a strong breeze would shatter him.
"Hey, Harry. I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by. I'm not intruding, am I?"

He didn't know what was wrong, but he knew his duty as both host and best friend.

"You could never intrude. You're always welcome."

A tremor shook the other boy for a moment. Harry looked out into the night to give him a chance to master himself.

"Thanks Harry," he spoke up after a long moment, his voice thick. "Is it okay if I hang out for a bit?"

"The more the merrier. Have you eaten?"

"No. I went to bed early and then I left. I don't want to be a bother…"

"Nev. Don't be ridiculous."

He called Tilly and ordered up another serving of dinner and led Neville back to where the others were gathered. There were some raised eyebrows and significant looks exchanged around the table. Neville didn't seem to notice, sunk as he was in his own misery.

"Oi! Neville. You're the prefect, right?" Ron demanded.

Neville nodded, though the idea seemed to give him no joy.

"Congratulations, Neville. Well done." Adeline said warmly.

"Thanks."

"How were your OWL results?" Sirius asked curiously.

"O's, and E's. I managed all twelve."

"Potions?" Harry demanded.

"I managed an O. No worries."

"Good. Snape only takes O's in his NEWT class. Most of the others accept E's as well."

"That's excellent, Neville. You should be justly proud. I'm sure your parents were over the moon." Remus said.

Neville just gave a tight smile and didn't say anything.

"How's your gran?" Remus asked hesitantly.

"Great. Couldn't be happier."

"I see… Your parents?"

"Over the moon. The whole family is, really. He's bound to be a thumping good wizard, you know."

"Um…who?"

"The new baby, of course. Who else would uncle Augie be talking about? Certainly not me."
The adults all winced, though they tried to hide it. Harry fumed.

"That's it. I'm kicking uncle Augie's ass so hard his ancestors will feel it. Better yet, you should. He's obviously not learned his lesson."

"Rufus, you're still here? What happened with the villagers?"

"Psh. They seem to have put their village under fidelis and hunkered down. We left a small team behind to watch the area. They're going to have to come out for food eventually. They don't have a floo hooked up anywhere on the premises. We combed all over the whole area yesterday, but we can't find the bastards. So, the team will watch and wait and call for backup when they show themselves."

"How has the investigation been going on this end?" She asked, eyeing the stacks of folders that were spread out on the table. Scrimgeour and several aurors were going through them making notes.

"I think those sons of bitches have some ruddy nerve moaning about how they're being kept down." one of the aurors growled. A low, ugly murmur traveled amongst the rest of them as they voiced their agreement.

"What did they do?"

"They've been making more than the department heads for years, that's what! It's no wonder we keep having budget crises! Not every muggleborn at the Ministry has, but all the ones in this group were."

"Making more than the department heads?" Bones exclaimed.

"They were getting paid at muggle rates rather than wizard rates--galleons just go further, so they've had a pretty sweet deal all these years. While the rest of us were plugging away, working hard and trying to advance so we could eventually get ourselves a comfortable living, these bastards have been swimming in galleons even if they're just a low-level clerk, and the ones in middle management have been living the bloody high life!"

"How did this go unnoticed for so long?"

"A couple of reasons. The first is that they had their people in charge of the books, the second is that the rest of them are positioned in such a way that all information and paperwork travelling through the Ministry, up or down, passes through their hands before getting to its eventual destination. The third is that up until we got here and simplified the law code, it was perfectly legal what they were doing."

Scrimgeour pointed to one of the old books of law that had followed them from the old world. It really should have been simplified ages ago--it represented at least a thousand years of laws, added to by succeeding groups that conquered Britain, however briefly, and then added to extensively by the Ministry once it became the power in the land. Recent decades had seen numerous laws added as well--real laws, and social policy disguised as laws. It was the last that was the most problematical, though there had been serious problems with the whole thing.

Though the muggle lovers of the world didn't like to hear it, wizards and muggles were actually different in a fundamental way--one had magic, the other didn't. The extreme pro-muggle camp always pointed to it as a minor difference and pointed to their similarities--they were both human,
had families, lived their lives in similar ways. While this was true, it was also wrong. Magic made much more of a difference than that.

Wizards were bound by their word, their contracts and their laws in a way that muggles simply weren't. The laws handed down through official channels shaped society in fundamental ways. It was their fairy heritage that did it--that was where they all got their magic from. They weren't bound to the same extent pure fairies were, but more than any muggle ever would or could be. The long, convoluted law system had been a boon for the criminals among them, as it meant they had a lot of wiggle room. A criminal who knows the law and chooses to ignore it stands out somewhat to both the community at large and the aurors in particular as a criminal just by walking down the street. Mundungus Fletcher had been such a one--there were fairly stringent laws against theft over all the permutations the law code had gone through; he knew this and didn't care. All anyone had to do was look at the man to know he was a criminal that stood outside the rest of society.

Folks like the death eaters had been problematical because there were older laws on the books that gave nobles with vassals certain rights and privileges--several variations of such, actually, depending on which group had written the laws. They were on the books, even if in modern times they weren't really referred to. Under Ministry law, they were criminals. Under feudal laws they were operating in a lawful and approved way to carry out their liege lord's commands. There had been a reason they hadn't just been able to pick them out of a crowd. If captured by aurors, and sentenced under Ministry law, they were criminals and everyone knew it. So long as they remained free and under the aegis of Lord Voldemort they were law-abiding citizens, and looked just like everyone else in the crowd.

This difference had meant problems for witches that married muggles as well. A witch promised to 'love, honor and obey' her husband in a muggle ceremony. She was bound by her word. If the man turned abusive, she was stuck. Should she decide to fight back, likely with magic, she was criminal and oathbreaker in one. It was illegal under modern law to use magic against muggles, period. The only allowable use of magic was an obliviate to protect secrecy, and only by approved Ministry personnel. Even a tickling hex used against a muggle could technically land you in Azkaban, should anyone choose to pursue the matter.

The Muggleborn--it was capitalized in the law book as well, were a protected group. It was granted that they get paid at muggle rates not wizard. It was illegal to criticize them. It was illegal for them to be under suspicion of wrongdoing, or investigated in a criminal matter. They were by definition the victims of all wrongdoing and never the perpetrators. Anyone who disliked them, criticized them or tried to point fingers at them was by definition a 'murderous pureblood supremacist dark wizard'. It was no wonder, really, that it had gotten to the point where people were howling about dark wizards under every rock, and one couldn't even say something as mild as "I don't care for so and so" without having everyone having conniptions about it if so and so happened to be muggleborn.

Knowing all this, it was hardly any surprise that Charity Burbage had honestly believed she could just walk into the Wizengamot and take over in one fell swoop. Had the silly chit done her homework like she was supposed to before coming in, she would have known that all her group's laws had been stricken from the record, even if most there had no idea there had ever been such laws in the first place.

"This is unbelievable! The utter gall of these people!" Bones fumed as she read through the sections he'd marked off for her. "How did this pass into law? How did no one notice?"

"Until the whole debacle with Elphias Doge, the Wizengamot had been getting systematically stripped of all its power, and the ability to just make laws and have them rubber stamped more or
less had been given to the Ministry. Look at the title of that particular volume you're looking at."

"Ministry rules and regulations? It wasn't on the proper law books, just here and had that sort of power?"

"The law of the law--it might have actually been more powerful for not being a regular law. Albus Dumbledore is known as the 'champion of the muggleborn'; It's quite possible Doge just saw 'protect muggleborns', figured Dumbledore would approve and just okayed it--making it a regulation handed down by the acting head of the government. Dumbledore benefitted most overtly from these policy changes, so that might explain why it always seemed to be either him behind it, or his people in the middle of it."

"He knew policy was changing, knew people weren't happy and resentment was building, and so was seeing convoluted death eater plots everywhere, and took it that it was all aimed at him personally."

"That's my guess, yeah. I have to wonder about the muggle-inspired sorting machine that got stuck in the auror department too."

"The one that kept spitting out Lucius Malfoy's name every two weeks or so as the lead suspect in a variety of crimes?"

"Yeah, that one. It seems to fit with their agenda."

"Every time I think we've gotten a handle on corruption in the Ministry, it just seems there's more bubbling just beneath the surface--and the deeper we dig, the fouler it gets."
"Uh...what's with Neville?" Sirius asked curiously. The boy in question was seated out in the garden, eyes closed.

"He's meditating."

"Um, why?"

"He's trying to clear his chakras and release his angst so he can get on with his life."

"I see..."

"We got up early, spent a few hours in the dojo sword fighting and then had a long talk about how the reality of getting back your lost parents doesn't live up to the fantasy. I suggested meditation to help him work through his issues. He figured it was better than just sitting around being miserable."

"You and all your friends are really weird. You know that, right?"

"So you keep telling me." Harry replied sourly.

Ron finished gobbling down his breakfast, grabbed his lunch and hurried off to the tournament, waving goodbye over his shoulder.

"What are you going to be doing today?"

"There's no Wizengamot, no board meeting, I did my school shopping already...so I guess work on the boat. I haven't gotten as many free hours to work on it as I might have liked."

"It looks mostly done. It just needs a bit of paint and some finishing touches." Adeline pointed out.

"I wanted to expand the hull and put a cabin or two in there. I was also thinking of putting a small cabin on the deck with the controls for the propulsion system in there so the boat can be steered in a storm without having to sit out in the storm. Yeah, it's got a big sail, but there's a reason the single rigged, square sail wasn't used on later ships--there's a big chance of being left floundering if the winds aren't with you."

"Need some help?" Sirius offered.

"Sure. If we're lucky we might even get to take it out before I have to head back to school."

"Let's get cracking then. You gonna help, Moony?"

"Oh...I was actually going to move out today. I've been slowly furnishing and decorating my house over the last few days. I was going to go food shopping and spend a few days there before heading
They had been working on the ship for a few hours when Sirius spotted a white dot flying by overhead.

"What the heck is that?"

"Oh, it's Aang and Appa. He's probably looking for us."

Harry transformed into his animagus form and shot into the air. The white dot spotted him and changed directions slightly until it was headed right for them. Appa landed with a thud and a groan on one of the jutting arms of stone that protected the cove. Aang hopped off his head and greeted everyone cheerfully as he drifted down like a wind-borne leaf to inspect the ship they were building.

"Hi everyone! Wow, what's that? So you're living here, huh? I thought you were all on the peninsula. What was that big place I saw as I was coming in? It's almost as big as Zuko's house! Is that your house? It doesn't look anything like you described…hey! Is that a baby?"

Aang had calmed down and grown up a lot in the time he'd known him, but when he got excited he tended to revert to the hyperactive twelve-year old of old.

"That's a ship, we built a resort on this island, we do actually live on the peninsula. The big place was new world enterprises--it's a company that sells things and has been making trade agreements with Ba Sing Se and Fire Nation. That's my summer house, we're all staying here for the moment, and yes, that's a baby, my godbrother Regulus to be exact." Harry answered his questions in order while giving him a mild noogie.

"Okay, okay, stop!" Aang laughed before twisting out of his hold.

"So what brings you by?"

"Huh? Oh! Yeah…I was just in the desert. Wang Shi Tong brought his library back, though it took a lot of talking to get him to agree. It's on top of the sand right now, but I don't know how long that's going to last--sand drifts were already starting to pile up by some of the walls before I left, and I really wasn't out there that long."

"No worries. We have an oasis team on standby--there's some folks wandering out in the desert looking for buried treasure. I'll just let everyone know and they'll head over to try to secure the place against being buried again."

Hedwig drifted down and landed on the edge of the boat and puffed out her chest--all but daring him to try using his phone when she was sitting right there. He scrawled out a quick note to Griphook and sent her off.

"There. Unless a major sandstorm shows up before they get there, they should be able to take care of things easily. Even if there's a major sandstorm they still can, it will just take longer."

"Oh, well that's a relief."
Aang stuck around for a little while, but admitted he was expected elsewhere. Before leaving, he offered to drop Neville off with Guru Pathik along the way.

"Guru Pathik? Is he the old guy in the loincloth?" Neville asked.

"Yeah. He's helped a lot of people work through their entanglements. He did great things for the Fire Nation Royal family--Zuko and Azula are hardly the same people anymore. He doesn't growl and burn things nearly so much as he used to and she doesn't want to kill everyone anymore. If you're having trouble with your meditation, he's the guy to help you with that. He helped me too. I can call on my avatar state at will after working with him, where before it would just sort of pop up when I got upset and destroy everything around me."

"Uh..."

"It's probably not a bad idea, Neville. If you want to go, by all means do so, though no one's going to force you if you don't."

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea. I can't go on the way I am right now. I couldn't sleep last night, and I've hardly been able to eat more than a few bites yesterday and today. I'm hungry enough I feel hollow, but I just can't choke it down."

"One of us will come get you before school starts. Did you do your school shopping?"

"No, and I don't have my letter either. I left it behind."

"I'm sure your gran will go for you. After you leave I'll let her know where you are and what you're doing." Adeline offered.

Neville gathered up his things and they all said their goodbyes, waving till Appa and his two passengers were out of sight.

"You think this guy can actually do anything?" Sirius wondered.

"I sure hope so, though given his track record so far I'm not too worried."

"I guess I should call Augusta and let her know to do his school shopping."

"I'm kind of surprised we haven't heard from her or Frank and Alice by now, I mean, they must realize by now that he's gone." Sirius noted.

"I'm sure they do. Augusta is probably waiting to hear from him. Frank and Alice are probably relieved." Harry said bitterly.

"Relieved?"

Harry explained what Neville had told him about the party to celebrate the new baby, and what he'd overheard of his parents' conversation with his gran later while coming down the stairs.

"Damn. I suppose I can't blame the kid for taking off. Maybe Frank and Alice should go see this guru guy as well. It sounds like they might need his services more than Neville does."

"Probably, but honestly, at the moment I can't bring myself to care overmuch about either of them. They can rot in their own issues for all I care."

"That's not very nice."
"Neither is destroying your son's happiness and confidence and making a replacement for him so you don't have to deal with him any longer."

"I sort of felt that way about Regulus...my brother, that is, when he came along."

"You were like, two, right? Normal sibling rivalry. In Neville's case, that's actually what they're doing. They said themselves that their son was an infant and as far as they're concerned he's gone. The quiet teenager with a talent for herbology and puppetry, who has the bad taste to befriend duffer Hufflepuffs and evil Slytherins gives them nightmares."

Sirius winced. Harry sometimes had a disturbing talent for bluntness.

"We should get back to work; the ship isn't going to finish itself."

Charity Burbage strode in front of her assembled troops. It had been a long and bitter argument, but they'd finally settled on their uniform. They were now all arrayed in fatigues, berets and heavy boots, with the acronym M.O.D.E.R.N. stenciled in bold white letters across their shoulders. Each also had a balaclava to hide their features when they went out. They didn't want anyone to mistake them for death eaters, or for the run of the mill silly wizard living in the dark ages. They wanted everyone to know when they saw them that they were a people of vision who were there to improve their sad, backwards little lives.

"Are we ready?"

"More than. We need to get cracking; we're almost out of food."

"We can eat like kings once we've captured our prey."

"Too right--I've had enough of living in this mudhole."

"We all have. None of us was made for living in such paltry conditions. Today we make a strike for a better world. Tomorrow, we take our rightful places as the rulers of the wizards, just as we were always meant to."

The group cheered as sadistic grins spread across their faces. They were looking forward to hearing that blasted Potter kid scream--he and all his collaborating lackeys. The gloves were off.

"Does everyone have the apparation point fixed in their minds?"

Upon receiving an affirmative, Charity nodded. "Then let us go, and wipe Harry Potter and all his works from the face of this world!"

"YAH!" they screamed in unison. The whole group disappeared with a deafening 'crack'.

Sirius and Harry were putting the finishing touches on the ship when a sound like a massive gong rang out over the whole island.

"GAH! What the hell was that?"

"That was the wards. Something, or someone, just bounced off. I better get to headquarters. Chances are it was just an idiot that decided to ignore the 'authorized portkeys only' rule, but just in case..."
He transformed and started flying at high speed to the castle.

The MODERN army flailed around in the ocean, dazed and floundering. One by one they staggered up onto the beach and started drying themselves. At this point, many would have given it up as a bad job, but MODERN had been holed up together for four days now, not sleeping, egging each other on, making grandiose plans and building up a head of steam. They were not leaving until New World Enterprises was a smoldering inferno. They could see the tops of the towers of Lestrange castle peeking over the trees in the far distance.

"LET'S GO! WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED! WE WILL NOT BE STOPPED!"
"DEATH TO THE INFIDEL!"
"DIE HARRY POTTER!"

The vacationers that had been on the beach drew back in fright from the obviously deranged people. One small boy burst into tears. The shuffling and crying drew their attention, and a few of the members opened fire on the crowd while the rest began marching towards the castle. The crowd screamed, parents grabbed their children and began fleeing from the crazed mob.

Back at headquarters, the place was buzzing like a kicked-over anthill.

"What's happening?"

"We've had massed spellfire at the beach. It's an actual attack, not a mistake." Griphook informed Harry cheerfully.

The interns and employees were milling on the staircase and around the edges of the room looking stunned and fearful, and only became more so as squads of young goblins began portkeying into the entryway, while the goblins that worked there at headquarters pushed back part of a nearby wall revealing a sizeable armory--swords, axes, warhammers, pikes, armor, shields. Several large, snarling things--they looked rather like a feral cross between a giant wolf, and a wild boar--appeared after the last of the goblin warriors ported in. While the young warriors began suiting up, the older goblins began suiting up the snarling beasts.

"Why are you all standing there? Why hasn't a triage team been sent out to check the beach? Why are the rest of you hanging about? Did none of you read the employee handbook?" Harry demanded.

"Non-combatants are supposed to head to the upper levels of the castle and secure the doors!"

"Master Harry! We is bringing in wounded."

"Thank you Pip" Harry told the house elf. "Those of you with some facility with healing charms, head to the medical wing. The rest of you head upstairs and lock the doors."

Still looking shocked and frightened, the crowd of interns and employees began clearing out.

A mean looking hawk flew in through one of the windows and landed near Griphook.

"An army dressed like human soldiers is headed this way" he read. "Sadly there only seems to be about fifty of them. You'll all have to be quick if you want a piece of the action." he chuckled.

The young warriors looked briefly disappointed by the small numbers, but they were soon hopping
on their war dogs, determined to get a fair shot at a battle.

"Only fifty, huh? I guess I'll stay behind then." Harry grumbled. "I'll just take pictures."

"That's thoughtful." Bloodaxe allowed.

"I know how important this is for all of you. You especially. You're about ready to pop, huh?"

"You don't have to tell me." Bloodaxe grumbled before shouting and leading the goblins and their war dogs out the doors.

Harry left behind them and transformed to fly overhead. He'd point them in the right direction and take photos for the 'Defeated Enemies' wall. He always tried to be respectful of the cultures of others.

"That's disappointing. I could have used a bit of excitement" one of the hags now working in the R & D department as a potions master complained.

"Hey, do we have the celebratory party when they get back, or do we have to wait till after they get married?" another hag wondered.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked curiously.

"All those young fellas down there, they can't be considered adults till they've been in a battle. Some of them have been waiting quite a while for their chance. They're not allowed to find brides until they're adults. I guess when it's all over we can have a celebration here. The goblin warriors are probably going to hightail it back to their homes to get started on their honeymoons."

The hags cracked up and began indulging in a lot of perverted speculation. Hermione fled after a few minutes, unable to listen to any more. Her face felt like it was about to burst into flames as it was.

"I'm heading up to one of the towers. Maybe I can see what's going on." Dan, one of the sixth year interns, announced.

"Oh! I'll go with you. Let me just grab the omniculars from my room." Toby, a seventh year, agreed.

"There's a couple in R & D--we've been using them to film stuff so we can watch the playback if things go wrong. Just make sure you put them back when you're done. You might want to hurry--I doubt you'll want to keep watching once the battle starts. It's bound to be messy." Penny told them.

Hermione turned slightly green at the thought of watching a bunch of goblins hacking people apart with all the barbaric weapons they'd just grabbed, but she was more afraid of missing any part of what was going on than she was about seeing bloodshed. She hurried her steps, slipped ahead of some of the others that had begun to outpace her and grabbed a pair of omniculars before hurrying towards the nearest tower.

"Okaay…did muggle special forces follow us?" Dan wondered.

"I don't know. Oh, wait, the one in the lead is taking off their mask." Toby announced.

"Isn't that Professor Burbage? What's she doing attacking as part of an army? Is this why she left
"Hogwarts? Weird." Dan chuckled.

"Oh! A couple of them just shot fiendfire! That's very dangerous!" Hermione gasped.

"Man, how dumb are those soldiers? They're facing a goblin army with goblin silver weapons!" Toby chortled.

"What's that have to do with anything?" Hermione asked.

"Goblin silver absorbs that which makes it stronger. About the only thing those dumbasses did is make the goblin's shields able to absorb any spells thrown at them to strengthen themselves--that's if they didn't have that kind of power already. See? Poof! It just got sucked right up."

"And now they're all throwing spells." Dan said.

"The soldiers are backing up. They don't look so confident now, do they?" Toby agreed.

"Look at Burbage. I think she's started to cotton on to what a big mess they're all in." Dan snickered.

"Is that Harry? How is he flying through the air like that?" Hermione gasped.

"I think Burbage just summoned him….Ouch! He just lopped off her arm!" Dan gasped.

"Where did that log come from?" Hermione wondered.

"I don't know, but that had to hurt. Burbage just staggered right into it and it landed right on her head." Toby was still chortling.

"I think those idiot soldiers are trying to surrender!"

"Man! I thought they were dumb before!"

"Why?" Hermione asked, frustrated.

"If they'd just stood their ground and fought back, they would have given them a quick death, warrior to warrior. By crying and trying to run away they've revealed themselves to be honorless dogs. It's gonna take those dumbasses a long time to die." Dan said gleefully.

The line of soldiers broke and tried to run for it. The goblins bellowed a war cry and went charging after them. The kids on the tower winced and several lowered their omniculars, not wanting to watch the bloody carnage that followed. Dan, and Toby kept watching and recording till the fleeing army and their goblin pursuers were out of sight.

Griphook and Harry returned about two hours later. The employees and interns that had watched their approach hurried downstairs to see what the outcome had been.

"It's okay, it's all over. The army has been defeated and all is well."

"None of the vacationers fled did they?" Griphook demanded.

"No. We assured them that you were taking care of things while we patched them up. They're all fine." Barty assured them.

"Good, good. Bad enough those honorless idiots attacked; if they had ruined business on top of it,
we'd have had to have sent a few shamans into the afterlife to make them suffer further." Griphook nodded in satisfaction.

"Has the battle been going on all this time?" Hermione wondered.

"It wasn't much of a battle, really, though the last few did start getting desperate towards the end there. We think they were trying to make it to the resort to hide out among the buildings and fling the vacationers in our path. Cowards."

"I got pictures of all their faces and buried the bodies. The goblin warriors have all headed back home to start their bride hunts. The vacationers can head back whenever." Harry told everyone.

"We'll let them know. Any idea who they were or why they attacked?" Barty wondered.

"They're a bunch of nutters calling themselves MODERN. They came here to burn the castle down with fiendfire and kill us all so they could enact some convoluted plan to take over the wizarding world and rule as kings forever after."

"And professor Burbage was one of these people? She's muggleborn! Why would she do such a thing?" Hermione demanded.

"They were muggleborn supremacists."

The interns and employees that were muggleborn traded glum looks.

"Relax. They were a fringe group, and they hated everyone that wasn't them, including other muggleborn. I'm not sure why they thought killing all of us equals ruling as kings, but, well, they're all nuts aren't they?" Harry reassured them.

"They really wanted to kill us?" Toby asked, a bit thrown by everything that had happened.

"That's what they said, even while they were dying. They were having a real hard time accepting that it was them dying, not us." Harry agreed.

"Oh yeah? Well...good riddance to bad rubbish."

"Toby! You shouldn't say something like that!" Hermione scolded.

"You have objections to enemies being cut down before they can harm you? Very well, we shall keep that in mind. If another army attacks, we'll be sure to leave you outside." Griphook offered.

Hermione blanched and then mustered up a sickly smile.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish. Better them than us." "That's the spirit, human."

Scrimgeour and the aurors with him looked up when one of the junior aurors peeked their head in the door.

"Did those berks come out of hiding?" Scrimgeour asked hopefully.

"Not that I've heard, sir. Harry Potter is here to speak to you."

"Potter, eh? I wonder what he wants. Send him in."
The auror ducked out and Harry Potter sauntered in a moment later.

"Yo. I just wanted to report that a dork army attacked New World Enterprises about three hours ago. They're all dead--the goblins took care of things. I just thought I should let someone know. I got head shots of all the bodies for identification purposes."

"A dark army?"

"Dork army. Charity Burbage was leading them. They were dressed like muggle soldiers and calling themselves MODERN."

"Burbage? Damn it, someone go check on the team that was supposed to be watching them!"

"Sir!" two of the aurors barked before hurrying off.

Scrimgeour fumed and grumbled for a few minutes before turning back to Harry. "You've got pictures, you said?"

"Right here." Harry answered before tossing a stack of photos towards him. Scrimgeour flipped through them, grimacing as he did so, before tossing the stack to his nearest subordinate.

"See how many you can match with files. Any left over, take them around and find out who they are."

"You were already investigating this group?" Harry asked curiously. He hadn't heard about any other attacks.

"Yeah. The aurors taking Burbage to St. Mungo's were attacked and had their memories altered, and then half our clerks and middle management disappeared. We sent a group out to investigate the village and talk to them, but they'd put it under fidelis and hunkered down. We started investigating on this end and started finding all sorts of shenanigans, from embezzlement, fraud, murder and a whole host of other things."

"How could that have been going on without anyone being the wiser?"

"They made themselves a protected group. It was actually illegal to suspect them of wrongdoing or criticize them in any way!"

"You can do that?" Harry demanded with some astonishment.

"I wouldn't suggest it."

"I wasn't planning to do it myself, geez. It would certainly explain a lot of things now that I think about it."

"There's been a lot of that going around."

"Well, I guess I'll leave you to wrap up your investigation."

"Oh, hey kiddo. We were beginning to wonder where you'd gotten to. Is whoever ran afoul of the anti-apparation wards alright?"

"They're dead. That's what took so long."
"They died?"

"It was Charity Burbage and her band of loons. They formed a dork army and came to kill us all. They were going to burn down the castle with fiendfire and then run off so they could kidnap elderly Wizengamot members, impersonate them with polyjuice and take over the world."

Adeline and Sirius just sat there stunned.

"Well… we weren't expecting that."

"I can't help but think it's a good thing Remus moved out this morning." Sirius agreed numbly.

"Yeah, damn. I hope he won't be too mad I lopped his ex-girlfriend's arm off…"

"You did what!"

"What? She summoned me to use as a hostage so they could escape the goblins. I wasn't getting in the middle of all that, not after they surrendered."

"Oh… in that case. You should have lopped off her head."

"I would have, but I promised the goblins I wouldn't kill any of them."

"They wanted to do it themselves?"

"Of course. It would have been just my luck Bloodaxe would have been left without an opponent. There probably would have been no place safe for me in all the world had that happened."

"Well, I did it! I'm in the final round of the tournament tomorrow!" Ron announced when he came in that evening.

"Good on you, Ron. Maybe I'll stop by tomorrow to see you play. Is your family coming?"

"I dunno… I suppose they might drop by. I could see Percy bringing them by. That means I'm going to have to make arrangements to have my winnings put into my trust fund before mum gets here though…"

A knock sounded at the door.

"Geez, we get a lot of visitors." Harry complained as he headed off to answer it.

Percy was waiting outside with a couple of shopping bags.

"Hello, sorry to intrude."

"No problem. Come on in."

Percy dropped the bags in front of Ron when he entered.

"I took the liberty of doing your school shopping for you. You can pay me back when you win tomorrow." he added, handing over a stack of receipts.

"I'm not going to have anything left! Why the bloody hell did you go and do that for!"

"You probably would have forgotten, and anyway, mum would have just taken it and spent most of
it on Ginny and the babies. At least this way you have nice things for school. Stop complaining."

"I was gonna buy a broom so I can be a Chudley Cannon!"

"Really Ron, don't be so melodramatic. Them letting you hang out is not the same thing as having a firm offer. If you really want to play for the Cannons, you should get on the school team and invite them to come to your games to scout you. If you make the house team you'll have the use of a nimbus 2001, so it would have been a waste to spend all your money on a broom anyway."

"All my money" Ron whimpered.

"Some gratitude." Percy muttered before leaving.

Ron grumbled for a while longer before stuffing the receipts in his pocket. "Bloody interfering Percy, now I won't have anything to show for a whole bloody week playing chess night and day."

"You have a bikini clad girlfriend and new school stuff--nice stuff if it took all the winnings you haven't gotten yet." Harry reminded him.

"Oh…right."

Ron sighed and looked around. "Say, where's Neville at?"

"He's at the eastern air temple with guru Pathik."

"The what now?"

"He's working through his issues and trying to find inner peace."

"Oh. That's good then. Is this Pathik the fellow in the loincloth?"

"Yeah."

"Poor bugger, stuck with an old guy in a loincloth for the rest of the summer. If he wanted to find inner peace he should have just gone down to the beach and found a girl in a bikini."

"I think Hannah might have had something to say about that."

"Well, he could have just had Hannah be the girl in the bikini. Enough about that though, I totally forgot to tell you--folks back at the resort are saying a dark army attacked earlier--have you ever heard anything so barmy?"

"A dork army did attack. It's alright though--the goblins took care of it."

Ron stared at him blankly. "You're kidding."

"Wish I was."

"I'm gonna go read for a while, I think."

"You're going to read?" Harry repeated in some astonishment.

"I wanna make sure I'm prepared and all for tomorrow. I've got a book about championship chess games. I figure it can't hurt, right?"

"Probably not a bad idea. Maybe I'll go take a dip in the hotspring."
Ron nodded and wandered off. Harry looked around and sighed. Remus had moved out, Sirius, Adeline and Regulus seemed to be out, Tom had spent the night at his place, citing some business or other and had yet to return, and now Ron was off reading of all things. It was beginning to seem rather lonely in the old place.

Ron was up bright and early, ate his usual monster breakfast and was out the door clutching his lunch before the rest of them had barely gotten started.

"Gee, think he's excited?"

"I guess."

The attack on N.W.E. was the front page story that morning. One of Harry's photographs, which showed Charity unmasked and ranting at the goblin army while her masked cohorts stood arrayed behind her, was prominently featured at the top of the page. There was no mention of a muggleborn conspiracy, just a rundown of what was known and suspected of their hand in events of the last decade, and a lurid description of Charity being drug from the Wizengamot before deciding to launch her short-lived rampage. Happily, the quotes gotten from the vacationers that had been attacked were positive overall--most cited the staff's quick action to get them removed from the battlezone and healed, as well as glowing admiration for how quickly the 'dark army' had been dealt with.

"Good. It doesn't seem the Dork Lady ruined our resort. I'd have been right there with the goblins wanting to get her in the afterlife if she had. Damn…I just realized something… no one told Remus anything. He's going to find out Charity is dead from reading the paper this morning."

"That's where we were last night. After talking to you about what happened, we realized someone needed to warn him." Sirius assured him.

"Oh, good. I'd have felt like a real bum otherwise."

A loud and vigorous knock sounded at the door and continued on for several seconds.

"What the hell is with all the visitors?" Harry complained before heading off to answer it.

When Harry opened the door, he found a gaggle of Weasleys and one Delacour on the other side. He opened his mouth to greet them and got bowled over by Molly, who shoved past him and scurried inside calling for Ron.

"EXCUSE ME!"

Molly halted in mid-shriek and turned an offended look his way.

"No shoes in the house" he told Molly pointedly, "And if you had given me a moment to say anything, I could have told you Ron wasn't here."

Molly gasped in horror. "Oh! My baby boy was killed by the dark lady!"

"He didn't even know the island got attacked. He's at the tournament already. You're all on the wrong side of the island. The resort is that way." Harry pointed.

Molly charged back out of the house without another word. Harry huffed at her retreating back. Fred and George each had a baby in their arms, so they just smiled and shrugged apologetically.
before chasing after her. Ginny, who had been craning her head for a look inside sighed and followed them.

"Hey, Fleur. It's a surprise to see you here."

"I 'ave been visiting ze Weezeleys so I may get to know ze family of my future 'usband."

"You're engaged? Well, congratulations. I wasn't even aware that you two knew each other."

"We met during ze tournament, and kept in touch afterwards."

"Well, small world isn't it? Did you know Madame Maxime is dating Professor Snape?"

"C'est impossible!"

"It's true. They were here together last week for the gobstones tournament. They seemed pretty happy together from the little I saw. Snape looks like a whole new man."

"If she iz 'appy I am 'appy for her. I know ze Madame 'as been very lonely."

"Truthfully, I think Snape has too."

"Zhen eet is a good match and cause for much 'appiness."

Bill's smile grew more fixed the longer they chatted. "I hadn't realized you two were such good friends."

"Oh sure. We spent several Hogsmeade weekends together." Harry replied brightly. "Good times."

Bill's smile turned into a grimace. "We should get going...my fiancee and I don't want to miss Ron's matches."

"Don't let me keep you. It was nice to see you again, Fleur. Give my regards to Gabrielle."

He shut the door and turned, grimacing at the muddy footprints marring his formerly pristine tatami mats.

"Ruddy wench!" he growled, as he cast a few cleaning charms.

"Well, look at you, Mr. ladykiller. You had that Weasley kid all but growling to keep you away from his woman."

"I can't help it if I'm awesome." Harry deadpanned.

"Goodness, it's crowded."

"It's the final day of the tournament. I'm sure everyone wants to see who wins."

The stands around the edges of the convention hall were packed. The large screens, which had been showing dozens of chessboards with games in progress now showed only six—three in the junior division and three in the senior division.

"Can you tell who's winning?"

"I'm pants at chess, I'm sad to say. I really have no idea."
"Ron will have checkmate in three moves, the other two games could go either way." Adeline spoke up after studying the boards a moment. Sirius and Harry stared at her in astonishment.

"What? Just because you two don't know a chessboard from a hole in the ground doesn't mean it's the same for me."

Sirius and Harry managed to sit quietly for twenty minutes before they started fidgeting. Sirius was getting ready to pull his wand and hex someone in a funny way when the crowd around them started clapping. Ron and his opponent were shaking hands and their board now read 'Winner Ron Weasley'.

Molly tried to charge down onto the playing floor, but one of the officials waved her back to her seat. They could hear her shrieking from where they were at the other end of the stands, but oddly none of the players seemed to notice.

"Silencing wards on the edges of the floor to keep the crowds from disturbing the players." Harry explained.

"Probably a good thing. Getting all flustered and embarrassed now would hardly do Ron any favors when he still has two more games to play."

"I wonder where Arthur is?"

"Maybe he went to the Ministry to see if he could get one of the newly opened jobs. I'd heard he had a part-time job in a shop somewhere, but obviously that wasn't his first choice. I suppose those nutters did a lot of folks a favor--there's now a whole slew of jobs available."

The remaining games seemed to be dragging on. Sirius and Harry started fidgeting again, until Adeline finally snapped at both of them.

"If you're that bored why don't you come back in an hour or two?"

They didn't need to be told twice and hightailed it out of there as soon as they were able.

They wandered the resort, peered into all the shops, played games, took a ride on a couple of jet skis and challenged some others to a race, came back and got some ice cream.

"It should be okay to go back now."

"Yeah, they've got to be done by now."

They slipped back inside and found the games had only been reduced to four.

"You have got to be bloody well kidding me!"

The crowd started clapping and they saw two of the players on the senior division side standing to shake hands. A few minutes later a duo on the junior side finished their game.

"Hey, Ron's playing again. If he wins this one he'll be playing the other guy for the final match."

"Thank goodness. I really don't see the interest in this, you know? Sitting around watching two guys move little pieces around on a board is just not my cup of tea."

The second duo on the senior side finished their match to more applause and one of the tables was removed from the floor while the board on the remaining table was prepared for another round of play. Ron's match continued for five more moves and then he was once again accepting the
applause of the crowd and preparing for the final round.
The screens changed to show just two large chessboards, and the four final players took their seats.

They were evidently exciting games--there were a lot of gasps and murmurs from the crowd, though neither of them could say what was so remarkable.

On and on it went, and the audience leaned forward in their seats in anticipation. A murmur travelled through the crowd as Ron's opponent made a move. Harry wasn't sure why, but he did notice Ron smirked as soon as the guy's piece started moving. The game was over in three more moves. The crowd cheered with genuine appreciation, and Ron looked ready to float away in a cloud of prideful vindication. The senior match was still going strong. It was another agonizing twenty minutes until they finished.

The silencing wards were dropped, and the two champions could finally hear the crowd's applause. Ron's face went as red as his hair, and an enormous grin split his face as he received his trophy.

Harry was just relieved the ordeal was over. He glanced around the room and saw Hermione lingering near the edge of the floor, watching Ron and applauding with a look of pride on her face. Her smile suddenly slipped and her eyes grew enormous. Harry spun to look back at Ron, thinking some catastrophe must have befallen the boy to put such a look in her face.

Ron was fine--more than fine by the look of things. His girlfriend, Rebekka, had darted out of the crowd and was now busily cleaning Ron's tonsils with her tongue.

He couldn't help but consider the irony--just a few short months ago, Ron had worn a similar expression while staring at Hermione and Viktor Krum.

"Oh, hey, you're back." Harry greeted as he stepped into his room. The sliding screens were open letting in a sluggish late afternoon breeze. Tom was seated in the doorway looking out over the side yard.

"I returned earlier, but everyone was gone."

"It was the last day of the chess tournament. I told Ron I'd drop in to see if he won or not."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. Remus moved out. Oh, Aang stopped by. Wan Shi Tong brought his library back. He had to leave soon after. He took Neville with him. He dropped him off with guru Pathik."

Tom nodded but didn't say anything.

Harry started to fidget from the silence, realized what he was doing and so turned his attention to digging out something light to put on after taking a dip in the hot spring.

"So, what have you been up to? Must be something big…you were gone a couple days."

"Nothing of import, really."

Harry frowned at the non-answer and drifted towards him, only to slow to a halt.

"Your 'nothing of import' wears too much perfume."

"Harry…"
Harry didn't answer, he had already left.

Tom found Harry in the dojo a short time later, sparring against a dummy. He knew he was aware of his presence, yet he didn't halt his practice or acknowledge him in any way. Being ignored began to leave Tom rather vexed. He grabbed up one of the wooden swords from the rack on the wall and lunged in.

If he had thought to catch Harry by surprise and disarm him, he was sadly disappointed. Harry parried his blow and moved so he could be on guard for further attacks from both Tom and the dummy. Tom, focused on Harry as he was, nearly got brained by a blow from the dummy. It was charmed to attack the nearest opponent with one of the wooden swords--Tom just happened to be slightly closer to it than Harry was at the moment. An awkward three way battle ensued, until Harry finally grew annoyed enough to put an end to things, by landing a 'killing' blow on the dummy and disarming Tom.

Tom was feeling even more sulky than he had been when he entered the room. He didn't like losing--at anything, really. Losing on top of being ignored put him in a rather foul mood indeed.

"Is there some reason you felt it necessary to intrude on my practice like that?" Harry demanded, voice mild as he put away the dummy and restored the swords to the rack.

"You're being very childish, you know, coming out here to sulk. I did tell you Narcissa was still trying to play matchmaker."

"And you're not happy about it, but instead of telling her to stop, you're gone a few days without a word and come back reeking of perfume."

"The girls are all from important families. It wouldn't do to insult them."

"Good to know I rank so high on your list of priorities."

Tom sighed and rolled his eyes slightly. "Really Harry, you're being tiresome."

"Funny. You never seemed to think I was tiresome when you were crawling into my bed every night."

"You have no reason to be jealous. Even if I get married, it needn't change anything."

"Is that what you think?"

"Why would it? Once an heir has been produced to satisfy everyone…"

"If you cannot insult or alienate their families now because they're too important, do you think that will suddenly change or go away once you've married one of them? More to the point, if you honestly think I would allow myself to be reduced to a booty call, you are sadly, sadly mistaken. I don't know what you imagined the situation would be, but let me take a stab at it… The faceless girl and baby, off somewhere out of sight, out of mind. Your life doesn't change at all. When the mood takes you, you pop by for a quick rub-off and go about your way, and naturally I'm always ready and waiting, just in case." Harry snarled with great disdain. "I hate to break it to you buddy, but I would sooner die than allow myself to be reduced to little more than a dirty joke to your minions. I guess I should thank you for setting me straight on how things really are before we did anything irrevocable."
Tom's face by this point was a mask of fury. "Are you…breaking up with me?"

"Well, duh! I thought that was very obvious!"

"You are mine! You aren't going anywhere!"

"Wrong, darling. I am my own, I go where I please. Do you really think you can hold on to me if I don't wish to be held on to?" Harry replied his voice even. Only his eyes gave away how furious he was.

"You aren't going anywhere" Tom repeated, he pulled Harry roughly against himself and slid his hands down his arms, his bare back and settled on the globes of his ass to squeeze. Tom's confidence grew as he felt the immediate reaction to his attentions against his thigh.

Harry's eyes grew flinty with contempt. "I know very well the effect you have on me" He ran a hand down Tom's chest and squeezed the matching hardness he could feel rising in reaction to his nearness. "It's rather the same effect I have on you. If you think that makes any difference whatsoever, you don't know me at all."

Harry gave a final squeeze and stroke and twisted out of Tom's grasp to stand before him, proud and unashamed of the physical evidence of his desire.

"You're a hunger in my belly and a fire in my blood…but in the end it means nothing. I value my independence and my self-respect too much to ever compromise any of it, especially if it means reducing myself to a toy for your amusement…and that must be how you think of me…after all, it's only the girls you can't risk offending. You don't seem to have given any thought whatsoever to how I'd feel about all this. We're through, Tom…don't worry though, our alliance in the Wizengamot will continue to stand, so long as we continue to see eye to eye. I'm not so petty as to destroy all we've worked for just because we've come to a parting of ways."

With a twist, and a near-silent apparition, he was gone.

Tom stood there for a long time afterwards and then vanished from the spot with a sound like a thunderclap. When he found himself back in his own home, he gave a fearful yell and swept his arm across the nearest table, sending the various knick knacks Narcissa had so lovingly placed to brighten up the room smashing to the ground. Chairs were upended, tables smashed, costly tapestries torn from the walls, cabinets splintered and their contents blown to smithereens.

When at last his rage was spent, he sunk down on his knees in the middle of the room and fell forward on his hands. Warm droplets spattering his hands drew his attention. He stared at them for the longest time before he was able to comprehend what he was seeing. Hand shaking he felt his face and found it wet. He was crying.

Back at Potter Keep, Harry had apparated directly into the master bedroom, not alerting any of the (human) staff of his arrival. He curled up in a ball in the middle of the massive four-poster bed and let the rigid self control he'd maintained loose. His pillow was wet with tears by the time he fell into a miserable, restless sleep.
Augusta greeted them at the door and led them into the parlor. Refreshments were served and small talk was made. After this went on for some time, Augusta finally decided to bring things around to the probable purpose of their visit.

"Thank you, by the way, for letting me know where Neville is. I was growing concerned. I was ready to fire call the Abbot girl when I received the call from you."

"We knew you were likely worried." Adeline assured her.

"How did he seem?"

Sirius and Adeline hesitated. Augusta sighed. "That bad, was it? When is he returning?"

"Harry told him someone would come fetch him before school. I don't know if he gave him an exact time or date. I'm not even sure if the boy has his phone on him, to be honest."

"This guru fellow…"

"He comes highly recommended. He apparently has a lot of experience in helping people deal with family upsets."

"I realize he must be rather jealous of the new baby, but it seems excessive to run off like that."

Sirius sighed and put down his tea cup. "Augusta…he heard you, Frank and Alice talking. He was jealous and upset about being marginalized once word of the baby spread…but it was his parents wholehearted disapproval that made him leave. They think his girlfriend is a duffer, that some of his friends are evil and he's a traitor for daring to associate with them, and his two favorite pastimes give them nightmares."

Augusta closed her eyes in despair. Her hopes for Neville's swift return shivered up at his words.

"He heard all that, did he? Damn it. The worst part of it is, I can't even be properly furious with them about it. I was all ready to berate them and I just couldn't. They've suffered so much, the both of them. We fixed their bodies, their minds took longer, but I thought… The truth is, I guess I just wanted to put it all behind me at long last. We went faithfully twice a year to visit them in the hospital, you know. We, neither of us, could ever quite forget the war or let go of the past the way others could. Death is a part of life, and however devastating the loss, the mind is built to soften the blow with time and distance. We never had that sort of closure, and every visit just brought it all home again. Having it finally over, having them returned to us… We were finally able to put the war and everything behind us at last. Even with the constant reminders, it had been years--a lifetime for Neville. He was so small when it all happened. We had mostly healed, and it was just that last bit that was lacking. Frank and Alice were mad, locked in a sterile white room for over a decade. They both say they can't remember much of the time, locked as they were in their own
minds. For them it was years of war, an interlude of madness, and then being restored to a world
gone topsy-turvy—people they expected to see, gone, those that remained changed by the years in
between…Neville most of all. He was but a babe and now is nearly a man and they don't know
him, and they're still so scarred from the war that I don't know if they have it in them to get to
know him. It may be too late. I honestly don't know what to do or how to help them. When they're
here with me, or with others in the family who are older, but otherwise not much changed from the
people they knew, they're nearly their old selves at times. They're still not able to easily mix with
the rest of the world—they lost so many friends, others are so changed from what they knew,
people they had firmly in their minds as enemies are walking around free and it burns them. How
does one even fix such a terrible mess?"

"I don't know about all the rest, honestly our main concern was for Neville. We all know how
deeply he wished for his parents' return. I cannot even imagine what he must be going through."

"So far as Neville is concerned, we had an idea we thought might help. We thought we'd run it by
you and see what you think."

"I'm open for most anything. It's a dreadful situation."

"We have a pensieve. A big part of the problem seems to be that they're having trouble connecting
Neville to the infant boy they left behind."

"You hope memories will help bridge the gap?"

"It's worth a try, don't you think?"

"It's better than anything I've come up with. If nothing else, I suppose it couldn't hurt."

Guru Pathik sat sunken in his meditative state, passively monitoring the flow of energy on the
island, and trying to not let the jangled tangle of pain right in front of him pull him too far from his
own contemplations. The child was in such a state when he arrived, Pathik was well able to
understand why the Avatar had thought it meet to bring him to him.

At times like these, he was truly thankful for his life of quiet and solitude at the temple—the evil
that men could do to one another was a frightening, mind-boggling puzzle. He had seen so many
broken, wounded souls here in his refuge, and they were only a few who happened by—beyond the
shores of his peaceful oasis, there were hundreds, thousands, millions of similar souls with scars
and pain as deep. Truly the world, and other people, could be hell at times.

The stories the child had related to him upon his arrival, so that he would have some understanding
of the source of his pain, had horrified and saddened him immensely. So many lost and broken
lives! He was made hopeful by his tales of the healing that was slowly taking place among his
people and their society, but what a price they all had paid for it.

The child fidgeted a bit in place, his energy had never smoothed out to the gentle flow of mediation
in all the time he'd been sitting there. Pathik let his consciousness rise and addressed the boy.

"You must allow your mind to quiet, child."

"I am trying. It just doesn't seem to be working…and I think my leg is starting to fall asleep."

"Why don't you take a short break and walk around for a bit, and we'll try again?"
"Yeah, I think that might help."

Neville climbed slowly to his feet and set off around the tower into the gardens—he'd been itching to explore there since he'd arrived, but it had been growing dark when he had, and this morning the guru had taken him to a stone courtyard with a small stream running through it to begin their meditation. He was feeling closed in by the stone, which reminded him too much of the pavement rushing up to meet him when his uncle had dropped him out of the window, and water made him think too much of the time he'd nearly drowned at Black Pool. It had been on his mind all morning; the guru had told him to think about survival and fear. They were the first things that had come to mind.

Neville's shoulders relaxed and he began to smile as soon as he was enclosed in greenery. He took a deep breath, held it and let it out slowly, feeling all his tension leave with it. The island on which the Air Temple sat was beautiful, overrun with trees and blooms and all sorts of small wildlife. It was a peaceful, idyllic place to be. Even if he never got a hold of the whole meditation thing, he couldn't consider it a wasted trip. Every turn brought a new, beautiful vista to admire, and showed him plants and trees he'd never seen before.

He busied himself for a while, making sketches in a notebook he kept on him for just such a purpose, making notes alongside about the soil conditions, temperature and the like. of ones that particularly caught his eye. He'd have to make a point to visit this place again in different seasons to make further notes on the growth cycles, maybe even collect some seeds.

While he rambled, his mind continued musing on fear and survival, down deep where he was only partially aware of it. So many things tumbled together—uncle Augie, Black Pool, the window, his parents nightmares, plants, puppets, the war, fear and survival.

He'd spent most of his childhood quietly terrified. The probability of him dying had seemed quite certain through most of it. Uncle Augie had been the boogey man that had haunted his nightmares…well, when it wasn't the image of dark, masked figures and his parents screaming, that is…

His parents were better, and the Lestranges hadn't survived the trip to the new world. That fear had been quieted at long last. Most of Uncle Augie's power to terrify him had dissipated when he'd kicked him in the ‘nads and told him off for nearly killing him. He was a fully qualified wizard, though not yet of age. He was confident of his ability to protect himself from most mundane threats, and a few out of the ordinary ones. He was somewhat surprised to realize this. He would die someday, everyone did…it was no longer the constant, hovering fear it once had been. Who knew?

It felt like a small weight had been lifted from his chest, and he could breathe easier.

"Well done, young one. I think I begin to perceive why you had such difficulties earlier."

"Guru Pathik?"

"While you were walking along, among all the greenery, the way that you were then—that is what I was trying to get you to do earlier while we were meditating. Once you reached the trees you fell right into that state with near effortless ease. Maybe sitting still on stone will not work for you. I want you to keep wandering among the greenery each day. You have cleared your first chakra already. Are you ready to try the second?"

"Um…yeah. Yeah I am."

"Very good. Drink some of this and keep walking."
"What is it?"

"Onion-banana juice."

"Oh? I've never had that. We usually drink pumpkin juice." Neville drank down some of the liquid and smacked his lips. "It's pretty good, actually. Not nearly as bland as I thought it would be."

"Percy and Penny are getting married today." Adeline reminded them at breakfast that morning. "We need to head out soon. Harry, did you remember to get them a gift?"

"Yeah, I got them a back porch extension for their pre-fab house. I installed it yesterday. I have a card to put on the gift table to tell them about it."

"What did we get them?" Sirius wondered.

"A clock. They just have to attune the hands to each of them and it will keep track of where they need to be at the time, separate for each of them."

"Sounds good. They'll probably like that too."

"I know they will, it was one of the gifts in their bridal registry. It was one of the pricier things on the list, which is probably why it was still there. Everything else on their list was taken--one of the benefits of having such a large family."

"We should probably start getting ready soon. We can drop the gifts off at headquarters--that's where the reception is going to be. The ceremony will be at the amphitheater."

"Why there? Why not just have the ceremony in the castle as well?"

"They wanted to have it on the island because it's so beautiful here. There wouldn't have been much point in that if they held the ceremony inside."

"Did Molly do the catering?"

"I think she wanted to, but the elves were so devastated at the thought that they couldn't do it they told her to forget it."

"I can't imagine she's too pleased. I hope she's not going to be in a foul mood all day." Sirius snorted.

"I'm sure she wouldn't ruin her son's wedding."

"If she's in enough of a strop, she won't notice if she is."

"So, I was thinking. School starts up in just two more weeks, I've got a ship that hasn't had its maiden voyage yet, and there's a mystical library out in the desert that should have gotten a nice oasis formed around it just waiting to be seen. In other words, who feels like taking a trip to round out the summer?" Harry asked.

"Well... yeah, alright. That could be fun. Where's this desert at, and how far will we have to sail to get to it?"
"Not that far, all things considered. I figure we can sail across the bay and leave the ship docked there, and then take the carpet the rest of the way. Here, I'll show you."

Harry dug out the world map and pointed to the small island they were currently on, and then to the smaller peninsula across from the one the wizards were currently inhabiting. North of there was the vast track of the Shi Wong desert, where Wan Shi Tong's library made its home.

"That should just take us a few hours flying time to get there. How long is the trip across the bay likely to take?"

"Several hours, it is a pretty big bay, after all, and we want to get as close to the proper part of the desert as we can--it gets really boring, really fast just staring out at the endless sand dunes. Believe me, I've done this trip once before. Thankfully we at least know where we're going this time. Last time we were flying in a search pattern across the parts of the desert the archeologist we had with us hadn't already explored, looking for the place."

"I guess all that's left is to pack, make sure we've supplies and set out. Tomorrow morning sound good?"

"So long as it's bright and early, we want the tide with us. You can snooze on the ship if you're really tired." he added when Sirius made a face.

"It's a plan then."

"Do either of you mind if Luna and her dad come along as well? They both want to see the library. The original plan was for Neville to be with us as well when we took the boat out, but obviously we can't do that."

"There's four cabins, so that shouldn't be a problem. When are they arriving?"

"They'll be here for the wedding. They're going to stay here tonight and head out with us in the morning."

"Hellooo!
"Or now. That must be them."

He met Luna and Xenophilius coming around the house into the large garden where they'd had their 'hooray for phones' party.

"Hey! Good to see you both!

"It's good to see you as well. Thanks for inviting us.

"This has been a most diverting summer so far. We just got back from visiting some friends of mine, the Scamanders, and we had a chance to visit a few of the other settlements and briefly visit friends there. A wedding and a trip to a mystical library will be just the thing to round it all off!"

"The Scamanders? As in Newt Scamander, famous naturalist?" Adeline asked curiously as they led them inside to show them to their rooms and get them settled.

"Yes, though I'm better friends with his son Addler, and of course Luna and his grandson Rolf have always been good friends."
"We always got on well enough, I suppose. We rarely saw them when I was growing up, and of course he went to Durmstrang not Hogwarts--not that it would have made too much difference if he had, since he's a couple of years older than me."

"Addler married a German witch he met while on a trip with his father one year and they moved to be closer to her family. Newt was usually off prowling around different parts of the world looking for magical creatures, so there was no need for them to stay close to England for his sake." Xeno explained. "Rolf will be a seventh year this coming school year. He and his father were talking about going on a long trip to explore this new world once he's graduated. Perhaps Luna and I will go along for part of it next summer."

"That could be fun, though I was hoping I'd get a chance to visit Kyoshi island next summer."

"Well, perhaps Addler and Rolf wouldn't be opposed to looking around there as well. I guess we'll have to see, pumpkin."

"You're both looking very colorful today."

"One should always wear sun colors for a wedding. It brings good luck to the young couple, you know."

Xenophilius and Luna were both wearing bright yellow robes, and Luna had a sunflower in her hair. It made them fit right in to their exotic tropical surroundings.

"We're both wearing red."

"A color associated with love…I suppose that won't be too bad." Xeno decided after a moment's deliberation. "How about you, lad?"

"Blue."

"Oh, you might want to rethink that. It's not a very auspicious color for a wedding."

"I'm sure it will be fine. It's the color of water, which links it to emotion, and it's the color of Ravenclaw house, which is intellect. They're both the cerebral sort. I'm sure it will be fine."

"Hmm…well argued. Very well, you've convinced me!"

"Glad to hear it." Harry laughed.

"Did you not bring a gift?" Adeline wondered.

"We did, we left it outside. It's a dirigible plum tree sapling. We have them growing in our yard. We've always been very happy in our home, so we figured it was a good gift for a young couple just about to start their own, plus the fruit will make them both more openminded, which is never a bad thing."

They set off shortly afterwards on the carpet, made a brief stop at Lestrange castle to drop off their gifts, and then proceeded to the amphitheater. The amphitheater was a natural hollow that they had simply added stone step benches and a stage to. It was set slightly higher than the resort proper, so the island itself formed a beautiful backdrop to the stage. One could even see the ocean in the distance, though mostly by the glimmer of the waves. The hollow itself was carpeted in emerald green grass and dotted with small white star-shaped flowers that let off a tantalizing perfume, and
the benches and stage gleamed sparkling white in the sun. The sky overhead was an eye-searing cerulean blue, dotted with fluffy white clouds, and a gentle breeze wafted through, cooling the oppressive heat without being distracting or damaging to the decorations. It was a perfect day and a perfect setting for a wedding.

The stage was adorned with an archway, beneath which stood Albus Dumbledore. He gleamed nearly as white as the rest of the setting did--his long hair and beard glowed in the sun and were almost blinding. He wore one of his usual weird outfits--sky blue with red and yellow stars and comets that shot and sparkled across the expanse. He had matching hat perched jauntily on his head. The archway under which he stood was entwined with flowers and a pair of silver bells hung at the apex of the arch, just above his head. The seats were filling quickly--on one side was a veritable sea of red hair and freckles, in the center, school chums and friends, and on the other side the employees and interns of New World Enterprises--including a number of hags and goblins. There were still some seats available in the center section, so that's where they went. It seemed they had no sooner gotten seated than the music sounded and the wedding began.

Oliver Wood and Sylvia Goldstein, a Ravenclaw friend of Penny's, came out first, Oliver in dark grey robes with blue trim, Sylvia all in blue. Percy and Penny came next, hand in hand, he in black robes with a red flower in the lapel, she in white robes with a crown of red roses and a bouquet of the same. When all four had taken their places and Percy and Penny joined hands, Dumbledore beamed at the gathered crowd and began to speak.

"Why's Dumbledore doing the ceremony anyway?" Harry whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"He did your parents' wedding, Frank and Alice's too…most of the married folks in the Order, now that I think of it. No wonder he was so put out when he wasn't invited to do ours." Sirius whispered back.

Percy and Penny glowed golden when their wrists were bound. The crowd cheered when the new Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were presented to the crowd. Molly Weasley sobbed loudly into her hanky crying 'my baby boy! So grown up!' again and again. Percy shook Dumbledore's hand, Penny kissed him on the cheek, and they accepted the well wishes of their best man and maid of honor, before the four disappeared with a 'pop' back to the castle for the reception. The rest of the crowd, who was in high spirits, made their way back on foot to give the young couple a few moments together to compose themselves, and for the reception to be set up.

The elves had outdone themselves. The entry hall was bedecked with flowers. The ballroom and adjoining parlors were tastefully decorated in blue and white bunting, with blue flowers mixed in to the arrangements picking up the color theme throughout the room. There was a long table at one end of the ballroom for the bridal party, and numerous round tables scattered throughout the room, each with a blue tablecloth, a ring of flowers, and a bluebell flame dancing in a globe as the centerpiece. A long table in the entry hall was already overflowing with gifts when they arrived, with guests adding more to the towering pile as they passed. Percy, Penny, Oliver and Sylvia were lined up just outside the ballroom to receive the well-wishes of their guests.

Molly wasn't pleased to discover she and Arthur would be seated at one of the round tables with the rest of the guests, rather than up at the bridal party's table, but she subsided once it was pointed out that no one had wanted to draw too much attention to the fact that Penny had no parents to sit on her side, and so they had decided to only have the bride, groom, maid of honor and best man seated there and no others.

They found seats alongside Barty, Dora, Hermione, Remus and Professor Flitwick. After they all had been seated for a while and eating, Xenophilius shifted his weight and his necklace caught the
"I see you're wearing the symbol of the deathly hallows. I didn't really notice earlier." Harry noted.

"Oh, you know what this is, do you? That's good. There's a whole lot of silly buggers out there that think this is the symbol of Grindlewald. I do try to explain their misconception, but they always seem resistant to being educated on the subject. It's a very troubling thing--I am a seeker for truth, not a supporter of wizards becoming the dictator-overlords of muggles and making them slaves! The very idea is appalling. It's a terrible thing really, having such an ancient symbol corrupted so in meaning. I can't imagine how it ever happened."

"Something similar happened with the swastika. It was an old symbol of rebirth in many cultures, but Hitler used it as the sign of his party. In the west at least it became the sign of facism, murder and genocide." Hermione spoke up in her know-it-all voice.

"Grindlewald was a seeker for the hallows himself, though not necessarily a seeker for truth. Between him, and perhaps other seekers spreading the word that it denoted a follower of his to get rid of competition--that would be enough, I would think." Harry mused.

"What seeker would do such a thing?" Xeno objected.

"One who values knowledge as power, not for its own sake. There were plenty of those in Ravenclaw house when I was in school." Adeline asserted.

Xeno sighed and nodded glumly, acknowledging the point. "When I was as well, though they were few in number and tended to be somewhat shunned by the rest of us."

"The whole house was overrun with them when I started, fourth year and above at least. There weren't many among those in the Melting Pot--the rest wouldn't stand for it. Everyone else though… I'm really glad the Melting Pot came along. I don't think I'd have been very happy in Ravenclaw if it had all been like that." Luna offered.

"Like what, exactly?" Flitwick asked curiously.

"Nasty, bullying, everyone constantly sabotaging each other--stealing each other's work, changing answers on homework and putting it in the victim's handwriting, hiding books, checking out all the books in a subject so no one else could do research, or at least hiding them somewhere in the library if they couldn't check them out. All the Ravenclaw upper years spent half their time learning spells to protect their work, and the rest trying new ways to destroy the work of others. It was a vicious, bloodthirsty atmosphere. I like the Melting Pot way much better."

"So do I." Harry agreed.

"Wait…what is this? Bullying? Sabotage?" Flitwick spoke up, sounding distraught. "No one told me any of this!"

"By the time I started school, it was pretty much the whole house behaving that way, minus those in the Melting Pot, professor. If everyone was doing it, who was going to report it?"

Flitwick was even more troubled by her words, and vowed to keep a closer eye on his house from here on out, and keep a tighter rein on his prefects. The whole system didn't work if they didn't do their part to keep order.

"We should give Neville a call before we leave, and see how he's doing. It really doesn't seem right, taking the ship out for the first time without him." Harry said after a bit.
"It doesn't, but what he's doing is more important. I doubt he'll mind. We can go on a trip just the three of us next summer to make up for it." Luna assured him.

"What's this about Neville?" Hermione interjected. "Has something happened?"

"Oh…well, things aren't going well at the moment. He's at the Eastern Air Temple with a guru right now, looking for inner peace."


"He has a good track record. He did a lot for Zuko. He had a lot of malfunctions because of his father. He was really messed up there for a while. He worked through a lot of his issues with the guru's help and he's the better for it."

"If you say so." Hermione replied dismissively. It was obvious that she looked at gurus much the way she did divination, and nothing much was likely to change her mind.

"Oh, is that Ron's new girlfriend you mentioned?" Luna wondered.

Hermione stiffened before turning to look along with the rest of them. Rebekka was there, hanging off Ron's arm, wearing a flirty white sundress. Ron seemed to appreciate her attire, given the single-minded focus he was using to stare down the top.

Hermione huffed angrily and turned back to her food, digging into it as though committing murder.

"The wedding was rather nice. Percy and Penny seem a nice couple. Does anyone know where they're going for their honeymoon?" Adeline asked as they were all getting back to the house.

"They're going to travel around the provinces for two weeks or so. They're both curious as to how the other settlements are coming along." Harry informed her.

"Oh, well that should be nice."

Harry dug out his phone.

"Who are you calling?" Sirius wondered.

"Neville. We want to see how he's doing, and see if he wants to come along on our trip."

"Give him our best. Come on, let's leave the kids to sitting on the floor if they want. I need a chair." Sirius announced.

"I don't mind sitting on the floor. There are many cultures that eschew chairs, you know." Xeno replied cheerfully.

"Ours isn't one of them." Adeline replied following Sirius as he led the way deeper into the house.

"Hello?"

"Nev! How are you, buddy?"

"Harry? I'm good, actually. I've been doing some work in the temple gardens here. That mini transport greenhouse you got me for Christmas a few years back is really coming in handy. I have so many cuttings, and the beginnings of easily a dozen articles for any interested plant journals."
"I've found a few things I think might have healing properties."
"Yeah? You should check with R & D when you get back and compare notes. I'm not sure if anyone took samples from there or not, beyond the fruit we harvested."

"We harvested fruit from here?"
"Yeah, not all of it, obviously. We left some for the guru and for the animals on the island, and we took the rest. It would have just gone to waste otherwise--the guru is the only one living there. Like I said, compare notes with the R & D folks…you can call them, you know. I can find the proper phone numbers for you without too much trouble."

"Yeah, that would probably be a good idea. I don't want to just end up duplicating someone else's work."
"Enough of the herbology though, how are you?"
"Like I said, I'm good. I think this whole jaunt was a really good idea, actually. I already cleared two chakras."
"Really? Already?"
"The guru said I must have already done most of the work, it was just a matter of coming to terms with the things I learned and letting it go. Apparently I go into a meditative state when I'm working with plants."

"Huh. That would actually explain a lot, I think."
"If you say so."

"Luna's here too. I'll put her on in a bit. We were going to take the boat out tomorrow. We're going to sail across the bay and then fly to Wan Shi Tong's library and see how the oasis team has been coming along. Neither of us felt right doing the maiden voyage without you, so we thought we'd see if you wanted us to come get you before we set out."

Neville was silent a moment.

"I would like to go, but I think I'm where I need to be right now. We can go on a trip next summer…or even during the winter hols, if it's not too cold and miserable. We could go up the coastline or something, take a peek at some of the other provinces."

"That sounds both doable and interesting. Well, we'll miss you, but I'm glad the guru is being so helpful. Here's Luna."

"Neville! Are there any interesting animals there?"

"Nothing too unusual--birds, some squirrels, that sort of thing. If there's anything more than that, I haven't seen them."

"What's the temple like?"

"Beautiful, peaceful…and sad. It's a melancholy kind of place. On the surface it's full of life--there's things growing, animals everywhere, but underneath it's sad. You can tell it's the sight of a tragedy if you just let yourself feel it--it's an old sadness, but it clings to the stones here. The temple itself is massive--three giant towers. Walking those empty halls all you can think about are all the people that should be there but aren't. I like it better outside."
"I'll have to visit it one of these days."

"You should. Everyone should...well, maybe not everyone. I picture the twins wandering through the halls, joking and setting off firecrackers and I just cringe."

"That's rather unkind. The twins like people to be happy and laughing. If they were to do that, they'd be trying to rid the place of all the sadness that you say clings to the stone. They might even succeed."

Neville laughed. "They might at that. Well, I'll let you go. There's a few more samples I want to get."

"Alright. Take care."

"Bye."

"Goodbye."

"He sounds better. I'm glad. I was really worried about him."

"Neville's made of stronger stuff than he realizes. He'll be fine eventually. A little sadder, but fine."

"I was really furious at his parents."

"Was?"

"I realized it's not easy for them either. They look fine on the outside, and so everyone, myself and Neville included, just expected them to just be fine and pick up where they left off like nothing ever happened. Things aren't that simple, no matter how much we want them to be sometimes. Had it been my parents rather than Neville's, I can only imagine it would have been the same. I'm not the baby they died protecting. I didn't grow up with them, and I doubt I became whatever it was they imagined I would. I would have been a completely different person had they raised me. I had to grow up too fast, and I'm more broody planner than merry prankster--something I know depresses Remus and Sirius both. I don't obsess over quidditch, though I do love to fly. I always had too much on my mind, so those sorts of pastimes just seemed childish and a waste of time to me. I'm told my mum had a talent for potions and charms and my dad with transfiguration. I'm a competent brewer, but I don't have it in me to be a potions master. I'm solid with transfigurations and charms, but that's the result of study and lots of practice not any particular talent. My parents were both very outgoing and loved being the center of attention. I'm happiest with a small group of trusted people in the quiet at the edge of the room, not in the noise and bustle at the center. My parents were loved, spoiled, and led carefree lives until they decided to get involved in the war. I was despised, abused and neglected until I had a nervous breakdown and my relatives cleaned up their act somewhat--not because they cared suddenly though. They were afraid social services would come snooping or the neighbors would talk, so they eased up and hoped I'd start acting normal again and remove the danger. If they had suddenly come back into my life, I've no doubt it would be just the same as what's going on with Neville right now, and for all the same reasons. After that, how could I be angry at them anymore? I wish I could. I was quite happy to be furious at them for what Neville's going through, but it's not really fair, however much I want to just be angry at them."

"Harry, I'm sure your parents would be proud of you."

"Are you? I'm not. In fact, I'm quite sure they wouldn't quite know what to make of me, and would..."
find me too troublesome to be proud of."

"Harry, no, your parents love you."

"I never said they didn't. Love isn't always enough; this whole mess with Neville and his parents is proof enough of that."

Luna studied him in silence for a bit, until Harry started to fidget beneath her piercing gaze.

"Harry, did something happen? You seem sad, and I don't think it's Neville's problems with his family that are bringing you down."

For a moment, just a moment, his eyes filled with anguish. It disappeared shortly after. Luna might have thought she was imagining things, but she knew Harry and his worrying tendency to stuff his unhappy emotions down deep while maintaining a cheerful and unaffected face to the world.

"Did you and Tom have a fight?"

"Wha…"

"Harry, honestly. You're my best friend. I notice things. Did you have a fight?"

"We broke up, actually." Harry admitted, his voice unsteady. He closed his eyes for a moment to remaster himself. Luna noted his quick glance towards the door before he spoke.

"Do they not know you broke up?"

"They don't know we were dating…or whatever it was you would call it. Dating doesn't seem to be quite the right word."

"Why doesn't your family know you were dating?"

"Luna…you know who Tom really is. So does Sirius, Adeline, Remus. Of the three, Adeline is the only one that was willing to accept that he was for all intents and purposes a new person and she tried to relate to him as such. Sirius, if he'd had his way, wouldn't have allowed me to speak to him, let alone anything else."

"And so now you're hiding that you're unhappy because you didn't tell them."

"Pretty much, though it's as much because I don't really want to talk about it, and I really don't want to hear Sirius ranting and badmouthing him because of it. It would just make me feel worse than I already do."

"What did you fight about?"

"Can we not talk about this? It's over. That's all that really needs to be said."

"It might make you feel better."

"I doubt it."

"Try anyway." Luna urged him while taking his hand across the table.

He didn't really want to, but Luna was sitting patiently, all concern and sympathy and waiting till he was ready to speak. She could be stubborn. He knew she wouldn't let it go until he spilled all the gory details. It would be easier to just get it over with.
In a halting voice, he laid out the situation and the fight that had resulted. Once he'd started speaking, it was like a floodgate had opened and it all came pouring out in a semi-coherent ramble. He didn't really feel any better, but it was still a relief to get it out after a night and day of pushing it down so he needn't think about it.

"Well? You wanted me to talk. I did. Do you have nothing to say in response?"

"I think you did the right thing."

Harry nodded unhappily. There had been a small, very small, part of him that had almost wanted her to tell him he'd been wrong, overreacted, or been mistaken. He despised that part of himself, but he could admit, to himself at least, that it was there.

"You're right, your own self-respect could have allowed no less. I'm sure he'll come to realize that in time, though I daresay he'll be quite angry at you for a while. Your relationship will probably be the stronger for it in the long run though."

"Um, Luna? There is no relationship. We broke up, remember? He was a creep who was just using me, and I like an idiot let him do it, until I wised up that is. It's over."

Luna sighed and shook her head. "Oh, Harry, I don't believe that at all. I've seen you two together, remember? My guess is he got scared and did something stupid. While it was something new to both of you, you at least have the benefit of not only a prior romantic relationship, but you're also considerably more well-adjusted than he is."

"Luna, you're not making any sense."

"Of course I am, you're just not listening. Things were getting serious between you. You had pretty much moved in together. He trusted you enough to spend the night next to you…"

"We were travelling with my little tent for several months when we were here before. It was often the only shelter we had. He slept in a room with all of us many times over the course of our trip. That doesn't actually mean that much."

"I think in this case it does. Your relationship had changed a lot, and you have a lot of power over him. Sleeping beside you in those circumstances is a lot different than falling asleep alongside allies fighting and watching your back in a war."

"I think you're making too much of it."

"My point is, things were getting serious and he was getting comfortable and I think it scared him how domestic he was becoming."

"Again, I don't follow. If he had a sudden fear of getting too domestic, I doubt his first reaction would be to run off and get married so he could become more so!"

"That's where I think you're wrong. I think he embraced the idea somewhat because he doesn't care about any of the girls he was meeting. It would be a business arrangement, something he could control--the complete opposite of his relationship with you, in other words."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better, is it?"

"Well, no"

"Just let it drop. It's over, end of story."

"But Harry…”

"No. New subject."
Luna sighed but agreed to drop it.

"You never did show me how you control shadows."

Harry grimaced, Luna smiled hopefully.

"If I show you, it's with the understanding that you won't teach anyone else, excepting your children. You can teach them. They have to make the same promise."

"Well, alright, if you want. How did you learn it anyway?"

"Why don't we head out to the dojo."

They slipped out the door and across the covered walkway to the back where the dojo was located. On the way Harry told the condensed story of how he'd come to be a ninja.

"Wow, that's some accidental magic. All I ever did was summon things and change the colors of things…that and I swapped my teddybear for a sippy cup full of juice once, according to daddy. He found my teddybear in the coldbox later. He was very confused."

Harry snickered delightedly as he led them inside.

"So, are you going to teach me how to be a ninja too?"

"Um…do you want to learn to be a ninja? I thought you just wanted to control shadows."

"I'm a Ravenclaw. New knowledge is always to be sought and treasured."

"If I teach you everything, which is only a small part of what the ninjas know--I only got a few lessons by peeking, and I had to work out the details and maximize what I'd learned on my own--it will still take longer than a single afternoon."

"So we continue my lessons when we get back to school."

"Do you really know what you're asking for?"

"Hand to hand combat, throwing knives, climbing walls, turning into a log…did I get everything?"

"You forgot making and setting traps, disguise and seals."

"Even better then. I'm not really planning or expecting to ever need such knowledge, but one never knows what the future might hold. In another twenty years, or forty or sixty, a new dark lord might rise--one with better planning skills than MODERN. Such knowledge might save me, save my family, save others that we care about. For that reason alone, it seems well worth the effort."

"Well said, Luna. Very well, you'll be the second student I've taken on, fourth if you count Aang and Katara, though with them I was more of a guide than a teacher as such. I gave them ideas, but I didn't specifically pass on my own knowledge."

"A small but elite group. Please pass on your wisdom, o master" Luna said solemnly while giving a little bow with her hands steepled before her.

"If you must call me something, call me sensei or sifu, not master--it's just too weird."

"Hai, sensei!"
Harry sighed and gestured for her to sit on the floor and took his place in front of her.

"I guess we'll start where I did--chakra. I'm still not actually sure whether I'm using what the ninjas do, or if it is simply my magic, but in practice it doesn't really matter overmuch. I'll still give you same explanation Asuma-sensei gave in the class: chakra is what you get when you mix spiritual energy and physical energy. Obviously, for physical energy you have to be in good physical shape, and this is gained from training and exercise. Spiritual energy you already have, but you need to learn to access it. For that, we'll be meditating, clearing the chakra pathways so the energy will flow more smoothly and easily--that part I got from Aang and guru Pathik, as well as the original ninja training. Get comfortable and close your eyes. You need to find the quiet center of your own mind. Let your mind chatter, acknowledge the noise and let it go, it's meaningless. Breathe with me..."
Harry, Luna and their families take the boat out and go visit Wan Shi Tong's library. Snape and Lucius spy on Tom and steal his mail.

"Ugh, too early."

"Stop complaining. You knew we were leaving early."

"Reg knew too, unfortunately for us, he didn't care and kept us up half the night."

"Them's the breaks."

"You are the very heart and soul of compassion."

"Head down to the cabins if you're that tired. Luna and I can get us underway."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, we just need to cast off, get the propulsion system underway, and mess with the sail a bit for a bit of extra thrust if we want. Honestly, we could leave the sail tied up and not even worry about it."

"Do you know where we're going?" Adeline asked.

"Oh sure. I've got a contraption on the bridge there that takes care of most of the details. The goblins use them on ships of theirs that used to transport treasure from Egypt to wherever it was headed afterwards. It's essentially a geo-positioning unit. They had folks set the markers all around the coastlines and such so they'd still work. I just had to program in the approximate site of the library, and it charted a course to the nearest shoreline. Once we get underway and hit the course charted for us, we can pretty much let the ship run itself. It'll beep if obstacles are approaching, or if we drift off course for some reason. It'll also warn us if pirates are approaching, giant sea monsters, or storms. No worries."

"Oh, well that's good. Maybe I will go sleep for a little longer."

"You might as well. We'll be sailing for a good many hours yet. You won't miss much."

Xeno, Adeline and Sirius needed no more urging. They headed below deck to their cabins to try to get in a bit more sleep.

Harry and Luna gave them enough time to get down below, sealed the deck and cast off. Harry kept them on low propulsion until they'd cleared the cove and then sped them towards deeper waters.

Once they started cutting through the waves and kicking up spray, they traded a gleeful look.

"This is just what I needed!"
It took a bit of finagling to get the ship headed in just the proper direction to satisfy the guidance system, but once they had, they kicked back on the deck and settled in to enjoy themselves.

The day was shaping up to be warm, the sea air smelled clean and salty, and the heaving deck beneath their feet was exhilarating. What more could they ask for to round off what had already been a (mostly) marvelous summer?

Regulus wasn't of a mind to do much sleeping, so the adults rejoined them back on deck about an hour later. The sea air revived them, especially the baby who couldn't stop cooing and waving his arms around at everything. Even this little way into their trip, there was a lot to see--mostly the shadowy forms of schools of fish passing by underneath, the occasional giant sea turtle, and what most of them were sure must be a merfolk colony. By the time their interest in staring at the rolling waves had begun to wane, land was in sight, though still some miles ahead. They whiled away the time while the shore gradually grew larger in their sight by playing cards, or calling everyone's attention to yet another school of fish beneath the waves, or as they got closer to shore, to the seabirds travelling overhead.

At long last they pulled up alongside a jutting rock, and with a bit of magic formed it into a passable dock on which to tie off the boat and disembark from. From there, it was a small matter to unroll Sirius' large carpet, perch Harry's little tent on it so they'd have a bathroom available, Re-affix the tarp overhead so they'd have shade, and get back underway after a few plotting charms and a point me charm to make sure they were heading in the right direction.

For the first hour or two, the land was green, then scrubby, then the scrub began growing sparse, then nonexistent--after that it was rolling sand dunes and the occasional cactus or bleached animal skull, nothing more.

"I can't believe how hot it is. I thought it was hot on the island." Xeno admitted.

"Think how much worse it would be if we weren't carrying our own shade with us." Sirius agreed.

"Yeah, believe me it makes a difference. Last time I came through here it was the whole group of us and an archeologist on Appa. Appa's warm, and there was no shade. About the only saving grace was that he flies by controlling the air currents around himself, so we actually had a good breeze though the wind was hot."

"It's so gritty. I can stand the heat. It's how dry everything is that's getting me. I feel completely desiccated." Adeline admitted.

"Get some water then. Unlike most folks that would be making this trip, we have running water on demand. Heck, you can even take a shower if you really want to."

Sirius renewed the cooling charm on himself, though it didn't help as much as one might think, given how very hot it was.

He spotted something at the edge of his vision and squinted into the sun to try to see it better.

"Hey, does anyone else see a line of fuzzy green up ahead?"

Harry came up to stand beside him and dug out his omniculars. He extended the barrel at the end to shade the lens somewhat from the sunlight and peered at the line Sirius indicated.

"Yeah, that's it. I doubt there's anything else out in these parts that looks like the Taj Mahal, only not quite." He passed the omniculars to Sirius who took a peek and passed them on until all the rest had gotten a good look as well.
"It seems that oasis team you mentioned has been hard at work. It looks like a whole garden paradise has sprung up around the place. That had to be their doing. There's nothing else in these parts but sand."

As they got closer, they began to perceive just how large an edifice Wan Shi Tong's library was, though they had gotten at least a small idea from Harry's memories of the place. With it all being buried beneath the sand before, the true size and grandeur of the place couldn't really be seen, even from within, as it was so very dark and shadowed inside.

"Damn, the place is almost as big as Hogwarts!"

"Not quite--Hogwarts has seven floors. I think this place only has four, though I suppose another floor might have been added to accommodate the wizard collection. We'll have to make a point to see it; I'm rather curious to see what all the provinces handed over to be added."

"Muggle studies, old world history and astronomy, a few children's books, dead language lexicons, that sort of thing mostly"

Harry's vision greyed out in horror. "What! Muggle studies! It'll be full of pictures of cars and planes and the people here will all want them! All it will take is for the mechanist to wander by and take a gander and BOOM! It'll be the old world all over again!"

"Calm down, kiddo. Luckily, someone pointed out that very fact. The collection was heavily culled for any references like that that exceed this world's current level of technology. Thanks to your warning about the info-gathering foxes, an agreement was made that anyone that had anything like that that showed the high end of muggle technology would destroy it. That was done before the fellow brought his library back, so it should be fine. Everyone realized what it could mean for our futures, and so I really doubt anyone was…crap. Did the goblins ever discover the location of MODERN'S village?"

"They have a team of curse breakers out there busting down the fidelius charm, but yeah, that's a worry."

"Damn Charity Burbage to hell."

"I'm sure she's there already. Her last act on this earth was to take an army to fiend fire a castle full of people so she and her friends could rule the world."

"Man, poor Moony really does have tragic taste in women."

"If there was such a consensus, I'm sure the curse breakers have orders to find and destroy anything like that before any foxes show up. That's a relief. We'll still have to keep an eye on this place to see if anything turns up in spite of that consensus."

"Yeah, it's a worry. Thankfully Arthur had mostly plugs and things of that nature, not books, or I don't doubt he'd have hidden them to keep them from being destroyed."

"Let's hope there aren't more guys like him out there that have done the same."

Sirius brought the carpet to a gentle landing on the lawn in front of the towering library. There were the starts of a town being built nearby--the goblins, and N.W.E., were quick to jump on any possible sources of profit. In time, the muggles of the world would be heading out here to see the place, and they would need to have a sizeable caravan to make the journey and stay for any length
of time. Being able to resupply on site, or have lodgings available to host visitors until the next caravan came along was an almost guaranteed money-maker, should enough interest be generated by the reappearance of the library. Harry was certain there would be, at least in certain quarters--the folks at Ba Sing Se university had certainly envied Professor Zei's fate. Even if few of the natives came by, wizards of all walks of life were certain to come by, especially in these early years, when they were all trying to learn all they could about the new world they found themselves in.

One by one they disembarked. Xeno, Luna and Adeline were showing their Ravenclaw roots as they were all getting excited now that they were there.

"Come on, daddy! Let's go!"
"Right with you, pumpkin!"

Xenophilius and Luna joined hands and literally skipped into the courtyard and into the front doors. Sirius and Adeline looked at one another and shrugged. Sirius dropped Regulus into Harry's arms, and then he and Adeline went skipping after them. Harry, doing his best to look dignified while carrying a squealing baby, followed after. He didn't skip.

Harry had been hard at work for several hours. He had a sizeable stack of scrolls, books and letters spread out over the table he'd commandeered for himself. He hadn't realized how long he'd been at it until Xeno wandered by and broke his concentration, and he realized he was rather stiff from sitting in one position for so long.

"Hey, Xeno. How's it going?" he asked curiously as he stretched.

"Not too well so far. I've been to three of the wings so far, but there doesn't seem to be any mystical artifacts on the level of the deathly hallows in this world. It's very disappointing. This archive is my last hope of finding such a thing."

"I wouldn't give up hope that easily. There's no way you had time to do more than scratch the surface of one archive, let alone three. If there are such things, I doubt they're in a book titled 'Mystical Artifacts of this World'."

"I do realize that, but I still hoped I would have found some sort of reference to start a more detailed search. What are you working on? It seems quite involved."

"I'm reading up on the Order of the White Lotus."

"What's that then?"

"It's a secret society. I met several of the members when I was here last. I don't really know much about them, so I thought it was a good thing to look into so long as I was here. I started with Fire Nation because three of the five members I know of were all from Fire Nation, but I'm sure there'll be more about them in the other archives as well--the other two members I met were from Earth Kingdom and the Northern Water Tribe, and I know of at least one Air Nomad that was likely a member before they were wiped out."

"How exciting! I'll tell you what, my boy, I'll help you out. I'll get started on a search in one of the other archives and we can compare notes."

"I'd start with the Air Nomads, I think. They were destroyed a hundred years ago, so whatever records they have will be the oldest ones, just like I figure the Fire Nation has the most current
information. We can each take one of the others after we've exhausted what's in these."

"Sounds like a plan."

A much more cheerful Xenophilius bustled off to get started.

Harry got a visit from Wan Shi Tong himself just as he was getting ready to quit the Fire Nation archive for the night.

"What have you been doing? There was suddenly more knowledge here, but I don't know where it came from."

"Oh...I've been making copies of things I wanted to peruse at my leisure to take with me, see?"

"Copies?"

"Yeah. I can't stay here indefinitely. I have to return to school soon, but there was a lot of things I wanted to look into. Don't worry, the originals are all still here for whoever else comes along."

"You can just do that?"

"Yeah. They won't last very long, but it will be long enough for what I need them for. After that they'll disappear. It's not really a replacement for paper and ink, but for a case like this it's quite useful."

"So I see. How remarkable."

"It's pretty neat." Harry agreed.

"For how long will you and the others be staying?"

"A few days at least. It took us awhile to get here, so anything less would be a waste."

"I know that humans need to sleep and eat. There is no food here--I don't require it; knowledge is what sustains me. There are rooms available. There used to be visiting scholars who would stay for a while, they would read and help others find what they needed. It has been a long time since there was anyone like that--not since Tom at least. Will he be returning?"

"I'm sure he will at some point. He did mention he would like to. I'll let him know you asked about him the next time I see him."

Wan Shi Tong nodded and led him to the lower levels--he flew, Harry did as well once he saw what he was doing. He spotted Sirius and Adeline wandering one of the galleries and told them they'd been offered rooms to use during their stay as he passed by.

The lowest level was shaped like a pentagon, each side containing a number of doors in the color of, and bearing the symbol of, the nation it represented. The doors on the wizard section were black and each had a red and blue yin-yang symbol on it.

"I expanded this section when I added the wing to hold your people's collection. I haven't been so well fed in years. Feel free to use these rooms for the duration of your stay."

"Thank you for your kind hospitality"

Wan Shi Tong nodded and flew back to wherever he normally spent his time.
He was going to head up to gather the others, but spotted the carpet heading down to where he was, with all of their party riding on it.

"Rooms, huh? Pretty sweet deal. It will certainly be much nicer than spending the night outside. For as hot as it was earlier it has gotten damn cold out there."

The rooms were a bit of a disappointment— they were more like monk's cells than anything. Each was small and narrow, contained a single narrow bed that was actually just a stone platform. Each had a small bathroom, but none of the fixtures worked— no water and the toilet didn't operate. Each of the rooms had a single narrow window at ground level, high above head height, that let in light from outside.

"First things first, we make the rooms more accommodating."

"We should do all of them. This place won't be so inviting next if someone from one of the other nations decides to stay and tries to use the bathroom."

"Ugh. Good point."

"Can someone do mine? I'll get started on dinner in the meantime."

"Sirius can do yours while I work on ours."

"Sounds like a plan."

While the others got to work, Harry ducked into the tent to start procuring food for all of them.

Sirius was not a bookworm by any stretch of the imagination, and so the charms of the mystical library had waned for him very quickly. He had wandered the place top to bottom along with his wife when they'd arrived yesterday, but now it was a new day, and she and the others were all ready to spend another day prowling among the books and scrolls. He was bored, he was restless, he was annoying his wife who was trying to research the law codes of the various countries they now shared the world with. She had plopped the baby in his arms and shooed him away to go find amusement elsewhere. That was how he and baby Regulus had come to find themselves wandering among the camp and half-finished town that were set up along the outskirts of the oasis. After a few minutes of wandering, Sirius spotted red hair and freckles and altered his course to intercept.

"Bill! Charlie! Wow, small world, isn't it?"

"Sirius! What are you doing way out here?"

"Work, actually. We've finally found where at least some of the Egyptian tombs disappeared to; they're buried beneath the sand out here. We had a lucky break--some of the searchers spotted the fox spirits that work for this place milling around and digging and went to investigate. We're camped out here until the oasis team and excavation teams get done and then we'll be back to work."

"Well, that explains you. What about you, Charlie?"

"The dragons are spread out far from human habitation, which means we don't need such large teams to manage them anymore. Some of us were rounded up by Gringott's for a special project."
There's a mesa out in the desert somewhere that has a hive of giant bee-wasps or something. They make honey--mountains of it, apparently and we've been told it's the most delicious honey known to man. From what some of the locals told them there used to be a desert clan that had tamed them and used to sell and trade the honey, but something happened to them. No one seems to be too sure what. Anyway, the goblins saw opportunity and asked around for spare dragon tamers--they figured we'd have a good chance of re-taming the things. We're hanging out here until we get the go-ahead to head out to the site."

"So you're going to be a glorified bee-keeper?"

"From what we've been told, the bee-wasps are about the size of large dogs at least and have stingers about a foot long. They're not dragons, but they might be nearly as dangerous. We'll see how it goes, I guess."

"Your mum is probably pretty bummed, with you both being gone again."

"Probably, but we were happy to get the word to head out. We love mum dearly, but being home full time was beginning to wear on both of us."

"I'll say. Between her raging about Ron's new girlfriend--the dark witch scarlet woman--and complaining about Percy we'd both come to the end of our ropes."

"What's she complaining about Percy for? I'd have thought he'd be golden so far as your mum was concerned--he's got a steady job, newly married…"

"Living far away, in a place she can't just pop into whenever she wants, she was left completely out of the wedding preparations, and Penny has put her foot down about having children any time soon. She wants to keep working for a while yet, and said it will be at least five years before she even considers it. You can imagine how mum took that. The only bright spot, so far as she was concerned, about the whole 'wedding debacle' was the promise of grandchildren around the corner."

"She just had two babies, you'd think that would be plenty for her!"

"That's pretty much what Percy told her when she tried to get him to 'get Penny to see reason'. He told her he didn't want his kids to be the same age as their aunts."

"How's your dad doing?"

"He's good. Those nutter muggleborns were good for something at least--there were lots of job openings at the Ministry. Dad was able to dump his part time jobs and head back there."

"What's he doing now?"

"He got one of the middle-management positions in the department of magical law. He's a little disappointed he won't be going out on raids anymore, but it's better pay than he was getting before."

"Well that's good. I'm glad to hear it."

"Yeah, hopefully mum will ease up some. I get that she's been worried about money--she's been trying to convince us to get jobs with the Ministry, couldn't seem to get it through her head that with dad being laid off, the chances of us getting jobs there were slim, that's if we even actually wanted jobs with the Ministry. She was a little peeved about Percy going to work for that New World Enterprises, but once she realized it was an actual job, not just a group of kids playing
games she settled down somewhat. Fred and George got a job of sorts with them too, did you know? They're selling them some of their prank inventions. Mum figures it's alright as a sideline while they're still in school, but she's been on their back more and more to get 'real jobs'. She doesn't think prank items count."

"She must be aware of Zonko's, that's what he sells. He's made quite a respectable living at it for years now."

"Well, you know mum. She's never had much of a sense of humor. She's never had time for jokes and pranks, thinks it's a waste of time, and no respectable pastime for an adult."

"Sounds a lot like my mother, come to think of it." Sirius grumped.

"Do you see what I mean? Still think I'm imagining things?"

"No, I see it. You don't think he's going mad again, do you?" Snape replied in a very low hiss, hoping his words would escape the dark lord's notice. Lucius grimaced and they both turned slightly to observe the man in question.

Tom was seated at his desk at the far side of the room, ostensibly doing paperwork, but in reality he'd been staring into the distance for some time now. There was a heavy feeling in the room, like the approach of a storm. The space around the dark lord was often thus--his magic seemed to fill whatever space he was in. Depending on his mood it could be comforting, exhilarating or terrifying by turns. It was one of the things that had drawn people to him--one started to crave the feel of his magic blanketing the area; being around other, lesser wizards was never quite the same after being awash in the dark lord's presence.

Since his return his presence had been comforting and exhilarating. The dark murderous edge that had characterized it in the last days of the war had gone, much to everyone's relief. It had been a joy to once again bask in the dark lord's potent magic, without the constant fear of death or crucio overlaying every moment. Then, a few days ago it had all changed. His magic coated the room like a prickly bush, leaving everyone nervous and on edge. The only positive was that the looming sense of something wrong had kept everyone focused and on point. Their meetings were quite productive lately.

"When did this start?"

"About a week ago."

"And you've no clue what caused it?"

"None. He was at my home for most of the day for two days running--Narcissa invited some ladies of her acquaintance to come visit for a bit. He seemed fine then. He was on his best behavior, and the ladies were all quite charmed by him. He even spent some time wandering the gardens with Capricia Giordani. Narcissa was delighted that they hit it off so well, after the debacle with Ekaterina Belyakova. We'd been so certain the dark lord would take a shine to her--she reminded us both of Bellatrix, so we were sure they'd hit it off. Well, I'm sure you've heard how that went."

"Should you really be encouraging him to bond with a Bellatrix replacement?" Snape huffed. "We do want him to stay sane."

"Well obviously we strongly reconsidered after the mess at the Yule party. Capricia is quite different--she's a rather quiet girl, actually. It seemed to work--like I said, they were getting along
swimmingly."

"So, what happened?"

"I don't know. He left for the evening, and the next morning when we saw him again, he was like this." Lucius gestured sharply towards Tom, who was still sitting at his desk, staring into the distance and playing with the quill in his hands, obviously lost in thought.

"He's been morose. There's been practically no expression on his face. I had just gotten used to him smiling and cracking the occasional joke, and being chatty and personable…and then this. It's like he's not even here with us."

"And you have no idea what brought it on? Where did he go?"

"Home, I think. It was evening, where else would he have gone?"

"Did you ask?"

Lucius gave him a look.

"No, I guess you didn't."

"His magic has been jangling against my senses all week. It's been almost hard to breathe at times, it's been so oppressive."

The weighty magic in the air all suddenly seemed to sharpen and focus, like a crouching beast waiting to pounce. Lucius and Severus both stiffened and slanted a glance at the dark lord, each fearing he'd overheard their conversation, in spite of the precautions they'd both taken, and objected to being a source of gossip. They found he wasn't looking at them, his attention was all focused on the snow-white owl that was silently gliding through the room. He was still expressionless, but they could see from the tenseness of his body and the intentness of his gaze that he was far more interested in the coming missive than he would like anyone to think.

The two men watched silently and unobtrusively as he untied the letter from the owl's leg, fumbling with the ties a bit and then stared at the small scroll in his hands for several moments before steeling himself to unroll it. As he read through the letter the heavy magic in the air prickled and jangled and thickened the air until it felt like they were buried in it. He spent several minutes reading and then did a most curious thing--he spent several moments staring at the signature and running his fingers along it. Afterwards, he leaned back in his seat and rested his chin on his hand and sighed, a strangely melancholy sound. Hedwig, who had sat rather patiently through the whole show made an inquiring 'preck' sound at him, drawing his attention.

"Is he expecting a reply?"

"Preck."

"Oh, you just thought I might like to send one." His shoulders seemed to sag just a bit and he closed his eyes as though suddenly exhausted. "No reply. You can run along." he told the owl quietly. Hedwig flew up to land on his shoulder and curved one wing around the back of his head in a strange parody of a hug. "Preck!" she told him pointedly, before alighting from his shoulder to fly away from the house. Tom watched her go with bemused eyes. He pushed himself up slowly from his seat and started from the room.

"I'll be back in a bit. I'm going to take a walk."
"Very good, my lord." Lucius and Severus replied immediately.

They sat quietly sipping their tea and very pointedly not watching the dark lord as he left the house. They sat quietly for several moments longer, until the feel of the dark lord's magic was gone from the premises. When it had, Severus jumped to his feet to go keep watch by the window for his return, while Lucius hurried to the desk to read the letter.

"Well? What's it say?"

"I'm reading."

"Read it out loud!"

"Fine, hold on."

"It's starts off rather strangely--'Dear Tom' is crossed out, and it's addressed "to the desk of T.M. Riddle. I know you're probably surprised to be hearing from me so soon after, and there's some scribbles as though he started to say something and then changed his mind, then it continues "I just returned from Wan Shi Tong's library. I spoke to the spirit for a bit--he asked about you and wondered if you would be coming by to visit again. I told him I'd let you know the next time I saw you, but I figured a letter would probably be better received. We were there for about a week almost. The oasis team did a marvelous job. There's even the beginnings of a town springing up around it. We stayed in the visiting scholars quarters on the lowest level of the library. It's shaped like a pentagon, each side is for one nation: Red doors with flame symbols for Fire Nation, yellow with swirls for Air, etc. Ours are black with a red and blue yin-yang symbol. Being a spirit, he knows about things like beds and bathrooms, but I don't think he quite understood the concept. The beds were bed-shaped stone platforms, and the bathrooms looked like bathrooms but they didn't work. We fixed everything, obviously, which means whoever next comes along can at least be assured of a comfortable night's sleep and a working bathroom, though they'll have to procure their own food, or bring it along like we did. Well, anyway, that was all I really wanted to tell you. I promised I would let you know he was asking about you, and now I've done so." After that there's some scribbling-it looks like it said 'take care' before being crossed out and then it's signed 'Regards, H.'"

"He's coming back!" Snape hissed.

Lucius made a copy of the odd letter and tucked it into the breast pocket of his robes and hurried back to his own seat after settling the original letter back where he'd found it. They were both back in their seats, calmly sipping their tea when Tom wandered back in, still morose and distracted, and surrounded by jangly oppressive magic.

"I think we're done here for tonight. You two can run along if you have somewhere else to be."

"Very good, my lord. I'm sure Narcissa would have been calling before too long, wondering what was taking us. Will you be joining us? I'm sure miss Giordani will be pleased to see you again…"

"Give the ladies my apologies. I have other things to occupy myself this evening."

Lucius and Severus made their goodbyes and hurried to the floo.

When they arrived at Lucius' home, they found Narcissa entertaining her mother, Druella Rosier, Madame Maxime as well as several younger ladies and their chaperones, be they mother, grandmother or nanny. They had been joined by Draco, as well as by several older teen boys--sons
of their acquaintances that were already out of school. When the two men arrived they received fond smiles from the respective ladies in their lives, while the empty doorway behind them was perused hopefully by the chaperones, and one of the young ladies, for some sight of the dark lord.

It was an open secret that Narcissa had invited the young ladies to visit in the hopes of procuring a match for the dark lord first and foremost, and then for other young men in the area only as an afterthought. The dark lord had been polite and charming to all of them, but the only one he'd really paid particular notice to was Capricia Giordani. Feeling a possible match had been secured, Narcissa then opened the company to the other single young men in the area in the hopes of settling a few more couples before the visit was over.

"Tom isn't coming?"

"He had things to do this evening. He is a very busy man, you know."

"Of course. It's still disappointing." Narcissa could see Lucius had something to tell her, but seemed unlikely to broach the subject, whatever it may be, while they had so much company scattered about. Narcissa took care of that by suggesting all the young people take a walk through the gardens for a bit before dinner.

The young people agreed easily--the young men especially seemed bored being stuck in a room with a bunch of older women watching them like hawks for any sign of interest in the young ladies gathered there so they could start hammering out marriage contracts. Lucius could remember that all too well from his own youth. He couldn't say he missed it at all. Once the room was cleared of all but Narcissa and Maxime, Lucius drew out the copy of the letter he'd made and handed it over to Narcissa to read. She did so with a frown of puzzlement on her face and handed it over to Maxime to read afterwards.

"What is it I'm supposed to be seeing there? It's a short, awkward letter, badly written and full of mistakes. Frankly, Mr. Potter should be ashamed of himself for having allowed such a missive to leave his hands. He should have burned it."

"Zhey seem to 'ave 'ad a falling out, quite recently from ze way zhis first line is worded, and ze scribbles afterwards. Mister Potter is trying to find a new way of relating, but eet is awkward and uncertain. 'E makes eet clear he iz writing only because of obligation, not his own wishes."

"That's what we thought as well." Severus agreed.

Lucius went on to explain the odd way the dark lord had been acting all week, and his strange behavior earlier that very day.

"How very odd. What could it all mean?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"It is a puzzlement, isn't it?"

"I don't understand" Maxime admitted "What ees ze great mystery? Zhey 'ave 'ad a lovers spat. When one considers zhat ze young man in question 'as been here looking for a bride eet is not 'ard to understand why."

"Lover's spat!" Narcissa, Lucius and Severus all choked out in shock.

"What did I say? Eet seems very obvious to me."
Back to Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

The school year begins again. Harry and co. return for their fifth year.

"Man, I can't believe the summer is already over. It's seems like we just got here and it's already time to go back." Ginny complained as she followed the rest of them into a train compartment.

"It really did. Happily, I got most of what I wanted to do done, but I would have been happier to have another month...even just an extra week or so." Harry nodded.

"I for one am happy to be heading back to school. I learned a lot and did a lot during my internship, but I'm just as happy to be getting on with my proper education." Hermione disagreed.

"I'm happy enough to be heading back to Hogwarts. I would have liked to have spent a little more time at the temple. I'm pretty sure I got enlightened, but then I lost it, so now I'm not really sure."

"Of course you were, Neville." Hermione huffed, before rolling her eyes.

"What's not sensible about it? I was enlightened I tell you."

"You just said yourself you weren't even sure. That's how they reel you in, you know, they make all sorts of grandiose claims and then brainwash you into believing them. If you ask me, you're well away from that guru fellow."

"I wonder if Rebekka is thinking about me." Ron mused gloomily. "I wish I'd met her earlier in the summer. The last time I saw her was at Percy's wedding. I didn't get in near as much snog time as I was hoping--mum kept getting in the way every time we tried to sneak off for a bit. It was right unsporting of her, really."

Hermione scowled and pulled a thick book from her trunk and stuck her nose in it. She absolutely refused to listen to Ron moaning about his girlfriend during the whole journey.

"Didn't you mention a new boyfriend, Ginny?" Luna asked curiously. Ginny tossed her hair over her shoulder and cast a discreet glance Harry's way to see if he was paying attention.

"Yes, I did. He goes to Durmstrang, actually. He lives not too far from us. He saw me flying in the distance and came over to say hello. I didn't get to see him as much as I might have liked--every time he showed up, mum would call me in to help with the babies. I was reduced to sneaking out at night."

"WHAT!" Ron shrieked. "You were sneaking out at night to meet a boy? How could you! Mum'll murder you when she finds out!" He suddenly gulped and leaned back in his seat, warily eyeing Ginny's wand which was suddenly in his face, pointed unswervingly between his eyes. "Oh? And just who is going to tell her? You? That would be a very, very stupid thing to do." Ginny suddenly sat back in her seat, and her wand disappeared into the folds of her robe.

"You can't assume she's never going to find out, Gin, and when she does, you'll be lucky if you
"ever step foot outdoors again before you're thirty."

"Please, as if she has any room to talk. She got up to the same if not worse when she was my age, dad too."

"Like that's going to matter."

"It doesn't matter now in any case--we're off back to Hogwarts, and he's off to Durmstrang. It's not like I'll be sneaking out at night while at school to see him."

"No, you'll be sneaking out to meet someone else." Luna agreed cheerfully.

"WHAT! No she won't, she's got a boyfriend." Hermione insisted.

Luna looked at Hermione pityingly, and Ginny snorted in amusement at the idea that she would stay faithful to some guy she just met who would be hundreds of miles away for the better part of the year.

Ginny's words worried Ron immensely--there were boys at Beauxbatons, after all, and even if he thought they seemed kinda wimpy, running around in their powder blue uniforms with the sparkly wands on the chest, it had been obvious during the last school year that the ladies didn't necessarily share his opinions on the matter. What if Rebekka had a boyfriend at Beauxbatons? What if he'd just been a summer fling--the one nearby while her boyfriend was elsewhere? Worrisome thoughts of Rebekka's passionate reunion with some hulking, faceless Beauxbatons boy began to spiral through his fevered imagination.

"The train's about to get underway. We need to get to the prefect's compartment, Neville."

"Oh, right. There's a meeting or something?"

"Didn't you read the prefect's handbook?"

"No. I didn't get one, just a badge."

"That's no excuse. You need to read it and memorize it as soon as possible." she lectured as they left the compartment.

"Geez, and I thought Percy was bad when he became a prefect. Do you know she pestered he and Penny for their handbooks as soon as she got her badge? She kept at it even when they told her she and the others would get theirs during the meeting on the train. She's mental." Ginny scoffed.

"She's just excited and wants to do a good job. She takes responsibilities very seriously." Harry chided. "But yeah, she is a bit mental about it."

"I feel sorry for Neville. She's going to walk all over him."

"No she won't. Neville's a prefect too, and he'll remind her of that if she gets to be too much."

As they were disembarking from the train upon arriving at the Hogsmeade station, they were all rather forcibly struck by how tiny all the first years seemed. There were quite a few of them, and they were all chattering excitedly about the underwater view on the train, and seemed to be looking forward to getting to the school at last.
"Bold lot, aren't they? Remember how terrified all of us were, thinking we had to wrestle a troll and all?" Neville laughed.

"Yeah, thanks a lot Harry."

"Why are you blaming me? It was your brothers that told you that."

"You made everyone believe it."

"For all I knew it could have been true--it's not like I had any more idea than the rest of you how the sorting went." Harry defended himself.

"What are you two doing? Get in the carriage already." Hermione huffed.

"Just saying hello to the thestrals. It seems only polite, since they're pulling the carriage." Luna explained.

It hardly seemed like they were in a new world at all--Hogsmeade station was the same, the village of Hogsmeade as well. The ride up to the castle was unchanged, and Hogwarts herself stood proudly outlined against the evening sky as though she'd sat in that place for a thousand years. Already the peninsula with its new settlements seemed far away. Returning to Hogwarts was like stepping into the past.

The students felt that even more keenly when they eventually made it into the great hall. Here, everything was just as they'd left it--the teachers at their high table, Dumbledore in the center on his golden throne, beaming down at all of them, the walls adorned with house banners, the golden plates and goblets shimmering in the candlelight beneath the illusion of the night sky.

"I can't believe it's fifth year already. It seems like only yesterday when we were the terrified midgets coming in to be sorted. Time flies."

"It really does."

"You know what I can't believe? There's only one class left, beyond the new firsties, that aren't Melting Pot folks. How awesome is that?" Ginny realized.

"Pretty awesome."

It was strange being back at Hogwarts after spending most of the summer in his Japanese style house on a tropical island. Being enclosed by so much stone, not to mention the cooler weather, was going to take some getting used to. It was already brisk and somewhat chilly, and it was only going to get colder from here on out.

Luna was waiting for him at the room of requirement when he got there for his morning workout. His workouts would be taking a backseat for a little while until he got Luna up to speed--sadly, this was really the only time of day that they could really spare for ninja lessons.

"You ready?"

"I was born ready." Luna scoffed as she preceded him into the training room. Harry grinned at her back and shook his head.

If anyone had told him years prior, when he first met the eccentric girl that he would one day make
her his apprentice in the ninja arts he'd have thought they were crazy, and yet, here they were. Luna was a surprisingly quick study. She was already getting good at throwing kunai and shuriken, and even senbon needles--much better than he was when he started. He had a feeling she was going to be damned dangerous by the time he was done with her--all the more because no one would ever see it coming. Hand to hand combat wasn't her strong suit--she had neither the height nor the bulk for it, but she was quick and slippery as an eel when she put her mind to it. Against anyone not trained she would be a force of nature--against anyone similarly trained but with more strength she had a difficult time. Happily, there wasn't anyone he could think of off the top of his head, other than himself and some of the benders of his acquaintance, that had such training, which meant Luna would be dangerous indeed to most anyone who crossed her. Of course, it was early days yet--they'd only just begun her training. Only time would really tell what she would eventually become.

"I was thinking of inviting Neville to join us in training. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, why would I?"

"Just being courteous. I don't know whether he will or not, but I'm beginning to feel guilty about leaving him out and not even giving him a choice in the matter."

"Plus ninjas work in three person teams."

"Well, the ninjas I met did."

"You already have a secret code language. He took quite well to that. I'm sure becoming a ninja will just seem like the next step."

"I hadn't really looked at it that way."

They worked for two hours and then split up to get ready for the day.

"Breakfast!" Ron said cheerfully as they made their way down to the great hall that morning.

"First day of NEWT classes!" Hermione corrected, equally cheerful.

"You two are way too awake for this hour of the morning." Seamus complained.

"You shouldn't have been dipping into your stash last night. You knew we had to get up early mate." Dean muttered.

"Like you can talk--you helped me drink it!"

Hermione pushed her way between the two of them and glowered at them both.

"You were drinking! That's against school rules! You're underage! It's not only bad for your health, but on a school night as well!"

"Mind your own bloody business, and stop listening in to our conversation." Seamus grumbled, before he and Dean moved ahead of her and closed ranks so she couldn't get between them again.

"I need to go report them, right now!" Hermione seethed as they walked off.

"They finished off the already mostly empty bottle last night, and they're awake and ready for the day. It's not like they're drinking right now or are falling down drunk. Give it a rest." Neville sighed.
"I can't believe you didn't stop them! I should report you to McGonagall as well!" she turned to Neville in a fury.

"Seamus has been taking 'night caps' since first year, Hermione. Give it a rest." Ron added.

"Since first year!"

"Yeah. It's a family tradition. He has a shot every night before bed. Percy knows, he never did anything about it."

"That's completely ridiculous!" she huffed, pulling her phone. The rest of them pulled ahead of her while she was furiously dialing.

McGonagall came around shortly after they sat down to meet with each of them to finalize their schedules.

"Mr. Potter" she greeted when she got to Harry. "You did very well. I was quite pleased with your results. You did well enough you can really choose whatever you want for NEWT study. Are you still planning to pursue your healer-curse breaker idea?"

"That's the plan more or less."

"Well, you need charms, transfiguration, potions, herbology, DADA for healing, and arithimancy, runes and astronomy for curse breaking."

"Give me everything but astronomy--I'll pick that up later, once the experts have weighed in on the new world order."

"Seven NEWT classes, that's a heavy load."

"I'll manage."

She made a few notations on his schedule and on the clip board she carried and handed it over. "Good luck, Mr. Potter."

"This is brilliant! The next three years are going to be great! Look at all the free time we have!" Ron chortled in glee.

"You have, you mean. I have a lot more classes than you do. No potions? I thought you mentioned possibly being an auror once."

"I don't have the grade for it, and I don't really care--NEWT potions are with Snape, and I really don't want to be back in class with the greasy git. I might have reconsidered if it was old Slughorn."

"We have all the same classes it looks like, though I'm also taking Care of Magical Creatures." Hermione noted while peering over his shoulder.

"Neville too, he has the same schedule I do."

"You're all barmy. Oh well, I'll just laugh at you during my many, many hours of free time each week." Ron laughed.

"Oh, damn, I almost forgot…"
"What?"

"I got a present for professor Sinistra this summer. I grabbed all the astronomy related stuff I could find at Wan Shi Tong's library. She and other astronomers, from what I heard, have been star watching all summer, and are trying to slowly put together a new field of study in the subject. The notes I gathered will probably go a long way towards speeding that along. Excuse me a sec."

Professor Sinistra was at breakfast--dinner for her. She usually slept a good part of each day so she could be awake at night when the stars were out. Harry approached, and the students watched as they had a short conversation. Sinistra perked right up and began eagerly poring through the scrolls and notebooks he handed over to her. When he returned, she was still reading what he'd given her and seemed to be cross-indexing things with her own notes, and even pulled out a phone to call someone.

"She seems happy."

"Thrilled, yeah. She said it will save a lot of time and effort in compiling a star map, and the native folklore will help sort out the mystical influences and whatnot. She's calling some of her astronomy buddies to make sure they head out to the library--there's a planetarium thingy there, and a lot more stuff that's astronomy related, I just copied some stuff from each archive and brought it with me."

"I showed Professor Sprout some of the herbology stuff you brought back for me, as well as the cuttings I brought back from the temple. She's real excited too. You should see the green house that all the new world stuff is in--it's near to bursting. She's been working with everything there all summer, and some of her friends are working with some old lady somewhere in Earth Kingdom that runs a herbology institute."

"You went to the mystical library?" Hermione interjected, sounding jealous.

"Yeah, me Luna and her dad, Sirius Adeline and Reggie went. We were there for a couple of days. We just got back about a week ago."

"I wish I could have gone. It might be years before I get a chance! I'm going to be busy interning again during the holidays and the next couple of summers."

"It'll still be there. Remember, most of what's there is non-magical, low tech stuff. If you're that interested, I can show you some of what I brought back."

"When? What do you have?"

"Later, and I'll show you. Geez."

"We should get eating, breakfast is almost over."

Everyone checked the time and began wolfing down their breakfasts so they'd be ready when the bell rang.

"We have potions first thing."

"I have nothing! While you're all getting sneered at by the greasy git, I'll be hanging out in the morning sunshine, kicking back and taking life easy."

"Us too. It's your own fault, you know." Seamus agreed cheerfully.
"Yeah, all you eggheads can suffer, while us sensible folks enjoy our free time." Dean added.

The bell rang and the food began disappearing from the table.

"You know, it's unfair. We don't have class right now. They should let us stay at breakfast until we do." Ron grumbled.

Harry, Neville and Hermione ignored them so they could hurry down to the dungeons for potions class.

"Wow, this is a lot different than our old classroom." Hermione marveled.

The potions classroom was larger than the one they'd used for pre-OWL class, which was odd as there were far fewer people there--. There were a dozen workstations--each about the size of the tables they'd had in earlier classrooms, but intended for one person, rather than the two or sometimes three that used to have to share. Hermione, naturally, headed straight towards the front, which left her alongside Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini who had each taken the other two at the front. Ernie MacMillan, and Susan Bones of Hufflepuff were there, though they'd taken the stations in the back of the room as had Padma Patil, Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, and Su Li of Ravenclaw. Neville and Harry took the last spots left open, behind Hermione and Draco and next to Pansy.

Professor Snape had been boggled at quite a bit the night before--he was still tan, and his hair had still been clean at the opening feast. He seemed far more relaxed than any of them had ever seen him, a fact which was brought home when he leaned against his desk to address all of them, rather than stalking up and down the aisles like an overgrown bat like he used to.

"This classroom is strictly for use by this class. The stations you are at will be yours for the year. We will be not only covering the standard NEWT level potions during the course of the year, we will also be doing some experiments. You will each be keeping a potions journal this year, into which you will be recording your findings and ideas. These will be graded at the end of each term, alongside the usual essays that will be assigned and of course the potions that you submit in class. You all passed your OWLs with an 'O' or you wouldn't be here. Given that, I am expecting to not need to stand over your shoulders all period. I expect you to be able to brew each week's potion with little or no assistance, and should it turn out badly, I expect you to be able to tell me what you did wrong and how you could have fixed it had you thought to do so."

As Snape continued talking, Hermione and the Ravenclaws began to all but dance in their seats in excitement, while the Hufflepuffs, Neville and Harry began looking a bit worried that they wouldn't be able to keep up. The three Slytherins just sat there looking smug and relaxed--but then they tended to do that even when they knew they were out of their depth, so it was anyone's guess what they were actually thinking.

Hermione was still in high spirits when they were let out two grueling hours later.

"Oh, class this year sounds like it will be very interesting, don't you think? I do wonder why we're supposed to keep a sample of what we've made though, on top of what we handed in for grading."

"Probably so we have it on hand for reference when we explain what we did wrong." Neville shrugged.

"Oh, yes, that's probably it. Oh, I'd best hurry; I have Care of Magical Creatures next."
"We don't have anything more till after lunch. I guess we'll see you then." Harry nodded.

Hermione waved distractedly as she hurried off. They didn't take offense--they'd known her long enough to understand how she was where school and classes were involved.

"Melting Pot?"

"Actually, we should probably hit the library and get the potions assignment out of the way. I don't know about you, but I don't want it hanging over my head all week." Neville disagreed.

"Good point. Speaking of the Melting Pot though, did you and Hermione tell the firsties about the welcome party tonight?"

"Yeah. We're going to lead them there after dinner--they'll all be in classes until then."

There were lots of empty tables at the library--something they'd rarely experienced as underclassmen, as they'd always been in there after dinner previously, when the whole student body was free to go there. The only people there at the moment were a few sixth and seventh years that had the same idea they had of getting assignments out of the way as soon as they'd been given.

"I can't believe Snape is making us do homework even though our potions were perfect."

"Yeah, tell me about it. How am I supposed to tell him why I added extra steps beyond the obvious--my mum left them in her book and it does a better job. I don't know why, it just does."

"Well, there has to be a reason, right? We just need to hope someone explains it somewhere."

"I wish I had to do Hermione's--I know exactly why hers was a little off; there wasn't enough juice from the sopophorous bean. Squooshing it with the flat of a silver knife makes a huge difference in how much juice comes out. I noticed mine was the same color as Hermione's was before I poured the juice in and it made the difference between 'pretty good' and 'perfect'."

"You're still ahead of me then--I didn't notice that."

"What's with you two?" Ron asked when they arrived at lunch.

"We spent two hours in the library earlier trying to get our potions assignment out of the way. We didn't find what we needed until just before the lunch bell rang. Two hours and the stupid thing still isn't done."

"That sucks, mate, but you shouldn't complain. I was stuck mucking out horse shite for the last two hours."

"Huh?"

"Care of magical creatures. They've a herd of pegasi here. We had to muck out the stables before we could really get in close to see them, and then we had to groom them and check their teeth and hooves and preen the feathers on their wings. It was exhausting."

"At least we were able to use magic for most of it; imagine if we'd had to do it all by hand." Dean pointed out as he sat down.

"Uh, mate, wanna move downwind. You smell like shite, literally in fact."
"Like you're one to talk, mate. We all smell like shite."

"Honestly!" Hermione huffed before hitting each of the boys with a freshening charm.

"Uh, thanks, but did you have to make me smell like roses? I'm not sure that's better." Seamus complained.

"Hey did any of you hear? Old Filch is gone. There's a new caretaker, his name's Porter. He's a wizard." Dean spoke up.

"I guess that makes sense. Filch is off at the Southern Air Temple learning to be an airbender. From what Aang told me when I was there he's doing pretty good. He expects him to be a master in a year or so at the rate he's going. I doubt he wanted to put off his training for a year so he could run around here cleaning up after students."

"What's he like?" Neville wondered.

"Eh, seems nice enough, I guess. We tracked mud into the castle when we came back from CoMC. He just shook his head, pointed his wand and vanished the mess before wandering off."

"That's good. He should be less grumpy than Filch then. I dunno why they had a squib working as caretaker before anyway. This castle is too big for one guy to take care of, especially without magic." Parvati nodded.

"Yeah, he was bitter to begin with. Living at Hogwarts at those years, watching class after class of witches and wizards coming and going definitely didn't help." Lavender agreed.

"He got a bit nicer as the years went on." Hermione objected.

"Sure, there was groups of students helping him out now and again. Even so, he still wasn't exactly Johnny sunshine."

"Transfiguration after lunch. It's going to be weird not having McGonagall." Ron noted.

"I know, right? Anyone know what professor Argyle is like?" Dean wondered.

"According to Fred she could be McGonagall's younger sister. He said we'd hardly notice the difference."

"I guess we'll find out, time for class already."

Elinor Argyle was a witch of about thirty or so. She was dark haired and dark eyed, slim and neat and wore her hair in a tight braid around her head like a crown. "Welcome to NEWT transfiguration. As you will all know from having studied the subject previously, transfiguration is easily the most difficult and dangerous magic you are likely to learn while at Hogwarts. That becomes only more true at NEWT level. Some of the things we'll be learning can be dangerous--even fatal under the right circumstances. I expect everyone to be prepared, focused and ready to work while here in class. Fooling around will not be tolerated. If you cannot abide by these simple rules you will be expelled from this class and not allowed to return." She scanned the rows of students with her eyes to impress on them how very serious she was. Fred was right, it was just like being in class with McGonagall.

She flicked her wand a the pile of papers on her desk, which then appeared one in front of each
"That's your syllabus for the school year. As you can see, the chapter readings you are responsible for each week are clearly listed. I expect to be able to call on any one of you at random, and have you able to answer questions about what you've read, so be sure you do them, as I will be calling on you."

As the professor continued talking, many of the students slumped down in their seats looking gloomy. The woman was a nightmare. She liked calling on students randomly, she gave pop quizzes without warning, they were going to have to do two long papers on top of the usual homework essays, and there were long lists of transfigurations that were expected to be mastered every other week. Ron was on the verge of despair by the time they left.

"It's horrible! It's the first bloody day and we've already got homework, and she wants us to read our books!"

"I think in general the teachers usually do expect such things." Dean laughed.

"Oh well, I'm free again till dinner. Who's up for some chess?"

"I'm going to the library." Hermione announced.

"Harry? Neville?"

"We're going to the library too."

"What? Are you mental? We've got gobs of time!"

"Sorry Ron. We already told you we wasted the last block of free time trying to get potions out of the way. We still have that to do and now transfiguration on top of it."

"Not to mention the homework about the pegasi, Ron, don't forget that." Hermione reminded him.

"Don't bloody remind me. I swear, they're trying to kill us."

"Stop being so melodramatic. You should come to the library with us."

"No thanks. I'm going outside."

"Suit yourself."

When they arrived at the library, Harry and Neville discovered, to their horror, that the books they'd found to do their potions assignment with had all been checked out.

"What are we supposed to do now?"

"I don't know. Damn it."

At times like this, he wished he had access to his library at home. He was pretty sure he had most of the books they needed there--the titles had seemed somewhat familiar, even if he'd never read any of them before. That was when he remembered--he did have access to his library at home should he choose to use it.

"Why don't you get started on the transfiguration assignment. I'll be back in a bit."

"Uh, okay?"
Harry slipped out of the library and made his way towards the vanishing cabinet. It was lucky it was situated where there were no portraits nearby--he didn't think anyone would take him being able to just go from Hogwarts to his bedroom whenever he pleased at all well. There was no one around when he arrived, but he threw on his invisibility cloak just in case and then climbed in and shut the door. When he reopened it, he was in the sitting room of his bedroom suite, and the library was just a short distance away. Grinning to himself in triumph, he hurried in there and dug out the index. He had been right, he did have most of the books available. He tapped the titles of the ones he needed and they came and stacked themselves up next to him.

"Harry?"

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin at the unexpected interruption. He spun and found Sirius staring at him in astonishment.

"Oh, geez, you scared me."
"What are you doing here?"
"Remember the vanishing cabinet?"
"Oh, right. I had forgotten about it actually. Well, that explains the how…not the why though."
"Some jerk checked out all the books I needed to complete my potions homework. I knew I had copies, so…"
"Ah. You really are a weird kid. Most boys your age would use a contraption like that to sneak out for a night on the town, not to raid their own library so they can do homework on the first day of school."
"What can I say, I'm a rebel."
Sirius laughed and messed up his hair, before pulling him into a one-armed hug. "You're something alright."
"I should get going. The others are waiting for me, and I don't want anyone to see me climbing out of the cabinet."
Sirius gave his head one last pat and let him go. "Take care, kiddo."

"I'm back." Harry announced unnecessarily, before plopping the small pile of books on the table.

"Oh, you have Drummond's guide there, good. I was looking for it earlier. I thought it was checked out. It was rather rude of you to run off with it." Hermione said as he sat down.

"It is checked out, this is my copy--we need it too. How are you coming along on transfiguration?"
"I've got an inch done, so…only thirty five left to go." Neville sighed.

"Damn. I'm beginning to get the feeling that, large chunks of empty time or not, we're not going to have any free time this year."

"I think you're absolutely right. Ron better get himself in gear--if he waits till the last minute like he usually does, he's never going to finish in time." Hermione agreed.

"We already told him, it's up to him to actually do it. He'll either realize his mistake and correct it or he'll fall behind. We're not kids anymore." Neville replied.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm searching, what's it look like? I already wasted two hours earlier trying to finish this assignment--I refuse to waste hours more." Harry muttered as he tapped the blank parchment he'd
placed on top of the pile of books he'd brought with him. He studied the resulting list and began flipping through the top book in the pile then began reading, and then making notes about what he found. He continued making notes for the remainder of their time there, and then continued fiddling with his notes while they were all at dinner later.

"Just what are you doing anyway? You said you were going to do homework, but as far as I've been able to tell you haven't even started!" Hermione finally burst out in frustration.

"I'm getting a head start on all my potions homework for the year, that's what."

"How could you be doing that? We don't even know what the rest of the homework for the year is going to be!"

"But we do…we need to be able to explain what went wrong and what went right. What I have here is explanations, spread out over hundreds of pages and across five books mind you, on why what you do while making a potion is important. I'm going to make up a chart for reference and then wah-lah, potions homework should be at least somewhat easier for the rest of the year."

"Oh good. I was kind of worried about that." Neville said with relief.

"Let me just organize this and put it into a more readable format, and we should be good to go."

Harry tucked his notes away at long last and focused on finishing up his dinner before the bell rang and the food disappeared. "Once I do, I just need to finally do my homework and all is well. I really hope all the assignments aren't like this or its going to be a very, very long year."

Dinner ended and the first years, excited and curious, hesitantly approached Neville and Hermione. "Um, miss? You said there was a party tonight?"

The first years were all the more curious when they realized what seemed to be the whole school was disappearing down the same hallway and disappearing into the same wall that they were being led to. They were all but vibrating by the time they reached the Melting Pot. The house elves had been by already in preparation--there was a large banner hung on the wall that said Welcome First Years, and there were cookies and jugs of juice laid out on the tables. The first years were taken on a quick and dirty tour of the premises, invited to take a peek and sign up for any clubs that caught their interest, and enjoy the evening. A few of them were even briefly interviewed by Seamus, who was manning the radio that evening. The spread out into a smiling chattering throng and dove right in.

Even with the new, expanded premises, it was somewhat crowded. Harry looked around and felt an unwelcome pang of nostalgia--everything had grown so much from the little secret clubhouse containing only first years. He realized with a bit of sadness that if the rest of his classes followed suit with what he'd already had, he wasn't going to have the time to hang out here much except on the occasional weekend. He knew it was going to come to that eventually, but it still took him by surprise to discover that the time had come so quickly. He and his friends were more than halfway through their time at Hogwarts--they were on the way out, and it was nearly time for the next group to take over what they'd built here. It made him feel surprisingly old. He shook off his gloom with difficulty and pasted on a smile. He needed to make the rounds and catch up with everyone. His reign as king of Hogwarts might be nearing its end, but the end hadn't come yet. Until then, he had work to do.

The remainder of the week passed much like the first day--classes, blocks of free time that ended up being used to do the long, complicated and exhausting homework assignments they kept getting
assigned. Ron kept disappearing outside during all his free blocks, and wasn't seen doing homework or in the library once. As the week wore on, he became increasingly nervous and distracted, until by Saturday morning he looked downright ill. He snapped at Hermione when she began nagging him to go to the hospital wing and marched off after having eaten hardly anything like a man facing his doom. Hermione was waspish after their fight and started snapping at everyone as well and ran off directly after breakfast to put in some quality library time.

Harry, Luna, and Neville who had opted to join in, got in a bit of training before heading off to the library to get rid of the last of their outstanding homework. Once that was out of the way they headed down to the Melting Pot to see what was going on. They found a mud-splattered Ron who was all but glowing in triumph.

"I got it! I'm the new Gryffindor keeper!" he announced grandly as soon as he spotted them.

"Is that what's had you in such a strop all week? You'd best go apologize to Hermione for jumping down her throat earlier--she's been completely impossible since then. So, keeper, eh? Well, congratulations." Neville offered.

"Yeah, good job, Ron."

"Best of luck." Luna added.

Ron beamed at all of them and sat back to bask in everyone's accolades. He was on cloud nine. Nothing could bring him down.

"Have you done any of your homework? If you start flunking they're not going to let you stay on the team." Harry asked curiously.

Ron's beaming face crumpled and a look of abject horror overtook his countenance. "Oh no! I haven't done a lick of it…I've been practicing."

"Best get started then. You've got the rest of today and tomorrow. If you get a move on you might have it all done by the time the weekend's over." Neville told him.

"I've got practice tomorrow."

"Well then you'd best get started now."

"But…it's the weekend!"

"And you had all week to get it out of the way. You're going to have to stay on top of it from now on--you won't be able to afford to let it slide for long if you have practices eating into your time as well." Harry reminded him.

"I don't suppose…"

"No."

"Oh come on! Help a mate out!"

"Ron, I spent all my free blocks all week, and most of the morning doing my homework. Each assignment took a couple of hours. I didn't have anyone reminding me to get it done, like we've been doing all week for you. Man up and get cracking."

Ron scowled at Harry and turned hopeful eyes on Neville.
"No friggin way, Ron. I've already done mine, I'm not doing yours as well. Forget it."

Ron scowled at Neville as well and started out of the room. "Where's Hermione?"

"Library. She won't do it for you either."

He scowled again and stomped from the room, muttering under his breath.

"Geez, the nerve of that guy."
"I know, tell me about it."

Ron wasn't seen much for the next couple of weeks; Angelina Johnson, the new captain of the Gryffindor team, seemed to start channeling Oliver Wood as soon as she put on the badge. She wanted a career in professional quidditch, and was hell bent on making sure her team performed its very best just in case any scouts came wandering by.

"Have you done the charms essay?" Hermione demanded as soon as Ron sat down to dinner. He seemed worn and listless, and the rest of the team seemed to be giving him dirty looks.

"Leave off, Hermione. I'm not in the mood right now."

"It's due tomorrow!"

Ron looked at her in horror and then slumped in his seat. "I'll get around to it. Just leave it."

"Ron! You need to start being more responsible, at the rate you're going you'll be lucky to pass the year, let alone sit your NEWTs. I keep telling you and"

"LEAVE IT." Ron growled a final time. "I told you I'm not in the mood."

"Well I wouldn't have to if you would just"

"BLOODY HELL, WOMAN! CAN'T A MAN EAT IN PEACE AROUND HERE!" Ron shouted suddenly, before leaving the table in a huff.

Hermione shut her mouth with a snap and then bristled indignantly.

"Oh, well that's very nice, isn't it? Try to help him out and all I get for my trouble is abuse! See if I try helping him again. Ugh! If only he would listen! He's been handing in sloppy, poorly-done work that he scrambles to do at the last minute. I keep telling him that he needs to be more on top of things, but does he listen, oh no, not Ronald Weasley. Thinks he's god's gift, he does."

"HERMIONE!"

Hermione cut off mid-rant and glowered at her year-mates who had all just shouted at her.

"What?"

"Just stop, for the love of god just stop. It's no wonder Ron ran off like that. Ron's a big boy. At some point he needs to step up and do what he needs to. It's okay to remind him, but geez, once you've done that let it go. If he doesn't listen or screws up, it's on him. Frankly, we're all getting tired of the constant nagging. It has to stop." Seamus grumbled.

"If I didn’t keep on top of him he'd never get everything done."
"And he lets it slide because he knows you'll follow him around like his mum and make sure he does at some point."

"But…"

"No. We're staging an intervention. It has to stop." Dean agreed.

Ron was sweating the next morning at breakfast. He had a roll of parchment tucked up next to his plate and was frantically scribbling to fill the last six inches of parchment. Hermione was practically writhing in her seat, so badly did she want to lecture, but the stony gazes of the rest of their group kept her silent. The bell rang while Ron was still writing. His face went white and he stumbled after the rest of them while trying to finish—not an easy proposition. He still looked rather ill when they finally arrived at class. Professor Flitwick always had everyone turn in their homework first thing. Ron's essay was a sorry looking thing--the text got larger the further down the page one went, and the last few inches were barely legible and spattered with ink, and there was faint traces of ketchup and grease along the edges of the parchment, which was also somewhat wrinkled. He flinched and then scowled at Hermione's affronted expression when she caught sight of it, though her expression was nothing compared to Flitwick's.

"Stay after class, Mr. Weasley."

Ron hunched down in his seat, feeling utterly miserable. "Yes, sir."

This was too much for Hermione, who took to muttering "I told you! I told you!" under her breath.

Dean and Seamus, who were sitting next to the two of them sighed and slumped in their seats.

"Looks like we dodged that one." Harry muttered to Neville. They had opted to sit near the Hufflepuffs this class.

As soon as class was over, most of the students fled as they didn't want to get stuck on the edges of another Ron/Hermione row. Hermione lingered outside the door waiting for Ron, and looked ready to unleash a storm of nagging--everything she'd saved up since the night before. Her fellow Gryffindors considered staging another intervention, but as the last one hadn't done any good that they could see, they didn't bother.

"I swear, those two deserve each other." Harry laughed.

"Tell me about it. So, lunch and then runes then we're free for the day."

"Yeah, though we'll probably end up working on homework again. It makes you wonder what it was like when NEWTs only took two years, doesn't it?"

Neville shuddered. "I can't even imagine. You probably didn't even have time to sleep."

"Oh, Mr. Potter, just the boy I was hoping to see!"

The boys glanced up from their conversation and saw Professor Slughorn bustling out of the dungeons, obviously on his way to lunch like they were.

"And Mr. Longbottom as well, ah this is good luck. I'm having a little dinner party later tonight. I'd
be delighted if you'd join me. Several of your classmates will be there, as will an old friend of mine, Henri Talleyrand. He is, as you may be aware, the current head of the Wizarding Confederation. He's a most delightful chap, and knowing him will certainly be of benefit to young men such as yourself. You'll come, won't you?"

"Uh, sure, professor. Sounds delightful."

"Marvelous! I'll see you both then. Come to my quarters at dinner time, lads. Don't be late now! Oh, Mr. Bonham, just the young man I wanted to see!" The moment he received their agreement, he was already off, chasing down other students to invite to his party that evening.

Neville shook his head at the man, and they turned their steps to the great hall.

"I guess this means we're in the Slug Club?"

"Yeah, I suppose. My mum and godfather were, back in the day."

"I think my dad was as well, I'm not sure."

"If nothing else it will break the monotony of classes for an evening."

"This should be the place…"

"Ah, boys! Right on time, welcome, welcome. We're just about to get started. Why don't you find your seats."

Professor Slughorn was dressed in a silk smoking jacket and had a jaunty fez perched on his head. He seemed to be in high spirits. His room was comfortably furnished, decorated with conspicuously displayed photographs signed by various former club members—famous quidditch players, Celestina Warbeck a popular singer, ministry department heads and the like. In the center of the room was a highly polished mahogany table, surrounded by a dozen high backed chairs. The Patil sisters, Dean, Blaise, Hannah, Susan Bones, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Morag MacDougal, an older gentleman who must be Mr. Talleyrand and Slughorn himself filled out the room.

"I recognize some of you." Talleyrand asserted after they'd taken their seats. "I bought a book recently for my granddaughter's birthday. It was recommended to me by a friend of mine. Apparently his daughter quite enjoyed it when she was of a similar age. I'm sure my granddaughter will enjoy having a signed copy."

Dean, Neville, Parvati, and Harry exchanged glances and shrugged. "Sure, that would be no problem."

"My other granddaughter is a little older. I'm sure she'd enjoy a signed copy of your book, Miss Patil, perhaps for Christmas. Her birthday has already passed."

Padma smiled serenely. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

"Well, isn't this delightful. We're all such good friends already. Wine, anyone?" Slughorn interjected cheerfully.

There were some hard feelings after the Slug Club meeting. Ron was insulted that he wasn't
invited—he helped on the book, he was the Gryffindor keeper. Hermione had consistently placed at the top of the year grade-wise, she was a prefect and had also helped on the book. The rest of the Slytherins were part of the board of the corporation, Seamus had a successful comic book out, Lavender helped with the book, and was designing her own fashion line… on and on. Things subsided somewhat when those who had been there explained that being part of Slughorn’s club just meant you got to listen to him drop names for an hour, and got commandeered into doing favors for his guests, but there were still hard feelings. The three Hufflepuffs all felt so guilty about the whole thing, they decided to opt out of further meetings. Ron and Hermione, among others, just happened to wander past Slughorn several times so they could mention all the interesting and fabulous things they had either done or were planning to do in the future. Slughorn for his part seemed to be in his element—they all got the impression it did his ego a world of good to have desperate schoolchildren chasing after him and demanding recognition.

"It’s Autumn equinox. I just realized."
"We can’t dance! We’ll get pulled into another world! We just got everything set up the way we like it!"
"We won’t go anywhere. We had to dance with the intention of moving last time. This time we’ll just be dancing. Relax."
"Are you sure?"
"Positive. This time we’ll just be celebrating the harvest and whatnot. Just a fun time to be had by all, no worries."
Quidditch and Hogsmeade

Chapter Summary

Ron plays his first game for Gryffindor, Hogsmeade weekend and a new puppet show

September rolled into October, and with it came the first quidditch match of the year--Gryffindor versus Slytherin.

Ron looked like death warmed over when he came down to breakfast that morning. He couldn't eat, and his skin had a faint green tinge to it. When Angelina called the team together to head down to the pitch to get changed, he stood and trudged after them like a man on his way to the gallows.

"Geez. What's with him?" Neville wondered.

"Nervous, I guess. I'm sure he'll be fine once he gets out there." Harry shrugged.

The crowds were in high spirits as they trooped down to the pitch, and the students of Gryffindor and Slytherin were each proudly sporting their colors. It was a brisk cool day, not a cloud in the sky--perfect weather for quidditch. Even Hermione had gotten into the spirit of things--she and Lavender were sporting red hair and Parvati gold, while the boys had their faces painted to show their support.

The tension in the stands rocketed when Ron took his place in front of the goals. He seemed a bit wobbly on his broom, and still looked ready to faint or puke at a moment's notice. He seemed to pull himself together somewhat as the game started, and managed to --just barely--block a Slytherin goal. That seemed to help his confidence somewhat, but then he missed the next one. Angelina shot passed and shouted at him. He blocked another, and then missed a second shot that came right on its heels. They were tied 20-20. Ron was sweating now, and perched uncomfortably on his broom, shoulders hunched as the Gryffindor stands howled.

Gryffindor scored again, and he relaxed somewhat, and then missed another goal by Slytherin. Gryffindor scored again, then again. Then Slytherin. Ron started looking pasty again. The Slytherin chasers, sensing weakness started pushing for all they were worth, and managed three more shots in quick succession. Ron blocked one by the edge of his fingertips and let the other two in. It was now 50-70. Ron's face was white, and he sat tense and uncomfortable as the game continued.

Gryffindor scored, and then Slytherin pushed it and managed two more goals. 60-90. Ron was looking green again. Ginny was searching, but there was no sign of the snitch. He was so busy watching his sister, hopeful the game would end soon, he completely missed the next goal that got through. Angelina howled in rage, and the twins did a quick flyby to snarl at him to stay focused. He blocked the next goal and Gryffindor scored again. 70-100. Gryffindor scored once more, and then the Slytherin chasers came by for another barrage. Slytherin scored, Gryffindor got the quaffle, then Slytherin stole it back due to some quick work by their beaters. Slytherin scored again.

Ron was sweating so heavily now he could barely see. Gryffindor took possession of the quaffle, and some quick teamwork by Slytherin got it back in their possession. They scored again. 80-130.
Ginny suddenly went into a dive and Draco quickly took off after her. While they were racing across the field in pursuit of the snitch, Slytherin scored twice more. It was 80-150. If Draco got the snitch it was all over. The snitch disappeared without either seeker getting hold of it. Slytherin scored again. 80-140. Draco suddenly took off towards the Gryffindor goals, Ginny in hot pursuit this time. As they began chasing the snitch once more Slytherin scored again. Ginny suddenly rolled sideways and came up triumphant. Ron sagged into a puddle of relief on his broom. It was finally over. Gryffindor won 230-140.

As the rest of the team landed to celebrate, Ron took his own sweet time joining them. Happy as he was that they'd won, he knew all too well it was no thanks to him. He'd worked, he'd practiced, he'd blown off homework and had barely paid attention in classes… and yet when the moment had come, he'd choked.

"You can say thank you now." Ginny quipped with a smug smile. Ron just glowered at her and trudged towards the locker room.

Ron stayed in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, brooding and nursing a butterbeer while the 'hooray for Gryffindor' party raged all around him. The twins and Ginny were right in the center of things, prancing around, telling jokes and accepting their accolades, while the three chasers sat nearby, also near the center, basking in another win. Ron's roommates left him to it for a bit, but finally decided they needed to try and cheer him up before too long, or they'd be stuck listening to him whining and being a git for the next week.

"Here. Don't let Hermione see." Seamus whispered as he handed over a shot of firewhiskey. "Good for what ails ya."

Dean and Harry waited till he knocked it back and both hit him with a cheering charm.

"You don't think he's going to end up getting one of those drooling dog things if we keep pulling stuff like this, do you?" Neville whispered.

"Drooling dog things?" Dean laughed. "I have no idea what the bloody hell you're on about mate."

"Are you talking about Pavlov's dogs?" Harry inquired.

"I think so?"

"Hmm. You make a good point, actually. Note to self, don't mix cheering charms and alcohol on Ron anymore. He's a bit of a drooling dog already-- no need to help that along."

Dean cracked up and knocked back his own shot. The shot glasses and the bottle of firewhiskey vanished from sight as Hermione came by.

"Guy talk" Seamus, Dean, Harry and Neville all chorused.

Hermione sniffed and stalked off with her nose in the air. Once she was settled on the other side of the room, everyone held out their glasses for refills, which Seamus readily supplied.

"Alright man, why are you sitting off here alone being emo-man?" Seamus asked.

"You saw the game. I suck."

"Well, yeah, you did kinda." Dean agreed.
"What? You bastard!"

"What happened out there? You can't completely suck or you never would have made the team." Neville wondered.

Ron sagged back into his seat, his momentary rage spent. "It was everyone looking at me."

"You're kidding, right? You were in a chess tournament this summer. You've had crowds watching you before. It didn't bother you then." Harry objected.

"I usually had my back to them, and there was a silencing ward up. It was easy to forget anyone was watching me."

"Okay, I get that."

"You're going to have to work past this man." Dean shook his head.

"Everyone's watching the chasers and the seekers anyway. Just keep that in mind and keep your mind on the game, not the crowd." Neville offered.

"Easy to say."

"Come on, mate. What's the big deal, really? Even if you do completely suck--which you don't, in the grand scheme of things it doesn't really matter." Harry tried.

"Of course it matters! I want to be a Chudley Cannon!"

"Ron…the Cannons are the bottom of the league, and have been for years now. Even if you completely suck, you're probably still better than their keeper."

Ron downed another shot and grew thoughtful.

"That's actually true. I can actually stay on my broom the whole game."

"There you go. No need for worrying." Seamus said cheerfully.

"I can't believe it's Halloween already." Hermione mused.

"Time flies when you're swamped with work, I guess." Harry laughed.

"What's the puppet show going to be this year?" Ginny asked curiously from nearby.

"Strawberry Dwarves: a drama in three acts." Neville offered.

"That's exploitation! I can't believe you would all be so mean to the poor little dwarves!" Hermione huffed in outrage.

"What? It has a happy ending. There's even a big song and dance number for the finale." Neville defended himself.

"Ugh!" Hermione huffed, before stomping off.

"These are the kind of days I like--Hogsmeade in the morning, feast and a puppet show in the evening. Every school day should be like that." Ron said expansively.
"Wouldn't you get bored just playing around all the time?" Harry wondered.

"Are you mad? That sounds like a perfect life to me."

"Not me. Hogsmeade is only such a big deal because we can't just go there whenever we want. If we could, we probably would rarely go. As much as I complain about all the homework, I'd rather be doing something productive with my time."

"Well, you're daft."

"Yeah, thanks Ron."

"You're welcome."

Later, as they were clambering into the carriages to take them down to the village, Neville picked up their earlier conversation.

"You know, I totally agree about Hogsmeade. Remember how excited we all were third year? We're only fifth years now, and we've already seen it all. It really isn't such a big deal anymore. By the time we're seventh years, we might just skip Hogsmeade weekends altogether, unless we have a particular reason to go."

"I wouldn't go that far. It's still nice to get out for a bit." Harry objected.

"But you get what I mean."

"Yeah. It's sort of depressing, isn't it? Everything's become so commonplace." Hermione sighed.

"We're too young to be so jaded." Neville agreed.

"It's our age. My mum always said fifteen was a 'stupid in-between time'. I never really understood what she meant till now--we're not kids, but we're not adults either, so we're stuck at something in-between." Hannah mused.

"I'm sixteen" Hermione and Harry said together.

Ginny frowned and crossed her arms. She was only fourteen.

"Looks like we're here."

"Oh, crap."

"What?"

"My parents are here." Neville hissed before ducking behind the carriage. Harry and the others smiled and waved awkwardly when the Longbottoms glanced their way, and tried to casually sidle together to hide Neville from view.

"What do I do?"

"What do you want to do? Say the word and you can hightail it out of here." Harry offered.

"Neville, they've come all this way. The least you can do is hear what they have to say." Hannah chided.
"They think you're a duffer."

"Well, I think they're stupid Gryffindorks. Maybe the Hufflepuffs they knew were, or more likely, they never took the time to get to know any of them and didn't know any better. They're your parents, and you're going to be a big brother soon. If not now, when will you really have the chance to make things right?"

Neville sighed and slowly straightened from where he was crouched behind the carriage. "You'll go with me?"

"I'll be right there the whole time." Hannah promised. Neville sighed and took Hannah's hand. "I'll see you all later?"

"Yeah. Good luck, mate."

Frank and Alice embraced Neville when he got close to them. Hannah waited nearby with a small smile on her face. When they separated, all three looked slightly misty-eyed. The four of them left together right after, headed in the direction of the Hogshead.

"Why are they going there, I wonder?" Hermione asked.

"It's usually not crowded, not like the Three Broomsticks. It also has private rooms. It probably seemed the best bet. It's not like Hogsmeade is overrun with options." Ron shrugged.

"So, I guess it's just the four of us. Where to?" Ginny said brightly.

"Let's go to that Madame Puddifoot's place. I could go for some of those little pastries." Ron decided.

Harry balked at the idea. All last year he'd gone there every Hogsmeade weekend with Tom. He was still smarting from how their relationship, for lack of a better word, had so suddenly imploded. He had been happy this summer. He still missed the feel of Tom sleeping next to him. He missed talking to him, and just having him there. He wanted to kiss him again.

"I'd rather not."

"Oh, come on. I think it sounds like a good idea. It is a bit nippy. Some hot chocolate would be just the thing."

"I could use some coffee. I'm not quite awake yet."

"Still?"

"I didn't sleep well last night for some reason."

"Looks like you're outvoted. Honestly, what's the problem? You like that place."

Ginny and Hermione each grabbed one of his arms and drug him along. Harry sighed and let them. He didn't want to put up too big a fuss, because they'd want to know why. The only one he'd really talked about Tom to was Luna. He didn't want to rehash the whole sordid, depressing story again, especially not to the these three. They were all a bit tactless, not very sympathetic, and knowing Hermione, would want to psychoanalyze the whole thing. No thank you. The very idea made him shudder.
The place was just the same--frilly and overdone, filled with amorous couples sucking each other's faces off. The table he and Tom usually sat at was empty. He saw the others about to head that way, and so he made a beeline for the nearest open booth and slid in. The other three exchanged a glance and followed him. Ron shifted uncomfortably after he was seated. The booths were a bit narrow, and they were all right on top of one another.

"Maybe we should take a table."

"Yeah, this is too small."

Harry forcefully jabbed his wand at the benches and then the table and enlarged them slightly. "It's fine. Stay where you are."

Madame Puddifoot came to take their orders.

"I'll have a hot chocolate and some of those little pastries." Ron decided.

"I'll have coffee and the tiramisu." Ginny added.

"Harry? Do you want to split a tea for two?"

Harry's stomach churned at yet another reminder of happier times. "I'm not really in the mood for tea. I'll just have a hot chocolate."

"You can get a personal pot of tea dear and a pastry of your choice."

"Darjeeling and a slice of pound cake then." Hermione decided.

"Aren't you getting anything else, mate?"

"I'm not really in the mood."

"What's with you anyway? You're acting very strangely." Hermione asked suspiciously.

"What's so strange? I don't want any cake, so what?"

"You've been acting oddly since we got here." Ron agreed with her.

"You're imagining things."

"Give it a rest, would you. Hey did any of you hear about Romilda Vane and Theo Nott?" Ginny interjected.

"No, what about them?" Harry asked, eager to get off the subject.

"They broke up. She was seeing Cormac McLagen behind his back."

"She's an idiot then. Cormac's a jerk." Hermione scoffed.

"Oi! McLagen is a Gryffindor. She's better off keeping to her own kind." Ron spluttered.

"Theo's worth ten of McLagen. If she can't see that, he's better off without her." Harry disagreed.

Ginny slanted a sideways look at Harry to gauge his expression when she unloaded her next piece of gossip. "Cho and Cedric broke up too."

All Harry did was frown perplexedly. Ginny smiled to herself.
"They did? Why?"

"Cho's family has fairy blood. They didn't like the idea that she was dating the son of a fairy killer. They arranged a match between her and one of her cousins that's ten years her senior."

"That's crazy. Cedric is not his father. So that's it then? They're done?"

"Yep. Apparently Cho has been depressed and keeps crying all the time. Gem--Jemima Vance--was telling me about it. She said it was very tiresome. Cedric has just been wandering around looking stoic and not eating much."

"That's so sad." Hermione sympathized.

"They should elope if they're that broken up about it. Her family can't marry her off to her cousin if she's already married." Harry mused.

"She'll get disowned."

"It might be for the best if they're so bent on making her miserable."

"Cho's got a pretty large family. They could make life really difficult for them." Ginny disagreed.

"Cho's on the board of the corporation. Her dividends are being held in trust by Gringott's until she's of age. Her family can't touch it. She'll have an income of sorts regardless of what her family does. Cedric's solid. I'm sure we could find him a job at N.W.E. if they try to block him from finding employment elsewhere. They could get a house on the little island--I think they called it Tir nan Og. They'd be fine. In fact, I'll make a point to mention all that to Cedric the next time I see him."

"Arranged marriages are so medieval." Hermione grumbled.

"A lot of folks still do things that way. It's an accepted practice."

"It's still medieval. I want to choose who I marry. Everyone should have the right to--after all, it's you who has to live with the person, not your parents."

"I agree, but it isn't necessarily a bad thing. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were an arranged match and they're very happy together. Millicent and Vince were betrothed by their parents when they were young, and they're happy enough with it. I guess it just depends on the people involved and the timing."

"Our parents don't hold with that, thank goodness. They married who they wanted to." Ron noted.

"My parents obviously did as well. My mum was muggleborn--her mum was hardly hanging out with any pureblood matrons arranging a match for her."

"And a good thing too. I'm glad to see not everyone is stuck in the dark ages." Hermione sniffed.

"You're starting to sound like that lot from MODERN. Face it, Hermione, arranged marriages were pretty common in most parts of the world for a good portion of history. They're common in this world as well, depending on where you go. Fire Lord Zuko was engaged to a girl when they were both kids. Somewhere between then and now it turned into a love match, so they're pretty content overall. I know my friend Toph is worried about her parents arranging something for her--she's not a fan of the idea, wants no part of it. From what I saw, the water tribes don't really arrange marriages, but the family does have to give their approval. The Air Nomads were all monks and
nuns and lived separately except for festivals every few years where they got together long enough to produce children and went their separate ways again. They didn't get married at all."

"Ugh. Bunch of nutters." Ron grumbled.

"Seriously. Imagine only having sex once every few years. I think I'd combust." Ginny scoffed. Ron's face started turning a dangerous red.

"Something you want to share, Gin?"

"Let's talk about something else. All this talk of marriage is depressing." Hermione interjected.

"Ginny?"

"Geez, would you relax. It's all theoretical, but I have to imagine I would." Ginny sniped.

"I would certainly hope so. You're far too young to be carrying on like that." Hermione agreed primly.

"Damn straight, she is."

"You're only a year older than I am, Ron. You're one to talk."

"We're not talking about me, we're talking about you."

"Um, guys? If you want to air your dirty laundry, please do it elsewhere, and when I'm not there." Harry interjected.

"What does she mean, you're one to talk?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Rebekka likes to share." Ginny said airily. "I had to remind her he was my brother and I really didn't want to know any of that."

Hermione's face went white, but she was spared any comment by the arrival of Madame Puddifoot with their order.

Ron and Ginny tore into their orders and continued sniping at one another. Hermione huddled into a little ball of misery over her tea and pushed her pound cake away. Harry sipped at his hot chocolate without enthusiasm. He had known coming here was a bad idea, and now he was trapped against the wall, so he couldn't even leave. He should have just stayed back at the castle.

They didn't see Neville until after they'd all returned that evening.

"Hey, Nev…so? How'd it go?"

Neville smiled and shrugged. "It was okay. We had a long talk. It seems my parents have spent the last several weeks watching memories of me growing up, and of different people they knew and stuff that happened since the war. They've been playing catch up. They've also been talking to someone, a mind healer or something. They said it's helped a lot. They've been trying to reconnect with the world a bit. Obviously everything isn't perfect, but…it might get better. It's just frustrating, you know, being off at school like this. I'd love to be able to just spend some time with them and try to fix things, but I can't really do that while I'm here"
"Maybe you should make a set of mirrors."

"Mirrors? You mean like you used to have?"

"Yeah. They really helped a lot. I used to use them most every night, even if only for a short time. It lets you see each other face to face while you're talking. Sirius and I didn't get to know each other too well before it was time for me to start school, and then we didn't see each other again until the Christmas hols that year. He gave me the mirrors, and so I was able to talk to him all the time. It could help. You could call them each night or every few nights at a set time, and spend ten or fifteen minutes talking about your days. It would let you be part of each other's lives in a way you couldn't be otherwise. The phones are great, but for something like this, face to face would probably work better, don't you think?"

"Yeah. It's worth thinking about."

"How'd they get on with Hannah?" Hermione wondered.

"Awkwardly, but I think they've started to warm up to her."

The dinner dishes vanished and Neville jumped to his feet. "Oh geez, I gotta get going. I need to help set up."

As had become custom on Halloween, while the puppeteer brigade was setting up, the students moved to the edge of the room so the house tables could be gotten rid of and rows of chairs be put in their place. The lights dimmed and then brightened on an empty field with a small shack in the foreground and a backdrop painted to look like a strawberry farm. A puppet stepped out onto the stage. He was dressed in black and had an evil-goatee. He took center stage and began to sing about how he'd just inherited the strawberry farm from his ailing uncle, but knew nothing of farming. After lamenting for a while, he came up with a dastardly scheme to enslave a nearby enclave of dwarves to run the place for him. The lights dropped as he threw back his head and laughed evilly.

When the lights came up again there were a dozen or so pitiful looking dwarves with hoes and other gardening implements spread across the stage and hard at work. One of them, a particularly gnarled and wizened dwarf slowly straightened his creaking back and sang of his barely remembered youth, when he was free and worked as a stonemason. One by one the other dwarves sang similar tales of woe—detailing the harsh conditions they lived under, fellow dwarves who died while so enslaved. Many of the girls were dabbing tears of sympathy for the poor things before they were halfway done. The elderly dwarf who started the song moved to center stage and sang of freedom, echoed by the others, who sounded beyond hope of it ever happening.

The evil farm owner came back onto the stage and whipped all of them for goofing off, before waving an order form at them. He had just sold all the strawberries on the farm to a rich man in England. They needed to finish the harvest that night, and in the morning, begin the long journey to deliver them. While the evil man whipped the laboring dwarves, they struggled to harvest the strawberries…but then disaster struck! The elderly dwarf who dreamed of freedom keeled over, his poor abused body unable to take any more of the farm owner's cruelty. He died in his son's arms while making him promise to keep hoping and to one day find his freedom. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Act two opened with the dwarves struggling beneath massive crates of strawberries as they marched in line across France—you could tell where they were because the Eiffel Tower could be seen in the distance, and the shop signs all said things like "Le Shoppe". Several of the dwarves expired during the long journey—and those left to stagger on were forced to carry twice the load
they had set out with. They huddled at night around tiny fires that were not enough to warm their chilled bones, and continued their journey in the morning, too exhausted to do more than stagger along in a ragged line. At last they reached the Channel—their arduous journey was halfway done. The dwarves were terrified of the raging waters, but they had no choice but to obey the cruel slave contract they were under. They hefted their burdens and staggered into the water just as a terrible storm was approaching! The waters surged and raged, and the poor dwarves flailed and screamed in terror as they tried to hold on to their precious cargo. Several were swept under the surging waters, while begging for help or mercy. One of the dwarves—the old one's son—managed to climb on top of his crate of strawberries, and he began to sing. The other dwarves took heart and grimly climbed atop their crates as well, though several more drowned over the course of the song. They paddled grimly, all of them that survived singing a song of hope, and somehow managed to make it to the far shore. Exhausted, weary and half-drowned, the survivors hauled themselves and their cargo ashore and collapsed.

Act three opened on the dwarves, now half dead, staggering to the gates of Malfoy Manor. The gates swung open and revealed a house elf. The lands beyond looked like paradise—rolling hills, trees and flowers, albino peacocks strutting to and fro, and far in the distance, a line of caves. The dwarves huddled together and gazed on the promised land. One of the dwarves, so overcome by all his suffering, broke down and cursed the evil farm owner that had enslaved them and swore to never return. The other dwarves gasped and cowered—the cruel slavery they labored under would surely strike down the dwarf that was so disobedient. One by one, they straightened and examined the dwarf—he was fine. The old one's son stepped forward and explained—the wording of the contract was such, that they were now free. He burst into song, and the others joined in. Arm in arm, they danced onto the grounds to make a new life for themselves in the distant caves.

As the lights came up Harry and Ron straightened from where they had been slumped down in their seats, wiping tears from their eyes and laughing.

"I don't believe you two! You're awful! How could you laugh at their suffering!"

"I couldn't help it!" Ron defended himself.

"Yeah Hermione, give it a rest! After the sixth or seventh time one of the dwarves started on about how bloody miserable they all were, it was like I just reached misery overload, you know?"

"Yeah. I just started laughing and couldn't stop. It didn't help that Harry was laughing too."

"I still say you're both awful. Those poor little dwarves!"

"It did get to be a bit much." Ginny agreed, wiping tears of mirth from her own eyes.

"You were laughing too?!"

"Once these two started, I couldn't help it!"

It wasn't until they had all gotten to their dorm that night that Harry finally had a chance to ask the question he'd been wanting to ask all day. He was sensitive enough to not ask while Hermione was around—he had no similar compunction about hiding his question from the rest of the boys in the dorm.

"So…you shagged Rebekka?"

Seamus' bottle of nightcap whiskey fell right out of his hand. Luckily, it was spelled to be
unbreakable, and so just bounced and clattered and made a bit of a racket. Neville tripped over his shoes as he was coming out of the bathroom. Dean sank down on his bed, stunned. Harry could well understand their reactions--he'd had a similar reaction of shock, though as he'd been sitting down at the time it hadn't been as noticeable. He was pretty sure they all agreed Ron had been voted least likely to lose his virginity any time soon. The idea that he might have ended up being the first didn't sit well with any of them.

Ron's face turned bright red and his eyes bugged out. "W-what! Blimey! I wish!"

Harry frowned in real confusion. "What about what Ginny said earlier? If you didn't shag her, what the heck was she talking about?"

"I kissed her! Bloody hell."

"Uh, mate? That's not such a big deal. Heck, Ginny's done as much--people have seen her. She seems very enthusiastic about it."

Ron glowered and threw a pillow at him. "Don't remind me."

"So? What the heck was she talking about?"

"She was wearing a bikini at the time! When I put my hands on her waist I was touching skin." Ron bragged as he stretched and put his hands behind his head.

The other boys all relaxed--the world was back on kilter.

"You're a stud, man." Dean assured him.

"I know." Ron chortled.

Hermione was still noticeably down come morning. She, Neville and Harry, the early risers in the house, were at the table alone for the moment, as they were for the first third of breakfast most mornings.

"Still bummed about Ron, huh?"

Hermione lifted startled eyes to Harry's face and made an admirable attempt at playing dumb. "I don't know what you mean. Ron seems happy, why wouldn't I be happy for him?"

"If it's any consolation, he didn't sleep with her."

"I'm sure that's none of my business one way or another." she replied, obviously disbelieving.

"Ron can't even say 'scarlet woman' without blushing. In retrospect, I should have realized as much, regardless of how Ginny's words made it sound. He would have been strutting all over the castle and would have been hell to live with. We all would have known--me especially, as he was staying with me during the week he was running around with her during the tournament."

A little of the tension leaked out of her and she brightened noticeably, even offering up a wry smile. "That's true, isn't it? Ron is many things, but subtle isn't one of them." Just as quickly her cheer faded and she went back to pushing the eggs around on her plate. "It doesn't really matter though, does it?"

"I take it you and Viktor are quits?"
Hermione sighed and nodded. "I have three years of school left, and he'll be travelling around being Mr. famous quidditch star. Even in the summers we couldn't really see each other--I'm tied up with N.W.E for the next eight years at least. I was very fond of him--he's sweet, and much more intelligent than anyone really gives him credit for, not that anyone seems to care about that, so long as he can fly a broom and catch the snitch. It was nice, and I'll always have a bit of a soft spot in my heart for him, but it wasn't a forever love--not for me, not for him either."

"And Ron is?" Harry asked, his voice skeptical though he tried to make it not so. Even Neville looked at her a bit askance.

"No offense against Ron, or you either for that matter…but are you sure about that?"

"I didn't say it was. I didn't say anything!" Hermione protested, her cheeks pink. "And well, I don't know do I? And even if I thought it could be, at the moment it means nothing, does it?"

"Well, that's true. So long as Rebekka is in the picture, it really doesn't…of course, an established relationship has never been a bar before has it?"

Hermione stared at him, perplexed, and then realized he was referencing her helping Ginny send cursed hate mail to Cho so they'd break up, if the glint in his eye was any indication. She glowered at him--pouted, if she were honest.

"Why do you keep bringing that up? It was ages ago…and it was for the best, anyway. She was all wrong for you, and she's in an arranged marriage. It wouldn't have worked out."

"It was hardly your decision to make, Ginny's either." Harry bit out. "But we're getting off the subject. I'm just saying I'm surprised--apparently established relationships are no bar…except when it's Ron, who you're after. Which makes no sense to me."

Hermione sighed and gave her eggs a particularly vicious poke. "I was just helping out a friend. It would be more truthful to say established relationships are no bar to Ginny. I actually felt rather bad about what we did, alright? While it's true it would be easier in this case--I wouldn't have to actually watch her get hexed, since she's at another school, it just feels sort of cheap. Viciously hexing your rivals is not the path to true love, not in my book."

"Not mine either. Truthfully, it was a very bad move on Ginny's part. I tended to avoid her because she was a fan girl--she didn't know me, she had some mythical dark-lord slaying hero built up in her mind long before she ever met me. If she had grown out of that, who knows? However, her hex-happy ways kind of soured me on the prospect. I now look at Cho as a fond memory, and like you with Viktor, I'll always have a soft spot for her…but at the time, I was very, very upset about how things ended. Hurting Cho in no way, shape or form endeared Ginny to me. Quite the opposite in fact. Ron strikes me as a guy who might actually be flattered by such a vicious ploy for his attention, but there's no real guarantee of that. If he cares about Rebekka at all, hurting her will only tarnish you in his eyes, possibly forever."

"It's not worth it anyway, I mean, think about it--they only knew each other for a week, and then they'll be separated for the whole year while they're each at school. It's hardly a recipe for a lasting relationship, is it? They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but they also say 'out of sight, out of mind'. A week long fling is more likely to be the second than the first." Neville added.

Hermione mustered a genuine smile this time. "That's true, isn't it? I know from experience that long-distance relationships don't really work, and Viktor and I spent a lot longer together than a week before we were separated." Looking considerably cheered, she finally started eating her breakfast instead of pushing it around on her plate. Their conversation was concluded just in time.
The ambient noise in the great hall quadrupled as the rest of the student body began trickling down to join them.

Ron sat down next to Hermione, grunted in everyone's general direction as he began loading food on his plate. Harry and Neville looked at Ron, who was inhaling everything like a vacuum cleaner, and then at Hermione, who ate like a bird and already had her nose stuck in a book, and shook their heads, mystified. They had little in common, they fought like cats and dogs, and Hermione often seemed honestly disgusted by his appetite and his manners, while Ron often seemed to think she was nuts. It made no sense to them at all that Hermione was hung up on Ron.

The morning mail arrived shortly after the bulk of the students arrived. Mail service had been a bit spotty at first, until a 'gateway' of sorts was put up to shunt the owls from Hogwarts to the peninsula in short order. Now that the gateway was up and functioning, the morning mail arrived like clockwork once again.

Harry took his paper, and relieved Hedwig of a letter. Inside he found a photo of baby Regulus sitting up by himself, along with baby Eri and baby Drusilla. Reg was happily chewing on a stuffed piglet, but then it floated to Drusilla who gurgled happily. Reg started crying and Eri's hair went from black, like the other's to white when she became startled by his wails.

"Bloody hell!" Ron suddenly exclaimed. "I'm going to the world championship! Junior division, but still! The prize is two hundred and fifty galleons! Rebekka's dad must have set it up--he's the world champion you know. I impressed him, looks like. I guess I can stop worrying about whether or not she's still my girl. I need to write to mum and let her know I won't be home for the holidays."

Beaming ear to ear, Ron inhaled the last of his breakfast and hurried off, letter still clutched in his fist.

Hermione, who had been cheerful before his announcement, slumped in place like the world had just ended.
"I can't believe the term is over already. Where'd the time go?" Dean wondered.
"I know. Time flies."
"So, Ron, are you excited about the tournament?" Neville wondered.
"Sure am. It should be pretty cool, not to mention I'm gonna get a chance to see someplace new. The tournament's being held in New Russia. I can't wait. Charlie's going with me. Mum insisted someone did. She's gonna try to be there for the final round, if I make it that far--the woman should have some faith in me. Until then though it's just me and Charlie."
"I take it things must be going well with the bee-wasps?" Harry asked.
"Huh?"
"I doubt he could have gotten time off otherwise."
"Oh, yeah I guess. I didn't think to ask."
"It's going to be a busy holiday. Ron will be off at the chess tournament, we're having a fencing tournament on the island" Neville noted.
"We'll also be having several board meetings to discuss the next steps for the company and to cover what's already been rolled out. There's also going to be at least one Wizengamot meeting, and lots of parties." Harry agreed.
"Sounds fun. I'll be at headquarters working." Hermione sighed.
"There's going to be a Christmas and New Year's party, we're not slave drivers."
"Oh…well that's good at least. Still, it will be my first Christmas without my parents."
"It'll be my first with, that I can remember. We were stuck at Hogwarts last year for the Yule Ball." Neville said.
"Good luck with that. I hope it goes well."
"Me too. I think it will. The mirror thing did us all some good I think."
"Yeah, I've been breaking out mine more so I could see Reg. He's so little, I didn't want him to forget who I was. He likes the phone, but he tends to just drool all over the mouthpiece, the mirror's better where a baby is involved."
"The first movies should be opening during the holiday too, aren't they?" Parvati realized.
"Yeah, Nightfall, I haven't seen it yet. I hope it's good. Let me know, would you? I don't know if I'm going to get a chance to go see it." Harry replied, adding the last bit to Hermione.

"What makes you think I will?" Hermione demanded.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Barty arranged a movie night for the first weekend. You'll get a chance to see it at headquarters."

Hermione grinned excitedly--she couldn't even remember the last time she'd gotten to see a movie. "I'll let you know then."

"It looks like we're here."

While milling around on the platform to find their respective families, Neville spotted Cho and Cedric and nudged Harry. They were staring into each other's eyes over a distance of several feet. A bubble of silence seemed to surround them both. Cedric's jaw tightened and he turned away with obvious effort, looking grim and tragic. Cho's eyes welled with tears and her breath hitched in her throat, though she tried to muster up a brave little smile as she got swarmed by what was obviously her family and drug away in the opposite direction.

"Did you ever talk to Cedric?"

"No, I didn't. Honestly when I said that, I sort of assumed I wouldn't have to say anything. By the look of it, I was wrong. It seems Cho is just going to go along with it, and Cedric isn't going to do a thing to stop her. I know they love the drama, but come on."

"When's Cho's birthday?"

"Early February."

"Well, at the moment then, she doesn't have much choice in the matter. Until she's seventeen, she can't get married without her parent's permission, and if she tries to run away her parents have the right to hunt her down and drag her back if they choose to, and anyone harboring her against her parent's will can be arrested."

"So I guess we wait for February and I'll have a talk with Cedric then."

"Why not with Cho?"

"I have a feeling she'll jump on it if Cedric asks her to run away with him--the problem is Cedric--he's the one turning away. It's just stupid, really. They're both miserable."

"Maybe he's waiting till she's seventeen?"

"Maybe. I guess we'll see. You don't think her family's going to hold a wedding over the holiday, do you? Just to preempt any elopement?"

"I dunno. Probably not. If she was already out of school, I could see them trying to pull that. She's still got a year and a half of school to go--they're all Ravenclaws, so they're not going to pull her out, and I doubt her fiancé would want a wife he's not going to see for at least a year and a half. I guess it's all down to how determined they are, and how obedient they assume Cho is."
Hermione unlocked her door and stepped inside. Her room was just as she'd left it, albeit a bit dustier. She busied herself cleaning up and vanishing dust, thanking the house elf that popped in with clean sheets and blankets for the bed. A few flicks of her wand had the bed made and her trunk unpacked. It was a comforting, though somewhat melancholy homecoming. With difficulty she shook off her gloom and headed down the hall to the interns lounge. There was a small tree in the corner, and the place had been decorated for the holidays. There was a notice for a secret Santa drawing before Christmas, and an itinerary for the New Year's party they would be hosting. She and the other interns would be leading tours through the building for any of the guests that were interested, but otherwise were free to enjoy the party along with everyone else. The Christmas party was just for them. There were also notices about the upcoming movie nights, and their schedules for the rest of the time they'd be there. It looked like they'd be packaging and preparing the food shipments that would be going out to Ba Sing Se and Fire Nation each month over the winter. Not very exciting, but it needed to be done, and at least it would make the time go by faster.

When she looked around, she realized she wasn't the only one feeling a bit melancholy.

"It's strange, isn't it? This will be my first Christmas without my parents." Hermione blushed when she realized she'd spoken out loud. The others around the table stiffened momentarily--they'd all been thinking much the same thing. It was a little easier, knowing that all of them there were in the same boat.

"My mum always made gingerbread on Christmas eve."

"We always went caroling every year."

"My family used to take down our stockings on Christmas eve. They were usually filled with fruit and nuts and something small that we wanted. I got a necklace one year, a matching bracelet the next, and earrings the year after. My brother..." she trailed off as her voice got thick before continuing "He liked collecting toy cars. He especially liked the vintage ones. He got a new one each year. My grandpa made him a cabinet filled with little cubbies to display them in. He had it hanging on the wall. He'd just filled the last cubby in it last year."

"We always had roast goose with all the trimmings, plum pudding… one of our neighbors used to joke that our Christmas dinners were like something out of "A Christmas Carol."

"My parents and I used to open one gift Christmas eve. That was our celebration. We either had all the relatives over Christmas day or went to one of their houses."

"You're all lucky. My dad used to get drunk over the whole holidays. I don't think a one went by without him and his brothers getting into a brawl and smashed the place up."

"That happened a lot at my house too, only it was mum and her sisters fighting with my grandparents."

"Holidays were always difficult after I started Hogwarts. My relatives were all really nosy and would ask all kinds of questions, and my mum would get flustered and try to answer and then change the subject, which of course just made everyone more nosy. I think most of my relatives were convinced I was at a reform school or something. My parents started fighting a lot. My dad eventually left. It was just me and mum for a while. She died the year before last. Car accident. I haven't seen dad in years. If we had any family traditions, I don't remember them."

"We should make new ones." Hermione spoke up quietly. "Let's face it--we're all orphans, and
we're going to be together for the foreseeable future, right? It's not the same, we can't replace what we've lost to each other…but we can make something new. We can make our own traditions."

"We could."

"Secret santa and movie night are a good start."

"We can come up with the rest as we go along."

The interns exchanged tentative smiles around the table before digging in to their dinner.

"You've been quiet, son."

"I don't have anything to say."

"Oh, come now, I'm sure that's not true. It's your seventh year, NEWTs will be on you before you know it. I remember when I was your age...adulthood seemed to come on too fast, for all that we'd all been wishing for it for years by that point. Suddenly it was there and everyone was all in a tizzy, worrying about what they were going to do next, friends were getting engaged left and right..." she trailed off when Cedric let out a sob and covered his face.

"Darling! What is it? Are you hurt? Are you ill? Talk to me!"

Cedric pushed her away roughly and pushed himself to his feet. He began pacing and raking his hands through his hair.

"Darling, what is it?" she repeated.

"Cho is engaged."

"You've gotten engaged?! Why..."

"No, mother, Cho is engaged, and not to me. Her family stepped in and forced her to break things off. They want something better for their only daughter than to tie her fortunes to the son of a murderer!"

Pam's shoulders slumped and she looked at her son helplessly. "Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry. I know it's been hard, but it will get better."

"HA!" Cedric shouted bitterly. "Sure, mother. Unlike you, I don't have another name to take. Did you think I wouldn't notice all the letters on your desk are now addressed to Pamela Plummer? You've left me to carry father's legacy alone. I can't just change who I am!"

Pam sighed and took a seat. "I'm sorry son. I guess I didn't think of how it would feel to you. I wasn't thinking anything like that, believe me, and it really hasn't changed anything. It isn't like everyone forgot whose wife I was just because I took back my maiden name. After he died... I did it for me. I knew your father didn't hold any great love for fairies, but I never imagined it went so far. I kept wondering, if I didn't know about any of that, what else didn't I know about? I took back my name in an attempt to keep my sanity and my sense of self after the whole world went topsy-turvy on me. You at least can hold on to most of your memories of your father and know that for all his faults he loved you and was genuinely proud of you. You were the apple of his eye from the
moment you were born. For me...he was my husband for twenty years and I find I didn't know him at all. I felt like my entire life had been a sham."

Cedric sank down into a seat across from her. "Did it help?"

"Like I said, not much. I still get pointed at and whispered at when I walk down the street. Mostly, it's just helped me remember that I existed as a person before I married your father, and the end of our marriage doesn't mean the end of me."

"I wish I could do the same."

"Be strong, love. For all that this has been an ordeal for both of us, it has shown us who our true friends are, and we both have far more than either of us realized. The whisperers don't matter, not really, even if it's hard to bear up under the scrutiny. It will pass and those people will point and whisper at someone else, and we'll be able to put this part of our lives behind us. It will just take time."

"Well, that doesn't really help, does it? Cho is still engaged to someone that isn't me."

"And she still has a year and a half of school to go. Don't give up so easily dear. Until she's married, anything can happen. You may realize that she's not the one, you know. You're young yet. If that turns out to be the case, well, it will hurt now, but eventually you'll be able to look back on her as a fond memory of your youth. There may be someone else waiting just around the corner— you just have to leave yourself open to the possibilities."

Cedric looked at his mother suspiciously. "Mother...do you have something to tell me?"

Pam blushed like a schoolgirl and fidgeted with the ends of her sleeves.

"Mother?"

"I might have...started dating again." she replied in a rush.

"WHAT!"

"Cedric, please calm down."

"Mother! What...how!"

"Cedric, please. I'm a widow, not dead. He's a very nice man, and I'm sure you'll like him. I'm not going to introduce the two of you just yet. We've only gone out on two dates, so it's not serious or anything. If it becomes so, I will certainly introduce you. Just try to be happy for me, would you?"

Cedric just stared at her for a long time. It was too much on top of everything else.

"I'm going to bed. Excuse me."

Pam sat alone in the dining room for some time after her son left in a huff. After an hour, she stirred herself to start clearing the table.

"RAAAH!"
Baby Regulus squealed as Harry lifted him up into the air again. They had spent most of the morning and afternoon decorating the tree and the rest of the house for the holidays. Once they were finished Harry decided he'd best get reacquainted with his 'little brother', which led them to where they were now. Harry was laying on the floor a short distance from the fireplace and lifting Regulus high in the air overhead, bringing him down and buzzing his belly and then repeating. He'd been doing it for about a half hour now and Regulus still thought it was the greatest thing ever. Babies, it seemed, were easily amused.

Regulus gurgled and kicked his feet as he lifted him up again and a line of drool escaped his mouth to pool on Harry's chest. Suddenly a terrible odor filled the air as Harry pulled him close to buzz his belly again. Harry grimaced, rolled to his feet and presented the baby to Adeline with a smile. "I think he's had about enough. He's all yours!"

Adeline raised an eyebrow and sniffed as she took the baby from him. She gave him a dirty look and shook her head, muttering 'men!' under her breath as she took him off to change him. "He'll go willingly to get his head chopped off but balks at a dirty diaper!"

"We all have our limits. I can deal with drool, dirty diapers are just too much."

Sirius snickered from behind the newspaper he was reading. "Sounds perfectly reasonable to me."

Adeline growled as she left the room.

"So, where's your buddy?"

"Huh?"

"Tom. I don't remember him taking this long to make a nuisance of himself before."

"Oh. Him. You don't have to worry. He won't be coming around anymore."

"Oh? Well, good riddance." Sirius replied with some surprise. "Though, I guess I'm surprised to hear it."

"I don't know why. I guess he was just coming around all the time because I was familiar--we spent all that time here together. I suppose he just needed time to find his own place in the world or something. It's been what, a year and a half? He's found his own place in the world and he's getting on with his life. We'll probably be seeing an engagement announcement in the papers any day now." He'd had several months to come to terms with the abrupt end of he and Tom's relationship, but he was still proud of himself for sounding so unaffected.

"Engaged? To who?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Narcissa has been introducing him to 'pureblood girls of good family'. I suppose whichever one of them either caught his fancy, or that he finds least objectionable of the bunch."

"I see. Well, this is good news." Sirius said cheerfully.

"Yeah, wonderful." Harry echoed dully.

He felt suddenly restless. It was bad enough having the guy he was sort of falling for tell him he was tiresome and run off to marry a pureblood girl--stupid, prejudiced git--bad enough that he'd have to smile and be polite if he ever ran into the new Mrs. Riddle in public. Having his family
celebrating it on top of everything was just too much to bear on top of it.

"You know, I should go check in at my place and see how things are going. We don't have any plans today, do we?"

Sirius was studying him a little too closely for his liking. He made the effort to appear carefree and cheerful.

"No, just Remus is coming for dinner tonight. I think he's got a new girlfriend. We need to interrogate him and make sure it's not another nutter like that Burbage bird."

"I should be back in plenty of time."

Sirius watched his retreating back with troubled eyes.

Adeline returned a short while later with a clean and changed Regulus in tow. Regulus looked around hopefully for Harry, hoping they could continue their game, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Where'd Harry get to?"

"Went to check out his house."

"That was rather sudden, though I suppose it does need doing. He knows we've been checking up on things periodically, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but you know him."

"Something wrong?"

"I don't know. I asked him where Tom was and he said he wouldn't be by any longer. He seems to think he'll be getting married any day now."

"He is?"

"I don't know, but Harry seems to think so. Did they have a falling out or something?"

"I'm not sure. He spent most of the summer with us, and Harry's been at Hogwarts since then."

"He did sort of disappear at the end of the summer."

"I assumed he had responsibilities to attend to." Adeline studied her husband curiously. "If they did have a falling out, I would assume you'd be pleased. You never did take to him very well."

"I never knew what Harry saw in him, to be honest...though I suppose I'd gotten used to him by the end of the summer. He was a decent houseguest, he was always good to Reg...and I'd have to have been blind not to see how much store he set by Harry and vice versa. I may not have been particularly thrilled with it, but I wasn't actively trying to drive him off anymore. He might have been Voldemort, but he's not anymore. It took me awhile to accept that."

"If they've had a falling out, I suppose it doesn't matter anymore."

"Has Harry seemed depressed to you?"

"He's thinner than he should be, and he looks tired, but his appetite was fine and he seemed alright last night. He complained about all the homework he's been doing--seven NEWT classes are nothing to sneeze at after all. I just assumed he was worn from stress."
"Me too, but now I wonder. He suddenly decided he needed to go check on his house right after I asked about Tom. If something did happen between them…"

"That would be enough to send him running for the hills. He doesn't like attention when he's hurting."

"When I see that bastard again, I'm going to punch him right on the nose!"

"Sirius, I hardly think that will help anything!"

"It would make me feel better."

"We don't even know that he did anything--we don't know what happened at all."

"Maybe we should ask him?" Sirius suggested. "We already know getting anything out of Harry when he doesn't feel like talking is like pulling teeth."

"Or maybe we should just let them work it out themselves?"

"I don't know what the best course is. Even if I grew accustomed to his presence, he's hardly who I pictured Harry with. If he's out of the picture, Harry can find a nice girl. That's what his parents would want."

"Is it what Harry wants? I don't know and neither do you, and without knowing we can't really do anything. All we can do is try to let him know we're here if he does want to talk about it. Other than that, I guess we should stay out of things. I don't know about you, but I would have been mortified if my parents had tried to meddle too overtly in one of my teenage love affairs."

Sirius winced and nodded. "Same here. I just hate feeling helpless. It seems to be a recurring theme where Harry's concerned. He so damned independent. While it's a good thing for the most part, it does seem to leave us on the outside of his life more than I'd like."

"Ginny! Floo call!"

"Be right there!"

Ginny hurriedly checked her appearance and hurried downstairs, only to find Dean's head hovering in the fire.

"Dean! Hey, what's up?"
"Nothing much, how's your holiday going?"
"Good. It's going good. You?"
"Can't complain. Hey, I was wondering if you want to go to a Yule ball."
"Yeah, sure. Is your family holding it?"
"No, the Ministry is actually holding it."
"So it's on Christmas?"
"Christmas eve."
"Sounds good. I'll need to get something to wear…" Ginny hinted, hoping he'd offer to take her on a shopping spree.
"Yeah, me too. Well, I'll see you then, huh?"
"Yeah, see you." Ginny replied a bit sourly. What was the use of having a rich boyfriend if he didn't spend anything on her?
"Who was that, dear?"

"Dean Bonham. He invited me to the ministry ball Christmas eve."

"Oh? Well, Dean Bonham is it? Goodness." Molly said happily. "Your father and I are going as well. I suppose we can all go together...oh, but we need to get you something to wear. We don't want him setting his sights on someone else..."

"Mum, it's fine. I've got a ball gown. It's never been worn, by the look of it and it's pretty fancy."

"Where'd you get a fancy ball gown?"

"It used to belong to Bellatrix Lestrange. I had to hex a couple of girls to get ahold of it. It's red--the only red thing in her whole wardrobe, actually. I only tried in on once, and that was a while ago. It might need some alterations."

"We'd best get to it then. We want you looking your best, since you've landed such a well-to-do young man. One of your brothers, maybe Percy, would make an excellent administrator for the hospital..."

"His cousin is going to take over, mum. Besides, I don't think any of them are interested in running the hospital. Blaise is actually studying to be a healer."

"Oh." Molly sighed with disappointment. "Still, he must be quite well off. That's something at least."

That night, Ginny snuck out to go flying. Her mum practically had her married off already, and was already naming the grandchildren. She was starting to feel claustrophobic. She saw moonlight glinting on blonde hair in the distance and she grinned. Her summer fling was around doing a bit of night flying as well. She pointed her broom his way, smiling when he spotted her and immediately came to intercept her.

"Hermione Granger will be coming over later. She's going to be my date to the ball." Harry told Sirius and Adeline that morning at lunch.

"Really? I thought she got on your nerves?"

"She does sometimes, though she's gotten better since first year. She used to be a real head case about rules and was always minding everyone's business and lecturing them. She's relaxed a lot, though relaxed for her is still pretty uptight for most people."

"Why her then?"

"Because I know her, she's available, she's hung up on someone else, so no misunderstandings. Normally I probably would have asked Luna to something like this if I needed a date for it, but she's got a date already."

"Oh? Who with?"

"Rolf Scamander. Apparently it's always been understood that everyone would be quite pleased were they to get married someday. So far as her dad is concerned, in the absence of other
attachments, Rolf is her default date for public functions and vice versa.”

"What's he like?"

"I've never met him. I'll guess we'll all find out tonight."

Hermione arrived at five to give her a chance to get dressed before they all left together.

"Is that a Bellatrix dress?"

"Yes. I'm probably going to alter the color before we go though--black and green aren't really good colors for me."

"I can help you with that if you like, dear. I'll come by after I finishing dressing, and we'll see what we can do." Adeline offered.

"That would be much appreciated. It's hard to make sure you're getting it right when you're wearing what you're working on."

"I guess we should head up now."

"I'm so glad I'm not a girl. I couldn't imagine taking two hours to get ready." Harry muttered as Hermione and Adeline headed upstairs.

"Hear, hear. Drink?"

"Depends what you're offering. I don't think either of the ladies will be too impressed if I'm tipsy by the time they come back. Hermione will have a fit I've been drinking even if I'm in no way impaired. We had to make spells to vanish alcohol when she's in the vicinity at school or we'd never hear the end of it--she doesn't care if it's a party or anything."

"Your mother was the same way." Sirius grumbled. "Butterbeer sound good?"

"Sounds great."

Dean smiled nervously at the gathered Weasleys and wished the collar on his robes didn't feel like it was choking him. He didn't know what he'd been thinking, dating a girl with so many older brothers. They made a pretty intimidating picture, all lined up on the couch as they were. Mr. Weasley, normally so cheery and laid-back looked surprisingly scary as well. Ginny was for a long time the only daughter and the youngest; the new babies were still small enough that she still seemed that way sometimes in most of their minds. This was the first time a boy had come calling for Ginny and none of them were too thrilled with it. They all wanted to protect her virtue and her innocence from heartless cads that wanted to use and abuse her. They wanted to make it very clear they would accept no shenanigans on Dean's part. Dean got the message loud and clear. He was about ready to keel over from all the stress--it was a tremendous relief when Molly came down.

"Molly dear, you look lovely."

"Oh, Arthur."

"Where's Ginny?"

"She'll be down in a moment. She's just touching up her hair a bit. Oh, here she comes now."
Dean stood and turned to face the stairway. She was all in red. The tight, cinched bodice pressed her cleavage up on display, and paired with the full skirt at the bottom made her waist look tiny enough to put his two hands around without trouble. Dean took it all in at a glance and fought valiantly to keep any of what he was thinking off his face--he was all too aware of the bristling wall of overprotective menfolk surrounding him. He risked a glance at Ginny's father and found his face was white and he looked to be struggling to contain a furious eruption. To judge by the horrified rumble of whispers travelling among her brothers, they were having similar trouble. Molly, by contrast, looked pleased as anything and shared a sly grin and wink with Dean, as though to encourage any ogling he wanted to do. Dean grimaced and ran a finger around the inside of his collar. He wanted out of this house, the sooner the better.

"Ginny! Great! You look real nice. We should get going. Here, grab on to the invitation."

"YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LET HER GO OUT LIKE THAT!" the boys all howled in protest.

Fleur sighed and rubbed Bill's arm soothingly, while giving Ginny a commiserating look. She could well imagine the difficulties the younger girl had faced growing up with all of them, though she had to agree the dress was a bit too old for her.

"Gosh, look at the time. Gotta go!" Dean laughed uneasily.

"Don't wait up!" Ginny added with a grin.

"Yule Ball!" Dean squeaked as soon as she grabbed on. They both vanished in a sparkle of multi-colored light.

Arthur ran a shaking hand down his face and glared at his wife in genuine fury.

"Molly! What were you thinking! She's fourteen years old for Merlin's sake!"

"Oh, Arthur, you're overreacting! She looked lovely. You're just not ready for your little girl to grow up. Relax. Dean seems a nice boy. I'm sure he'll look after her." Molly sniffed in reply, before shoving the invitation against his hands. "Yule ball."

"Holy shit."
"Draco! How crude!" Pansy sputtered.
"Look who just came in."
"Holy shit." Pansy repeated in shock.
"See? I wasn't being crude, there just weren't words to aptly describe what I was feeling. A literal scarlet woman."
"Is she completely stupid?"
"She's fourteen, so probably. A better question would be, does being a blood traitor rot your brain? One does have to wonder, otherwise there's no real excuse for letting your underage, unmarried daughter out dressed like that. What were her parents thinking?"
"It's a gorgeous dress, and the shade of red looks surprisingly good on her, considering her hair…but yeah, the only person who could really get away with a display like that is a matron with three kids, or someone scary like Bellatrix…and you know, it was probably her dress. So…at a guess, I'd have to say they're hoping to reel in prospects the old-fashioned way since they haven't money to lure prospective suitors."
"Judging by the leers going around the room, I'd have to say they succeeded in that much."

"What are you looking at?" Harry asked as he and Hermione returned from the punch bowl. They
followed their gaze and Hermione gasped. "Oh my god. I can't believe she wore that in public at her age. It won't matter if she's pure as the driven snow, everyone will assume they know otherwise, if she's flashing her boob tops everywhere!"
"Well, given what I've heard of Mrs. Weasley when she was in school, she firmly believed that the way to a man's heart was through his..."
"Harry." Hermione warned.
"And you kept him around through his stomach." Pansy finished his thought. "I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Why that old pervert!" Pansy sneered disgustedly. "He's old enough to be her grandfather, if not her great-grandfather!"
Dean had left her alone to get punch for them both. The moment he was out of sight an older gentleman had sidled up and was now openly leering down the front of her dress. Ginny's face was slowly turning red--a danger sign for anyone who knew her.
"I can't watch this anymore." Hermione moaned.
"Me either. Care to dance?"
"Yes, please."
"That sounds like a good idea." Draco agreed.
They finished their punch off and headed for the dance floor.

"Hey Ginny. Who's your...friend?" Dean demanded as he handed her the punch he'd gone to fetch. The old man standing with Ginny kept his gaze firmly on her bosom and answered absently as though he was having trouble speaking. "Newt Scamander. Pleasure."
Dean scowled and pulled Ginny back a bit before thrusting his hand out at the old man to shake. Having his view obscured recalled the man to his surroundings and he shook his head as though waking from a daze. That's when he noticed Ginny had her wand pointed at him and a crazed look in her eye. Dean had withdrawn his hand and was how holding on to Ginny's wand arm with desperation. "Please don't kill him. I don't want to have to explain to your father and your many, many, many brothers why you ended up in prison while out on a date with me." Ginny bared her teeth and a scuffle ensued. Dean got hold of Ginny's wand and let out a shaky, relieved breath as he tucked it away in his robes for safekeeping. He winced at Ginny's frigid glare, which promised endless pain to himself for interfering. Dean winced and turned back to the pervert with a glare for starting trouble. "Wait, did you say Newt Scamander?"
"Yes."
"Fantastic beasts and where to find them?"
"Yes. My life's work."
"I love that book. It was a great help to me when we were putting together our pirate book."
"Pirate book?"
"The Marauders. A bunch of us in Gryffindor did it as first years. It's a graphic novel. I'm surprised you've never heard of it--it did pretty well locally and was even translated into other languages."
"Quite a feat for first years. A graphic novel, you say?"
"Yes, extensively illustrated with more text than a standard comic book. I was the main artist for it."
"Really? Are you any good?"
"I'm alright. Why do you ask?"
"For the last few years my son and grandson have been coming along with me on my travels, but now that we're in this new world, there's a whole world of animals out there waiting to be found and seen. My son has been doing most of the illustrating for the last few editions of my book. I'm in need of someone to take his place--we're all going in separate directions once my grandson finishes school. I don't suppose you'd be interested in a summer job?"
"Boy, would I! I've been wanting to see more of this place. I got to see around the peninsula a little bit last summer, but only a few miles in every direction from my aunt's house. Where were you
hoping to go?"
"I'd like to go to Fire Nation if possible. I was voted the best choice of the three of us. I've been doing it the longest, and from what I understand Fire Nation has been closed to the outside world for the last hundred years or so. We all decided I was the one most likely to get by without completely alienating the locals. I don't know when exactly I'll be able to do it though. Unlike the old world, we don't have the extensive governmental network to smooth over travel between various nations. I'm sure that will come with time, but we don't have it yet."
"Actually, I know a guy that could probably help you out. He's friends with the king or something."
"Really? Would this friend happen to be here tonight?"
"Yeah, he is. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Ginny watched him go with disbelief, and had to quell the urge to chuck the stupid punch cups to the floor and stalk off. She felt like an idiot standing there. Still seething she looked out over the dance floor, trying to play it casual, when she saw something that made her blood turn to ice in her veins.

It was Rolf--her summer and last-night fling. He was dancing with Luna Lovegood. They looked like a prince and princess out of a fairytale--both blonde and blue-eyed, he in white, she in silver. He escorted her around the floor like she was made of glass and infinitely precious. She could see a number of people watching the two of them with small smiles of nostalgia on their faces. Rolf looked right at her as they twirled by, but his face showed no recognition. He acted like they were complete strangers. She turned away with a frown on her face. Dean had just deserted her, the guy she'd been with last night was pretending he didn't know her. Just then Harry and Hermione went whirling by on the dance floor and her misery was complete.

"Well, hello. Shame on your date leaving a pretty thing like yourself all on her lonesome. Wanna dance?"
Ginny glanced at the speaker in surprise. He was tall, fit, older than her, and all in all pretty dishy.
"Love to."

Severus Snape sipped at his wine and took a breather from mingling. He glanced at Olympe and found her watching the dancers on the floor. He followed her gaze and spotted the Potter boy and Hermione Granger just as he dipped her. They were both giggly as he pulled her back up, and she clung to him breathlessly for a moment before they went twirling off into the crowd. A lot of the older crowd was watching them with indulgent smiles. He tensed then when he noted the dark lord's magic, which he'd been aware of filling the room, was getting a prickly edge--nothing as bad as it had been at the end of summer, where the prickles had been sharp enough to draw blood, metaphorically speaking--but bad enough. He glanced around and caught Lucius' eye and saw he'd felt it too. They both began searching the crowd for him. Snape frowned in puzzlement when he finally spotted him. He was just standing there, pretending to listen to his date to judge by the slightly bored look on his face. In fact, you could see it in his eyes that he was a million miles away. There didn't seem to be anything going on that should make his magic feel like that. It was quite irritating, actually. They'd never discovered what had set him off this summer either. A mystery, it seemed.

Ginny and the fellow, she'd found out his name was Aidan and he was a chaser for Puddlemere United, had danced a few sets. Dean, the bastard, was still chatting with that odious old man. When
the current song ended he smiled down at her. "Want some punch?"
"Sure."
He escorted her to the bowl, filled cups for both of them and then pulled her along to an out of the way spot.
"So, do you come to these things often?"
"No, this is my first one."
"It's my third. I hate these stuffy parties. I prefer my parties to actually be fun."
"I hear you." Ginny giggled.
Aidan fished a flask out of his robes and held it up. Feeling daring, she held her cup out to receive a splash of whatever was in there, before he added a healthy dollop to his own. He put away the flask, winked at her and clinked their cups together. "Bottoms up!" Ginny grinned and downed hers—the sweet punch all but disguised the alcohol so it went down smoothly. Aidan was suddenly in her personal space and she realized there was a warm hand on her hip that slid down to rub at her bottom. "Say, since we both agree this kind of thing is a bore, what do you say we head out someplace a bit more lively? Or if you like, we could head back to my place for a quiet night, sounds good doesn't it?"
"Oi! Aidan, there you are. Me and the lads are thinking of heading out. We showed up, did the rounds. That should keep the coach happy…oh, sorry mate, didn't realize you had company. Don't let this tosser smooth talk you, sweet thing…" the man trailed off in horror. "SWEET MERLIN ON A STICK!"
Oliver Wood turned on Aidan in a fury and grabbed him by the front of his robes to give him a good shake. "What the hell do you think you're doing with her?"
"What? What is it? Old girlfriend? I didn't know!"
"GIRLFRIEND!" Oliver shrieked "She's like twelve, mate! You sick bastard!"
Aidan was suddenly about four feet away and looking at Ginny like she was a poisonous plant about to bite him. "W-what! No…no way she's twelve, mate. Look at the knockers on her! Bloody hell!"
"I'm fourteen." Ginny interjected icily.
Aidan moaned and covered his face with both hands. "You think that's better!" he hissed. "What's your problem, little girl? Are you trying to get me arrested?"
"No harm done, right? Right?" Oliver demanded.
"We just got here." Aidan assured him.
"Meet up with the lads. I'll take pretty poison here back to her folks and meet up with you."
"Thanks, mate. You're a lifesaver." Aidan said fervently before hurrying off.
Once Aidan was clear, Oliver scowled at Ginny and removed his outer robe, stuffed her into it and buttoned it up, paying no mind to her shrieking protest. Once she was covered, he grabbed her arm and marched her to her parents.
"Oliver? What…Ginny?"
Oliver shook his head at both of them and planted her between them. "I don't know what you're playing at, you two. You need to keep this one corralled." He glowered at Ginny one last time and shook an admonishing finger under her nose. "You're a kid. Dress like one, and bloody well act like one. I might not always be around to rescue you from lecherous men and dark corners!" Having said his piece he nodded and took off to meet up with his teammates.

"Hey Dean, everything alright?"
Dean flopped down into his seat, sighed at the empty seat next to him and leaned back tiredly in his chair.
"Where's Ginny at?"
"According to her brother, her parents made it an early night and took her home. I only left her for like fifteen minutes! Granted, I was gone longer than I meant to be, but still!"
"What happened?"
"She picked up a Puddlemere United chaser and was off canoodling with him in a corner somewhere. I mean, seriously, what the hell!"
"It's what she does. She did the same thing to me at the Yule Ball. She ran off with Michael Corner in the middle of it." Harry shrugged.
"I'd run for the hills if I were you." Draco spoke up. "There's plenty of girls out there."
"Tracy isn't seeing anyone at the moment." Pansy added. "You'd probably have much more in common with her. She's an artist, she's a halfblood that grew up in the muggle world. You should let us set you up."
"I'm technically still with Ginny."
"She ran off with another guy in the middle of your date. Hermione and I aren't even dating and neither of us would do something like that to the other."
Dean looked around and saw nothing but sympathy.
"Yeah, that's true, isn't it?" he sighed. "I can't believe this."

"Good evening, everyone."
"Oh hey, Luna. Happy Christmas."
"Happy Christmas."
"Pull up a chair, we've got room. Who's your friend?"
"Oh, everyone, this is Rolf Scamander. Our families are old friends. Rolf, this is Harry, Hermione, Dean, Draco and Pansy."
"Nice to meet you, Rolf."
"Enjoying the party so far?"
"It's alright, I guess. We've been having fun."
"So, where do you live?"
"He lives a few miles from me and daddy."
"Oh?"
Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance.
"You go to Durmstrang, right?" Draco asked.
"Yes, I do. I'm in my final year."
"If you live near Luna, you must know the Weasleys." Hermione said casually.
Because they were watching for it they noticed Rolf stiffened slightly and slanted a quick glance at Luna.
"Can't say I do, but then I haven't seen much of the area."
"You really should get out more and meet the neighbors, Rolf." Luna interjected, voice serene.
"The Weasleys are nice people. I'm good friends with their daughter, Ginny. Growing up she was the only girl my age in the area. The other two families, the Fawcetts and the Diggorys had sons a few years older than us, and the rest of the Weasleys are all boys. You can't miss them. A whole family of redheads. Ginny, my friend, has six older brothers."
"Six?" Rolf repeated weakly. "That's quite a family."
"Yeah, there's nine of them altogether. Bloody rabbits." Draco agreed.

"Oh hello Grandpa Newt." Luna greeted the older man when he wandered past.
"Ah, Luna my dear! How are you two enjoying yourselves."
"It's been fun. These are my friends."
"Ah, yes, I was speaking to all of them earlier. Lovely bunch of young people." He looked around hopefully and frowned. "Where'd that delicious little redhead get to?"
Dean, Draco, Pansy, Harry and Hermione all made a face and shuddered. Luna, still smiling serenely glanced at Rolf and arched an eyebrow. "Goodness. I hadn't realized it was a thing with your whole family."
Rolf gave Luna a sickly smile and tried to unobtrusively loosen his collar. "Please excuse us. It was very nice meeting all of you."
"Damn. She can really twist the knife in when she wants to." Pansy cackled once they were out of earshot.
"Okay, what the hell was that all about?" Dean demanded.
"When we were on the train heading to school, Ginny mentioned she had a fling with a Durmstrang boy that lived in the area over the summer."
"Luna obviously knew who it was, but she never said a word about it. She didn't seem too concerned, honestly--though whether that's because she doesn't care one way or another what Rolf does, or because she knew Ginny was already looking for someone new, I don't know."
"She probably didn't mind because it gives her an acceptable out if she doesn't want to marry him." Hermione decided.
"Most likely. It shows good foresight on her part if that is the case." Pansy agreed.
"It also gives her a chance to see what he's made of. He lied about even knowing Ginny. She confronted him on the fact that she knows damn well he does. She can see now if he'll keep lying, what he has to say for himself, and how things get resolved. I'd think those would all be pretty important to know just in case their betrothal does continue." Harry mused.
"Yes, exactly. Love and romance are all very well and good, but marriage also requires some sense and planning as well. You don't want to rush into things, and just because your parents might think it's a good match doesn't necessarily mean it actually is--not for the one who has to live with it."

"Come on, Ron. We need to get going!"
"Coming, coming. Geez. Let me finish breakfast first!"
"We should have left twenty minutes ago. You're going to be late for check-in if we don't get moving!"
"Hold your horses."
"Good luck, son. Do us proud."
"Yes Ron, just think of all we can do with two hundred and fifty galleons."
"Knock em dead."
"Don't make too big a fool out of yourself."
Charlie chivvied Ron along till they were outside, and then he took a firm grip of his arm and apparated them further south. When they reappeared they were outside a large hall.
"Here we go. Hurry inside and get registered. I'll come find you later. I'm going to set up a campsite in the meantime."
Ron nodded and headed inside.

Once past the entry hall there was a set of large double doors and a few steps leading down to the main convention floor. A veritable sea of tables were set up all along it. Ron led out a low whistle and actually felt himself becoming somewhat intimidated. He'd thought the tournament this summer had been grueling. There were three or four times as many tables set up this time. Swallowing nervously, he joined the other contestants that were milling around on the bleachers set up along the sides of the room. Unlike the last tournament, this one wasn't open to the public for the most part. Only the final two rounds of the junior and senior division were open to spectators--the matches that decided the final bout and the final match itself.
He was sitting for about forty five minutes when the folks that had been running the check-in station entered the room and sealed the doors behind them.
"When we call your number, please come down to the floor. Number 1 and number 1000."
"Number two and 999"
Ron hurriedly checked his number. 554. Great. He was going to be here awhile.
Bit by bit the tables began filling in down on the floor, from the outer edges in. As the first couple of games got started, Ron busied himself watching them in progress on the boards. He was so engrossed, he almost missed his number when it was called. Luckily he realized. He jumped to his
feet, noting there were only a few people left on the bleachers. His game table was almost in the center of the room. His opponent was a tall, pale glowery fellow who looked rather like a vampire. They shook hands and sat down. "Begin."

Pam knocked on Cedric's door, and then more loudly when there was no answer. She heard a faint grunt from within the room—it was a bit hard to hear over the mournful love songs Cedric had been playing non-stop on the wireless since he'd seen the paper that morning. She creaked open the door and peeked her head inside, and sighed sorrowfully at the sight of her son. He was laying spread-eagled on the bed, staring at the ceiling, with Cho and Chuanli Chang's engagement announcement from the morning paper clutched in his fist.

"Oh, honey."
"If you don't mind, mother, I'd like to be alone right now."
"I was going to go out, but never mind, I can call and cancel."
"Go, mother. I really don't want to talk about it. I'll be alright."
"I don't want to leave you here like this."
"Mother. Go. I'll still be here when you get back."

Pam dithered for a bit before sighing and slowly closing the door behind her. She paced back and forth, wringing her hands and finally decided to meet her lunch date as planned, but she would come back as soon as they were done eating. She didn't want to leave her son like this for too long, alone in the house. Sighing sadly she grabbed her cloak and purse, checked her hair and set off.

Her apparition took her to a small bistro in Diagon Alley. It had opened just a few months ago and had gotten good reviews. She spotted her date and found herself smiling in spite of her worry. He really was a dear man—intelligent, soft-spoken and genteel, though possessing a wry humor and a bit of prankster beneath his mild-mannered exterior. He turned and spotted her, and she was flattered by the smile that lit up his face at the sight of her.

"Pam. It's good to see you."
"Remus, it's good to see you as well."
"Shall we?"

Pam nodded and giggled like a teenager when he offered his arm. She took it with a smile and they headed into the restaurant.

"Did you see that!"
"Yes, Sirius, we're standing right here." Adeline laughed.
"Pam Diggory! That's who he's been hiding from us."
"She took back her maiden name; she's Pam Plummer again. This is wonderful though—I've always been fond of her, and you must admit she's a much better fit for Remus than Charity was. We can start having couples nights again!"

Harry chuckled at Adeline's cheer and bounced Regulus who was getting restless.

"Adeline, Sirius!"
The three of them turned and Harry stiffened. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were approaching, and
with them were Tom Riddle and a young woman. "Cissy, Lucius, Tom…I'm afraid I don't know you." Sirius greeted them.

"Oh, Sirius, you remember Giovanni Giordani don't you?"

"Giordani…oh! He was that friend of uncle Alphard's. Enchanter, right?"

"Yes, exactly. This is his granddaughter, Capricia. Capricia, these are Sirius, Adeline and Regulus Black, and Sirius' godson Harry Potter."

"Hello. It's nice to meet you." Capricia replied. She had a quiet voice with the faintest hint of an accent—she was also wearing a familiar perfume. It had been all over Tom the day they'd broken up. Sirius and Adeline greeted her warmly. Harry gave her a thin smile and nodded. It wasn't enough to be a snub, but it was certainly skirting the edges of good manners. He could feel eyes on him, he didn't know whose--he used Regulus as an excuse to not look at anyone.

"What brings you here today?" Narcissa asked into the somewhat awkward silence.

"We were going to have lunch at the new bistro that just opened."

"That's where we were headed as well. It's gotten wonderful reviews. We should all go together."

"Do have fun." Harry said cheerfully as he handed Regulus to Adeline.

"You're not joining us?" Lucius asked.

"I'm afraid not. I have a lot to do before the holidays are over." Harry replied, directly to Lucius who had addressed the question. "I was just here to get a bit of shopping out of the way. It was nice to see you both again--I didn't get a chance to really speak to you at the Ministry ball."

"We shall have to rectify that at New Year's."

He turned back to Sirius and Adeline and stifled a sigh when he saw they were both struggling to look like his sudden defection from their plans hadn't taken them completely by surprise.

"Will you be going anywhere after lunch?"

"We hadn't planned to. How long are you likely to be?"

"I should be home by dinner. I'll try to call ahead if I won't make it. Goodbye everyone."

He was rather proud of himself. He'd held on to his composure, managed to extricate himself from being forced to interact socially with the ex-that-shall-not-be-named, and had managed to not look at or acknowledge said person at all while not making it obvious he was doing so. He hoped Tilly had food in the summer house--he was really hungry and now had to make new lunch plans.

"Cedric? I'm home! Oh! Roger, Sean, I didn't realize we had visitors."

Roger and Sean, two of Cedric's friends from Hufflepuff waved hello.

"What brings you here?"

"We saw the engagement announcement. We figured we'd take him out, help him take his mind off things."

"I'm glad you did. I've been a bit worried, to be honest. Where are you headed?"

"We're going to see a moo-vee."

"A what?"

"It's something they just came out with--it's like a play but recorded so they can show it over and over. We thought we'd check it out."

"How interesting. What play is it?"

"It's called Nightfall--some Ravenclaw wrote the book. I never read it, though I remember a lot of people reading it."

"Yeah, girls." Sean pointed out.

"So? Doesn't mean it won't be interesting. Some of the girls from our year are meeting us there--it was actually their idea. They all want to see it."

"I'm glad Cedric has such good friends."

Cedric came down a few minutes later. He looked pale and morose, but he was up, dressed and ready to go, which was a good sign so far as the rest of them were concerned.
"Have fun, dear."
"Yeah." Cedric sighed. Roger and Sean traded a glance and followed their depressed friend out the door.

The first wizarding movie house had taken the movie houses from the golden age of cinema as its model. There was a lot of red velvet, gold, glittering chandeliers. There were ushers, all in uniform to guide, guests to their seats. The refreshment stand was doing a brisk business, selling candy and drinks and hot buttered popcorn. They had gotten lucky--the group behind them got the very last tickets available for the show they were heading in to.

They found the girls inside, all of them chattering happily and peering around in interest at the palatial lobby and watching everyone who had come out for the first showing. There was a festival atmosphere in the air--most of the people there had never seen, and many had never heard of, movies before. They didn't know what to expect, but whatever it was it was sure to be new and diverting--something that didn't happen all that often in wizarding society. The crowd's excitement peaked even further as the golden doors that led into the theater proper were opened. The girls all squealed and grabbed the guys by the arms to drag them inside. They wanted to get good seats.

They ended up in the balcony overlooking the main seating area. There were two other, smaller balconies to either side at an angle from them. The house was packed. When the lights dimmed, the crowd slowly quieted down, and one could feel the anticipation in the air. That's when it happened--the screen lit up.

N.W.E. had taken more than just the building from the golden age of cinema--they were going to offer a full night's entertainment: news reel, short film, a few commercials for N.W.E. business concerns, previews of upcoming movies that were currently in production, and then the main feature. They wanted to be sure everyone felt they'd gotten their money's worth. The crowd cheered and hunkered down, prepared to be entertained.

The first thing that appeared on screen was an advisory, informing the audience of what was to come as the lights dimmed. When they were completely out, jaunty script appeared on the screen informing everyone that it was "Newsreel with Ted Tonks".

"Good evening, folks, I'm your host, Ted Tonks. Tonight we have a very special guest--Miss Padma Patil, author of Nightfall. Good evening, Miss Patil."
"Good evening. It's nice to be here."
"Why don't you tell us a little about your book."
"I'd love to. Nightfall is a love story. The main couple, Woodward and Isabella, find one another, fall in love and eventually triumph over the many obstacles that seem to keep cropping up to keep them apart--his vampirism, his family, her family, her friend Jacques who is in love with Isabella and is Woodward's enemy. Through adversity, they each discover that their love can see them through anything--even the prophesized end of the world."
"Wow, sounds like a heck of a ride!"
"Oh, it will be."
Padma and Ted both laughed.
"Let's see a bit of what was going on behind the scenes, shall we?"

A vampire and a shirtless wolf animagus in the midst of changing growl at one another as they circle each other, both looking for an opening.
A different scene--the vampire falls to his knees in a clearing and throws back his head to shout his love's name to an uncaring world.
The vampire and a young woman embrace in the midst of a former battlefield.
"Woodward! I thought I'd lost you!"
"You're so absurd. Nothing could keep me from your side."
A middle aged wizard stands between Isabella and the vampire.
"Stay the hell away from my daughter! She deserves a chance at a normal life!"
A group of vampires in old-fashioned clothing lounge around, jaded and indolent in a ruined mansion, sipping wine glasses full of blood.
"She is not one of us. She will never belong. You belong to two different worlds."
Isabella and Jacques frolic with a group of teenagers on the beach in the sun while Woodward stands in the shadows of the trees at the edge of the screen, watching them with regret and longing on his face.
Woodward thrusts Isabella from him and begins to walk away from her, towards the screen.
"Enough! I can never give you the sunlight and you cannot thrive in the darkness! It's over!"
Isabella reaches towards his retreating back, stretching out in supplication. "Woodward! Woodward! Please! I LOVE YOU!"

In the audience, the girls gasped or squealed as the situation warranted. The guys all slumped down in their seats.
"Doesn't mean it won't be interesting." Sean muttered to Roger in a mocking voice.
"Shut up, man. Just shut up."
They both sighed as the girls with them all started clapping and bouncing up and down in their seats.
"Oh Merlin! Woodward and Isabella's love is so epie!"
"Go team Woodward!"
"Team Jacques, baby!"
"No way! Woodward and Isabella are soul mates!"
Sean slumped a little further in his seat. "Just kill me now."

Ginny was awoken by the sound of tapping on her window. She sat up groggily and then gaped at Rolf, who was hovering outside her window. She stumbled over and glared at him, before searching out her wand. She fogged up the window and wrote "I can't come out. Locked in" and then flicked her wand a second time to reverse the writing so Rolf could read it. She was going to kill Ron for it one day. While her dad had been reading her the riot act about dancing with an older man, the berk told them about her sneaking out at night to go flying, and her dad went and warded up the room on her to keep her in at night! At this rate she'd be lucky to leave the house by the time she was thirty.
His face fell rather comically. He hovered for a moment in thought and then pulled his wand. To make a guess, he was checking out what sort of wards were holding her in.
After several minutes of this, he re-fogged the window and wrote his own message. "Alarm tied to you. Can't cross." He refogged the window and continued writing. "None to keep me out and no alarm either." and then once more "Open the window and cast a silencing charm."
Ginny scowled and wrote back. "No way, jerk!"
Rolf stared at her perplexed, and a trifle annoyed.
"Why not?"
"You pretended you didn't know me!"
"You said your parents didn't know you were sneaking out!"
Ginny crossed her arms and stared at him for several minutes.
"What about Luna?" she wrote.
"What about her? Our families are friends."
Ginny debated a bit longer, but in truth she was feeling rebellious. She'd been stuck in the house all day doing chores and watching the babies, not to mention getting lectured by her mother about how she was on the fast track to being a scarlet woman, and then she'd gotten a letter--a letter--from
Dean, breaking up with her. She motioned for Rolf to move back a bit, locked the door and silenced the room and window and then opened it and stood back, watching nervously as Rolf squeezed his way in, and waited half-fearful for an alarm to wake up the whole household. Rolf landed, shut the window and pounced on her like a starving wolf, not even taking time to say hello. Ginny was irked, but she reminded herself this was just a bit of fun, not a relationship.

"Lucius, Narcissa."
"Severus, Olympe. Good to see you both again."
"Ah, let me see zhe baby! Is so sad zhat her black curls all washed away like zhey did, although she now fits better with zhe rest of you. By the look of things, she'll have the same golden blonde as her mozher."
"I was a little disappointed, actually. She looked more like my side of the family with her dark hair, but she's a Malfoy not a Black. I suppose I can't really complain...and it did give me an excuse to overhaul her wardrobe."
"More's the pity." Lucius sighed, remembering the bills from the robe shops.

Maxime settled herself with the baby and began to coo at her. She looked utterly delighted when baby Drusilla smiled and cooed back. Snape watched this spectacle for several moments and began looking panicked and uneasy. It wasn't hard to guess why--the man was a lifelong bachelor and a misanthrope. Seeing his lady friend in the thrall of a baby spelled doom to the dark man's mind. He knew full well where it would lead. Lucius did his best to stifle a grin--it wasn't often Snape allowed anyone to see him so discombobulated. He indulged himself for a bit, watching him squirm, but eventually took pity on him. He knew he'd have to be slowly acclimatized to the idea, and he and Narcissa fully intended to see to it that he was--he was the last of the Prince line. If either of them had any say in the matter, they were going to make sure that didn't stay the case forever. They weren't actually all that worried though--Maxime was French, and French women had long been known for their ability to twist men in knots and make them do their bidding. She'd already done quite a lot in that respect. It was really only a matter of time, whether dear old Severus realized it or not.

"What say we have a drink, old man, and leave the ladies to talk?"
"Let me guess, you'd like brandy? What a coincidence, I just received a particularly fine bottle for Yule." Snape replied dryly.
"Well, that was lucky, wasn't it?" Lucius replied all innocence.

Narcissa waited till the two men had left the room before casting a sly glance Maxime's way.

"You've done good work there. I've rarely seen him relaxed enough in company to let out his sense of humor. It's the talk of the town, you know. A lot of young ladies regularly curse your name--all the girls that came around to throw themselves at him in the hopes of getting a fancy house to live in are now gnashing their teeth at having let him get away."
"Really? Good." Maxime laughed. "Those silly girls would never have found the diamond beneath the gruff exterior. A man like Severus takes patience and a certain maturity to deal with. It took the careful work of months, both in his company and through correspondence, to peel away the prickly layers he protects himself with. I always felt it worth doing, but now that I'm beginning to see some return on my investment I'm even more pleased."
"So now on to step two?"
"Slowly but surely. He does want a family, but between his own less than stellar childhood and his long years as a bachelor he's fully convinced himself that he wants no such thing. It will take some doing to coax him out of such a dearly-held mindset, but I think it's well within the realm of the possible. I am patient. I'm not going to spoil the work by rushing things."
"I'm so glad he met you. Lucius and I have been trying to convince him to get out there and meet people but he would just grumble and ignore us both. It was so frustrating--he seemed bound and determined to pine away all his life for Lily Potter and prostrate himself on her altar till death."
"Yes, her. It's a mark of how miserable his childhood and teen years were that she stands out as the only good thing in it." Maxime grumbled as she lightly bounced Drusilla who had started to fuss. "She was supposed to be his best friend. Best friends don't simply abandon one another for all time because one said something unfortunate in a moment of anger and humiliation. That she did that and then turned around and married the man that had made her best friend's life such a torment for so many years right afterward… Pah! Don't talk to me about her."
Narcissa nodded as she sipped at her tea. "I know. I'm very fond of her son… I didn't care for James either. I quite despised him and his band of miscreants while we were all in school. Happily I wasn't there with them for too long. I did feel terribly for poor cousin Regulus--he took the brunt of my cousin Sirius' misguided rebellion against the family after I was gone, and of course Severus was and remained their number one target--it only increased as the years went by. Severus and Regulus were friendly, and of course James had been chasing after Lily for years at that point. This will sound awful, but I have to wonder if it wasn't a good thing their son wasn't raised by them. As it stands, he seems to have most of their better qualities rather than their worse ones. He'd have been a very different person if they'd raised him, and I think the world would be poorer for it."
"How so?"
"My family was all but gone and we were all estranged from one another. He was the catalyst that started the reversal. Had he been raised by James it never would have happened—that man despised all things Slytherin to an unhealthy degree—it was a pathology with him. Had that man been his role model he would far sooner have seen us all dead than reunited, and would have danced on our graves afterwards and considered it well done. Lily" she added with distaste "would have been right there cheering them on and standing around with her nose in the air while waving a Gryffindor flag."

Lucius swirled his glass a bit and watched the amber liquid within catch the light before taking a sip. "Ah, whoever bought this has excellent taste."
Snape snorted and rolled his eyes before taking his own sip, making a hum of appreciation as he did so. "So, what did you want to talk about?"
"What makes you think I didn't simply want the joy of your companionship?"
"You have that look on your face, that's why."
"What look would that be?"
"The 'I have gossip you simply won't believe' look."

Lucius frowned at bit at the thought of being so predictable or so easily read, but shook it off. He did have gossip, and Severus had known him for a good many years.

"Do you remember towards the end of summer, when the Dark Lord began acting a bit strangely?"
"Yes."
"Do you remember Olympe's speculations after we read that letter from the Potter boy?"
"Yes?"
"I think she might have been right."

Snape stared at him in stony silence for several heartbeats before exploding.

"That's completely preposterous! The Dark Lord and Harry Potter having a lovers spat? It's beyond absurd! It what universe would the Dark Lord become involved with his nemesis? When one adds
in that the Potter brat is but a child… no. I don't care what ridiculous reasons you have, the idea is utterly impossible."
"I had thought much the same as you, remember. We all laughed, especially when Olympe insisted she had the right of things and that we were letting preconceptions blind us. Well, I've changed my mind."

He quickly outlined the confrontation that had taken place in Diagon Alley the day previous, Harry's swift retreat and Tom's moody brooding afterwards.

"He tried to act normal, but it was there."
"You're imagining things."
"I'm not. It was right there to see. The most telling thing was how Potter all but snubbed Capricia and acted for all the world like the Dark Lord wasn't there. He completely refused to acknowledge his existence. Sirius and Adeline were both taken by surprise when he announced he hadn't planned to have lunch with them because of other engagements. They tried to play it off as though it wasn't news to them, but it was obvious it was. No, as shocking as it is to even consider, I think Olympe had the right of it all along. The Dark Lord and Potter were involved and parted ways, and it wasn't amicable. Furthermore, I would venture to guess that whatever caused them to part ways was some wrongdoing on the Dark Lord's part that Potter is loathe to forgive. In fact, now I'm beginning to wonder about that strangeness at the ministry ball. Potter was there. With a date, no less."

"If they were in fact involved, which I'm still not convinced of, where does Miss Giordani fit in to all of it?"
"I believe she may have been the cause of the squabble. No, think about it!" Lucius insisted. "The Dark Lord was introduced to her and they hit it off and spent several days together. He goes away for a few hours, and when he comes back he's moody and distracted, then he gets the odd letter from Potter. Potter leaves for school, the Dark Lord eventually starts acting like his old self again, only to have a brief relapse months later upon running in to Potter, one expected, once unexpectedly--while accompanied by Miss Giordani no less. Potter snubs her, refused to acknowledge the Dark Lord's presence at all, and removes himself from the lunch engagement he had with the Blacks."
"It still doesn't make any sense. Why was the Dark Lord moody and brooding if he ended his supposed love affair with Potter after finding something better? Hmm? Tell me that. I could see Potter being pissed in that scenario, but it doesn't explain the Dark Lord's behavior."

"What if he didn't intend to end things? What if he wanted a respectable pureblood wife and his bit on the side and Potter wouldn't go for it?"
"That would explain things, though I still can't imagine such a scenario. I can't see the Dark Lord chasing after the Potter child--it's absurd. I certainly couldn't see Potter being at all impressed with being anyone's 'bit on the side' either, nor can I imagine the Dark Lord suggesting such a thing." "Nonetheless, I'm certain something like that must have happened."
"Stuff and nonsense." Snape grumbled. "And honestly, even if it were true, why do we care? It isn't of any importance."
"That's where you're wrong, Severus." Lucius said with surprising seriousness.

"Potter's the unofficial leader of the neutral faction in the Wizengamot. We've gotten most of them on board with our policies, or made acceptable compromises, because of the alliance between him and our Lord. If that alliance crumbles, the members of the neutral faction that voted with us because of Potter will no longer do so. There's also his little company to consider. My son, Nott's son, Crabbe and Goyle's sons are on the board of investors along with Potter and they seem to be everywhere these days. If push comes to shove, I think they'll side with Potter. The future of our movement is in jeopardy--all the children we assumed would one day take over for all of us may not do so. The Blacks are another matter--Sirius, Adeline, and I daresay Arcturus and Melania will
side with Potter if it comes down to a choice between him and the Dark Lord. Dumbledore is an old man. He won't be around forever. In spite of the fact that he and Potter have been at odds, I'd lay money that the majority of the hard-line light wizards will look to Potter before anyone else--he's their 'savior', isn't he? The fact that he takes a middle of the road stance on most things won't sit terribly well with many of them, but he'll still be seen as a viable replacement for Dumbledore."

"So you worry that them being at odds will cause problems for the movement? Psh. So someone just needs to sit him down and give him a stern talking to, a spanking if necessary, and remind him that we'll not stand for any childish petty antics of his ruining things for the rest of us." Snape scoffed.

Lucius gave him a scathing look in return.

"Honestly, Severus! I thought you'd finally buried your grudge with the boy's father. It's not Potter I'm most worried about. If our surmise about the cause of his falling out with the Dark Lord is at all true, I doubt he'll have anything much to do with him on a personal level. I don't think he'll allow it to interfere overmuch with things in the Wizengamot, though I don't doubt it will be noticeable that things have cooled somewhat. If he agrees with us, or has a compromise in mind, I think he'll still vote with us, though we might have to work a little harder for it. No, I'm actually worried about Capricia. She's a pureblood witch of an ancient line. She's not going to take this indiscretion of the Dark Lord's at all well--she'll be beyond insulted at the thought of being little more than the public face to hide his affair with a half-blood medical oddity. A man will do a lot for peace at home. No, I fear Capricia will be the crumbling of the alliance and all we've been working for. She was seething through most of lunch that Potter gave her such a dismissive greeting. She thinks he needs to learn his place."

"His place?"

"She's a pureblood, he's a half-blood. She feels she is his better and he should acknowledge that."

"The Dark Lord is a half-blood."

"She thinks he's the Dark Lord's grandson, remember? She thinks he's a pureblood."

"And you and Narcissa thought this woman a good match for him? Did either of you stop to consider that perhaps I wouldn't be so keen to stick around if the new 'dark lady' was constantly sneering at me and demanding I accept that I'm her utter inferior? Or how about Olympe? She used to be a half-giant. It doesn't matter that she is no longer, it's shaped her attitudes and perceptions a great deal. Adeline Black is a halfblood too. Ted Tonks is muggleborn. Do you think either she or Sirius Black are going to in any way warm up to such a woman or want to be associated with her? What about the Crabbes and Bulstrodes? They've remained good friends in spite of Bulstrode marrying a half-blood, enough so that they betrothed their son to their half-blood daughter. The children's company is full of muggleborns that were orphaned by the move! What the hell were you two thinking? If you were so fired up to get the Dark Lord married off, you should have at least taken the time to find someone a bit more neutral on the blood issue!"

"The Giordanis are an important family. I did them a favor and introduced their granddaughter to the Dark Lord. If she ruins things, that's not on me, and I can maintain cordial relations with them--they'll be angry with her. She was only one of several young ladies we introduced him to--most of them were fairly neutral on blood issues. It's not my fault he picked the hardliner to bond with!" Lucius defended himself.

"If she's a bad as you say, we need to get rid of her. Now that we're in an all-wizarding country even the most hard-line blood purist will have a fairly wide choice just within their immediate surroundings. For right now though, a woman like that is going to be too disruptive and alienating, and will do our movement no favors."

"Maybe we should encourage him to make up with Potter."

"You're not still on that, are you?"
Lucius just rolled his eyes. "It wouldn't be ideal, but it would be accepted. We just need to find a female couple somewhere that will be willing to bear heirs for them. We need to get rid of Capricia before they make up though--she'll be too insulted if he tosses her aside for a 'half-blood medical oddity that doesn't know his place', and the rest of her family will be insulted right along with her, which will do none of us any favors either."
"I heartily agree about getting rid of the woman before she becomes a problem, but I firmly believe we should refrain from making any allusions to your ridiculous theory--he'll likely be so insulted by the very idea we'll both end up crucioed."
"Never mind that for now. We need a plan to get rid of her that will make the dissolution of her budding relationship with the Dark Lord her fault and not reflect badly on the rest of us."

"Hmmm… Wait, you said she's already had a run-in with Potter and doesn't like him for a perceived snub. Does she know he's involved with that little company he and your son started?"
"No, I don't think she does. Anytime it's been mentioned it was done so in connection with Draco, Theo or one of the other boys. She may well be under the impression that the four of them started it and are the ones in charge. I think I see where you're going with this. The New Year's Ball. We just need to get it mentioned that he's also on the board in her presence and let her do the rest. That could work. We can help things along if necessary."
"Yes, and once she starts alienating people left and right, the Dark Lord will drop her like a hot potato once he weighs the pros and cons a bit…unless he happens to be in love with her?"
"I haven't seen any indication of such. Honestly, I think most of the reason they hit it off so well is because she tends to be rather quiet, while the rest of the girls chattered almost nonstop on a variety of inane topics. I believe she's also rather learned. I caught them discussing magic theory a time or two, and they both seemed rather involved in the conversation. It's quite possible that, unless the topic of blood was specifically brought up, he actually might not be aware of her strong views on the subject."
"Well, let's make sure he becomes aware of them before he becomes too attached. The last thing we need, when everything is going so well for all of us, is for an extremist to start leading the Dark Lord around by his balls."
"Hear, hear!"
A party for the new year

Chapter Summary

Ron faces his final opponent in the junior world chess championship, Cho and her new fiance make their first public appearance, Cedric and his friends go to the movies, NWE has a new year's gala

"Ron!" the gathered Weasley siblings greeted.

"Oh, my baby! You've done it! Now you just need to do it once more. Two hundred and fifty galleons!" Molly gushed.

"Do you know who you'll be playing yet?" Arthur asked curiously.

"Yeah, Rebekka. Weird, huh?"

"You have to play your girlfriend? Ouch. Tough luck." Bill winced.

"What? I can just cheer her up after, once she loses and all."

"Good, Ron. Don't let anything interfere with your concentration." Molly demanded. "Don't let her weaken your resolve. Keep your eyes on the game and off her cleavage."

"Mum!"
"Molly, really!"

"What? I'm sure she wants to win as badly as Ron does. I wouldn't put it past her to try some sort of underhanded trick to steal his victory." Molly sniffed, unrepentant. "Eyes on the game." she repeated with a glare at Ron.

"I will, geez."

"We should get going. We don't want Ron to be late and forfeit."

"Heck no! This past week was a nightmare. I was playing chess in my dreams as well as playing it all day. I didn't put in all that effort just to screw up at the final moment!"

The family hurried to the convention hall. The place had been spruced up and the plain bleachers from before had been replaced by nice padded leather chairs climbing the sides of the room, with chess-themed decorations. The spectators that had come out for the final tournaments were all dressed to the nines, sipping wine and champagne and nibbling on the canapés that were circulating around the room while they were waiting to get started.

"Well, this is a lot fancier than I was expecting." Arthur said cheerfully as he snagged a glass of champagne for himself and Molly.

The rest were quick to follow suit, and Ron relieved one of the servers of his tray of canapés so he could wolf them down before heading down to the floor. The server watched in astonishment as he scooped the various treats into his mouth three and four at a time and handed back the empty tray.
"Who's that fellow?"

"Who?"

"The blonde guy. People keep shaking his hand." Ginny pointed.

"Oh, that's Rebekka's dad. He's the current world champ. I wonder where Rebekka is?"

"Oh! He's headed this way. Goodness. Why didn't you tell us to dress up?" Molly hissed to her son as she self-consciously smoothed down her plain everyday robes.

"Not like I knew. I've never been to one of these before, and this place has been kind of a dump all week."

"Ah, Ronald. You've made it to the final round, I see. Good luck tonight."

"Thanks, Mr. Qisling. Good luck to you too."

"Have you seen my daughter by chance? I came earlier than the rest of my family--I had to do a photo shoot."

"No, I haven't…oh, wait, is that her now?"

Qisling and the rest of them turned to see the young girl approaching them. She was wearing an expensive looking fur-lined cloak with silver fastenings. Her hair was upswept, but for the curls that framed her face, which was tastefully made up. Through the gap in the front of the cloak they could see evidence of an equally expensive dress underneath. She looked like an expensive porcelain doll. She slowed to a halt nearby and her eyes darted between Ron and her father suspiciously.

"Hello father. Come to wish your protégé well? How lovely."

"I was looking for you, dear. I wanted to wish you well before you started your match." Her father asserted, somewhat taken aback by his frosty reception and her odd tone of voice.

"Rebekka, darling. It's time for you to head down. Give me your cloak."

Rebekka broke off her staring match with her father and turned to face the woman who had just approached. She was obviously her mother--their likeness could hardly be mistaken. She hurriedly undid the latches on her cloak and tossed it to her mother, gave her father and Ron one last frosty look before stalking off towards the floor, where the table and their game had already been set up.

Ron began to get a sinking feeling in his stomach. He'd gotten a bit concerned when she spoke to her dad in an odd voice, but it was nothing to his reaction when she'd thrown off her cloak. Atop her fancy dress, she was wearing something terrifying: a leather bustier. All that was left was for her to sneer and slap someone in the face and the jury would be in. Ron swallowed thickly and followed her down to the floor, all the while wondering how he could have missed it. His girlfriend was secretly evil.

"Hi Harry. Thanks for coming with me."

"I'm happy to, I need something to wear to the party too. Not that I'm complaining or anything, but, well, don't girls usually take girlfriends robe shopping with them?"
Luna just laughed. "Usually yes. I did call Ginny, but she's grounded at the moment. I might have asked Hermione, but she's at work and can't get away right now. The few other girls I'm friendly with were either unable to get out or are depressed right now."

"Depressed?"

"Cho Chang. We talk occasionally. We're more casual acquaintances than good friends, but all the other girls I know couldn't come. I had thought she might enjoy a day out, but she's depressed and trying to gear herself up for her first public appearance with her new fiancé at the New Year's party. She said he's actually quite nice, so she can't even really hate him or anything, which just makes everything more difficult."

"Poor Cho, and poor whatever his name is too"

"Chuanli."

"Cho and Chuanli Chang? That's quite a mouthful."

"I doubt it is if you're Chinese."

"Point. So, who are you going with anyway?"

"Rolf of course."

"Still? Even though he was running around with Ginny?"

"We had a long talk about it after the Yule ball. He said they had a brief fling, mostly just hanging out and flying at night, and it only lasted about a week or so. He wasn't home the rest of the summer. He said he pretended he didn't know her because her family didn't know she'd been sneaking out and he didn't want it getting back to them, especially her many older brothers. I don't know if I completely believe him, but it does at least sound plausible. We were always friendly, but we were never a couple... of course, up until now I was too young to really be thinking like that anyway. He suggested we try to find out if we could be a real couple. He doesn't want to just marry someone because his parents think it might be a good idea, and neither do I. We've been dating, essentially, since the start of the holiday, and trying to get to know each other better. We went to the movies, out to dinner, we even went to Percy and Penelope's nightclub one night and danced a bit. He's introduced me to some of his friends from school and we hung out with all of them one day. We found we actually have things in common, and we've been having fun together. He's even bought me flowers when he's come to pick me up and presents while we were out."

"Sounds like he's been treating you well at least."

"He has. He's been a perfect gentleman, really."

"Well, good."

"How about you?"

"Hermione again, actually."

"Really? Are you two dating now?"

"Nah, just friends. We're both single, and we'll both be there. We actually had fun at the Ministry party, so why not? I don't think we could ever date, really. We'd probably drive each other crazy."
"Where are we going, anyway?"

"Vertic alley. Madame Malkins is fine for everyday stuff and school robes, but I prefer Twilfit and Tattings for dress robes."

"We usually just went to Madame Malkins, though I've also bought things at Gladrags a few times."

"Here we are."

Unlike Madame Malkins, which was a small shop, the walls covered in bolts of fabric and crowded with racks of already made clothing, Twilfit and Tattings aimed to impress. There was a reception area that was carpeted and held comfortable chairs from which to peruse their pattern books, and the pre-made clothing was tastefully displayed on the other side of the room, folded on glass shelves, or hung on the wall--just a few things at any one time. If you were having something made, once you'd chosen your styles, you were escorted to the back where there were three different rooms for fittings. Each held a small platform in the center and a large mirror, as well as more comfortable chairs for friends to wait while you were being fitted, if you so chose. Once your clothing was made, you could try it on for adjustments and alterations if you felt it was warranted. They served tea and biscuits while you waited, the place was filled with soft music and the air smelled faintly of lemon.

"Oooh, fancy."

"Luna commented as she stepped inside.

"Hey, Ron. Glad you could make it. How was the tournament?" Harry greeted the redhead with a smile.

"You're looking at the new junior world chess champion."

"Yeah? Congratulations. Rebekka couldn't make it?"

"Oh…yeah. We're quits. I found out something terrible."

"She was secretly evil?"

"Oh, you already heard about that?"

"Huh?"

"That she was secretly evil."

"I was joking. She was? Seriously?"

"Oh yeah. She talked to her dad in a funny voice, and she was wearing leather. What cinched it though was after I won. She sneered and slapped me in the face and started ranting about how her dad and I had been conspiring against her or something. They had to send in security. She went completely barmy. She vowed to return one day and defeat her dad and take his crown for her own. All sorts of rubbish. They don't even give you a crown for winning, just a sack of gold and trophy shaped like a rook. Mad, right?"

"Yeah. Wow. Too bad, mate, she was pretty cute."

"I know. If a girl's going to be secretly evil she could at least have the decency to be ugly or
something."

Harry snorted and shook his head. "Only you, Ron. Well, enjoy yourself. I should mingle some since I'm technically hosting this thing."

"I'm gonna get something to eat."

"Of course you are." Harry laughed again. He slapped Ron companionably on the back and continued past him, only to stop and try to go the other way when he saw who was standing nearby. It was Lucius, Narcissa, Professor Snape and Madame Maxime, Tom and the woman who wore too much perfume. Sadly, Lucius called out to him before he could flee in the other direction. Deciding to just get it over with he pasted a friendly smile on his face and started towards them.

"Oh, Harry, there you are. That should be the last of the tour groups tonight. Sorry it took me so long." Hermione said very fast as she hurried to join him. Harry's smile became more genuine. At least if he had to face his ex...boyfriend? Whatever. At least if he had to do so, he could do so with a date on his arm, and not just be stuck there alone and looking like a loser.

"Don't worry about it. Come on."

"Good evening, everyone. How are you enjoying the party so far?"

"I for one am very impressed. The place looks lovely." Narcissa complimented. Hermione beamed at her.

"Well, the credit for that actually goes to Hermione and our other interns. They actually decorated the place."

"You all did a wonderful job."

"Thank you. We were a little worried--there's two dozen of us and we all had different ideas of what to do. This was actually a compromise."

"It turned out very nice."

"I see Weasley is here. How did things go at the world chess tournament?"

"Oh, Ron's here? I didn't see him!"

"You just missed him" he told Hermione before turning back to Snape. "He's the new junior world champion, actually. Something will probably be in the papers tomorrow; apparently Rebekka Qisling caused a scene when she lost and had to be drug out by security."

"Mon dieu." Madame Maxime sighed.

"She's one of yours, I take it?" Wears-too-much-perfume asked in a fakely sweet sort of voice.

"I take it you didn't attend Beauxbatons, Miss Giordani?" Snape asked, his eyes narrowing at the girl's attitude towards Olympe; she'd been taking small digs at her since they'd arrived.

"No. I attended Durmstrang as it maintains stricter standards." She replied before giving Maxime a very obvious once-over. "It seems things have marginally improved recently...not enough, however. Animals belong in the barnyard, not mingling at school with decent witches and wizards."

Maxime and Snape both stiffened at the insult.
"Durmstrang is a fine school, I'm sure. We found the students of Beauxbatons to be equally impressive, the few we met, and they seem to be well-led by our esteemed Madame Maxime. Her students all seem to hold her in very high regard." Harry interjected.

"As do we all." Hermione added with a frown towards Capricia. They were at a party--why was the woman being so unpleasant?

Capricia sniffed and glanced around the room. Her face suddenly twisted in revulsion and she gave a delicate little shiver of disgust. She opened her mouth, probably to spout more nastiness, but Tom squeezed her arm in warning. "If you go enraging the goblins into calling you out, not a one of us will raise a hand in your defense." he hissed quietly so only she could hear. "They're part owners of this company. You are their guest for the evening, and will behave appropriately."

"Harry here is part of the board, along with my son, you know." Lucius interjected into the awkward silence.

Capricia sneered in Harry's direction. "You were lucky there were purebloods willing to overlook your unfortunate beginnings and take pity on you enough to allow you a place at their feet. They keep you around to keep the riff-raff in line, I suppose?"

"I beg your pardon? What unfortunate beginnings would those be?" Harry asked mildly.

"Your mudblood mother, of course."

Hermione stiffened and looked at the woman with anger simmering in her eyes, and Snape's eyes flashed as a second woman important to him was insulted by the wench. Capricia noted Snape's reaction but dismissed it. If he wanted to wallow with filth, so be it, but he couldn't expect it to go unnoted in company. Her attention was all drawn by Hermione's reaction and her lip curled in realization.

"Another mudblood? How revolting."

Hermione straightened and leveled her with a cool, disdainful glare that would have done any queen proud, while Harry looked her up and down in a deliberate, insulting manner while subtly covering Hermione's hand on his arm with his own hand in support.

"I feel sorry for people like you, really. Constantly harping about your blood because you have nothing else of worth to offer. My mother was a brave, intelligent, talented witch, as is the young lady at my side this evening. I'm proud to be both my mother's son and this young lady's friend. Furthermore, no one took pity on me, you stupid, arrogant bitch. I founded this company and gave my friends the option of buying in at the ground floor, something they've had ample cause to thank me for since then. You happen to be here this evening as my guest, and I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head. If you can't do that, I'm sure our esteemed Madame Maxime will be happy enough to toss you out on your ass." He turned back to Lucius, Narcissa, Snape and Maxime and gave them all a very slight bow.

"It was lovely seeing all of you. Please enjoy the rest of the party." Having said his peace, he and Hermione swept off with their noses in the air.

"He is right, child. I would be very happy to." Maxime added, with a sadistic glint in her eye, before she and Snape swept off as well.

"I should write to Igor. I think I'll suggest he add diplomacy and a course in basic manners to the curriculum at Durmstrang." Lucius mused.
"That's a very good idea." Tom agreed, before taking Capricia by the arm and all but dragging her from the room.

"Hey Dean, what are you doing here?" Ron asked.

"I'm one of the investors, so I got an invite. Pretty fancy party, huh?"

"Yeah. The food's good at least."

"So, where's that girlfriend of yours? I wanted to get a look at her after hearing you bragging on her all year."

"We're through. Turns out she was secretly evil and plotting to be the queen of chess or something."

"I…see."

"If you're here, how come Ginny didn't get an invite? When I told her where I was off to she got all pissy. She's been acting really weird lately. I'm glad I wasn't around for most of it. Even the twins have been avoiding her--Fred and George, not the babies."

"Um, well, we kind of broke up."

"You broke my little sister's heart?" Ron asked, as his face began to suffuse with angry color. He stopped in confusion when Dean just laughed bitterly.

"Hardly. She picked up another guy while out with me. I'm here with Tracy Davis from Slytherin. Pansy and Draco offered to set us up and I figured why not? This is actually our second date. It's been going pretty well so far. It's been nice not having to always explain muggle references. You have no idea how annoying that gets, since it's always stuff you kind of take for granted, you know?"

"Sure, if you say so. I don't know what the big deal is--fellytones and eckletricity, right? What's hard about that?"

"Nevermind."

"Wait, so you dumped my baby sister and you've already got a new girlfriend? I'm not sure I like that."

"It's not really for you to like or not, Ron. Anyway, what's the big deal--you didn't want me dating your sister in the first place."

"Yeah, well, I allowed it, didn't I? Now you've gone and messed things up."

"It wasn't me that did it. I was just trying to keep her from attacking the pervy old man that was leering at her. She thanked me for that by trying to run off with a Puddlemere chaser." Dean shrugged and looked unhappy for a moment. "I liked Ginny and all, but come on. It's all worked out for the best though--like I said, Tracy and I have really hit it off."

"Glad to hear it."

"Oh, Tracy. I didn't know you were there."
"You done? You owe me a dance."

Dean finished his punch and set the cup aside. "Am now. Shall we, milady?"

"We shall, my good sir."

They both laughed, though Ron wasn't sure what was funny, and swept off towards the dance floor which was quickly filling up. Harry and Hermione went whirling by. They looked like they were having fun. A sick sinking feeling began settling in Ron's stomach, though he wasn't sure why. He dimly remembered hearing the twins mention they had gone to the Ministry Yule ball together—they'd been laughing about how after years of protesting and trying to get away from her, Harry had apparently fallen for the girl. Now here they were again. The food, which had been so tasty just a moment ago, began to seem quite unappealing. He set his plate aside and headed for the doors to the garden to get some air.

Ron took a deep breath of air and began walking. It was surprisingly warm here, even in the middle of winter. The garden had been gussied up since he'd been here last. There were pathways laid out meandering through the greenery, benches and small tables scattered here and there. He could even see a gazebo, the roof of it at least, at the center. With no real destination in mind, he figured he'd head that way. As he drew closer, he realized he could hear voices raised in an argument. He couldn't see anyone yet--there was a large flowering bush between him and his destination. He crept closer and peeked around and found Harry's friend Tom and a really pretty woman with an accent in there.

"Why did you bring me out here? Answer me! You drag me all the way across the grounds like a sack of meal and now you just stand silent! What is wrong with you?"
"Me? What is wrong with me? You've managed to insult half the people at the party within the first five minutes of being here!"
"People? Ha! How else was I supposed to react? I was expecting to go to a society party to meet people of import, and what do I find? Goblins and hags and mudbloods, and filthy halfbloods mingling with decent folks and acting like they belong there. Why are you acting like this? I would think you'd be as disgusted by the decline of wizarding society as I am."

Tom's jaw clenched and his eyes burned furiously. She decided to change tactics and sidled up to him to run her hands up his chest.

"Darling, why are you so angry? I am a pureblood witch of an ancient and respected line. I have certain standards, as should you. Diplomacy has its place, but only after you've reminded the lesser beings of theirs."
"Lesser beings, is it? I'm a halfblood you ridiculous twit!"

The effect of his words on Capricia was instantaneous. She stiffened and recoiled in disgust before looking at her hands like they were suddenly covered in filth. Her hands suddenly clenched and she lifted one with the obvious intention of smacking Tom in the face and tearing at him with her long nails, but he grabbed her hands before she could do so.

"You filth, you monster! Did you think it was funny? Approaching me under false pretenses like that? Hiding what you are so you could pretend to be good enough to touch me?"
"As I recall, sweetheart, it was you who was desperate to touch me, not the other way around."

Ron's face burned at the ugly scene and he slowly backed away, not wanting to get involved. He was halfway back to the castle when the sound of apparation sounded from back in the gazebo.
Harry and Hermione were just finishing up another dance and had decided to take a brief breather when the saw Ron come sidling in from outside with an odd, uncomfortable look on his face. They headed his way and took him aside to find out what had happened. In a whisper, he told them about the scene he'd just witnessed.

"And then they apparated out. I heard them as I was coming back."

Harry and Hermione both winced and Harry drew his wand to cast a plotting spell.

"Looks like Tom is still back in the gazebo." He cast again and smirked at Hermione who smirked back in glee.

"Want to go get her out?"

"Can't we just leave her there? Wretched woman." Hermione huffed, only half joking.

"If she drowns from having her head stuck in the toilet we'll be liable for her death."

"Oh, very well."

"I suppose you should tell Lucius and Narcissa what happened as well. They're the ones that introduced her and Tom. Her grandpa was a friend of Narcissa's uncle and he sent her here to get introduced around and whatnot."

"Will do." Hermione sighed.

"I should probably go check on Tom." Harry realized.

"Yeah, poor bloke. She acted like he was diseased or something."

"Bitch." Harry and Hermione both spat before going their separate ways.

Lucius and Narcissa were standing with Sirius and Adeline when she approached.

"Hey, Hermione. What's up?"

"That…girl…with Tom is stuck in the ladies bathroom with her head in a toilet."

"That's odd. How on earth did she end up like that?" Sirius asked, bewildered.

"It's part of the defenses on the island. The only way on or off is by authorized portkey. She tried apparating away after saying some really foul things to poor Tom. Ron overheard them while he was wandering in the garden. I'm going to retrieve her now. Harry thought you might like to know since you brought her here."

"Goodness. Terribly unfortunate, that. Here. Slap this in her hand once you've gotten her free. It's a letter to her grandfather explaining why we had to send her home so abruptly. It's a portkey. The pass phrase is here." Lucius said blandly, handed her a small slip of paper. "Just say that once you give it to her and it should activate it."

Hermione held up the letter and stared at it a moment and then glanced at Lucius before smirking slightly at him and heading off.

"Lucius?" Adeline queried.
"What? I opened the door just as promised. It's not my fault the silly girl made a mess of things once she got through. I explained all that quite tactfully. I'm sure her grandfather will be relieved that none of us are planning to hold it against him and our business arrangements can go through as planned. Furthermore, he'll now feel he owes me a favor to make up for his granddaughter's poor behavior. You never know when something like that will come in useful."

Capricia sat sprawled on the floor of the bathroom stall, dripping water from her hair, and with her carefully applied makeup running down her face while gasping for air.

"Don't touch me! Filthy mudblood!"

"I'm filthy? Oh that's rich, considering you were drinking from the toilet like a dog for some reason. Here. Take this." Hermione ordered, slapping Lucius' letter against her hand. She grabbed hold instinctively and stared at it in confusion.

"Arrivederci" Hermione said with cheer. Capricia had only a moment to stare at her in confusion before being whisked away by the portkey.

Hermione dusted her hands and sauntered out of the bathroom and back to the ballroom feeling well pleased with her small vengeance on the girl. She had so rarely run into that sort of prejudice, thanks to the Melting Pot and the Finch-Fletchley parties since coming to the wizarding world, she often forgot for long periods of time that there were people out there that hated others with such passion for such a stupid reason. She looked around, but didn't see Harry anywhere--He must still be out there with Tom. Poor guy. She did spot Ron, and her stomach gave a little flip when she realized he was likely single again, since his girlfriend was apparently secretly evil. There seemed to be a lot of that going around lately.

"Hey. Wanna dance?"

Her attention was distracted from Ron by the boy suddenly standing next to her.

"Oh. Um, sure. I'm Hermione, by the way, Hermione Granger."

"Mickey Sullivan."

"Mickey… Oh! You were one of the evil vampires that tried to kill Woodward! I thought you looked familiar!"

"You saw the movie then?" Mickey winced. "I mean, no offense if you liked it and all…"

"It's not really my cup of tea. You were very good though, given what you had to work with."

"Oh, thanks. So…dance?"

"I'd love to."

Remus spun Pam out and then back in before dipping her. Pam laughed breathlessly as soon as she was once again upright.

"You've got some smooth moves there, Mr. Lupin, you've been holding out on me."

Remus just waggled his eyebrows at her, which set her to laughing again as they continued along the floor. They were both so wrapped up in each other, they very nearly collided with a young
couple coming the other way.

"Pardon me. I'm afraid I wasn't watching where we were going as well as I should have."


"It's Plummer, actually. I took back my maiden name after I was widowed." Pam replied. An awkward silence settled over the four of them.

"So, I understand congratulations are in order? Best wishes to you both." Remus interjected.

Cho's eyes began filling with tears, though she blinked and tilted her head back some to keep them from falling. "Thank you, professor. It's very nice of you." Cho croaked. Pam started to reach out to her and then let her hand drop, looking quite miserable about the whole situation. Chuanli looked at Cho, then at Pam then at Professor Lupin and tried to smile.

"If you'll excuse us."
"Oh, yes of course."

Remus and Pam started dancing again half-heartedly as they watched Chuanli steer Cho off the floor and then after a glance at her face, in to the garden.

"She seems to be as broken up about things as Cedric is. I feel terribly for her fiancé. From everything I've heard about him, he seems to be a nice fellow. It must be terribly awkward."

"Yes, I can't imagine having the woman you're expected to marry constantly crying and being depressed would be a good omen for your future married life."

It took several minutes for Cho to get a hold of herself--it seemed the more she tried to stop crying, the harder it became to actually do so. Through it all, Chuanli simply sat beside her patiently and waited for her tears to run their course, and even gave her the handkerchief he had secreted somewhere on his person to dry her eyes with. After she'd recovered somewhat, she just sat there feeling drained and overwhelmed. It was several minutes before she came enough out of her funk to really take in the area around them.

"It's really beautiful here. Where we are right now reminds me of the area around my grandmother's house in Hong Kong." Chuanli said quietly.

"I wish I'd had a chance to see it."
"Yes, you've lived your whole life in Britain, haven't you?"
"I was born in Aberdine." Cho agreed. "So was my father."

Chuanli just nodded and stared out into the night. It made her feel guilty. Chaunli was easy to spend time with, and the silences were never uncomfortable. He was sweet, and in different circumstances, she might actually have been happy to be engaged to him.

"That woman inside, she was one of the fairy killers? She doesn't look anything like I expected."

"She's not a killer. She's not and neither is her son. They didn't know anything about what he was doing in his free time. They were shocked and horrified when they found out. They're two of the nicest people you could ever meet, and because of what that man did everyone treats them like they're monsters!" Cho protested. "They don't deserve it."
Chuanli nodded thoughtfully. "I wasn't given many details of what happened, and the details I was given led me to believe something that you at least believe to be untrue."

"It is untrue. I was there when they found out. They weren't involved and didn't know about it. I tried to tell everyone that but no one listens."

"This fellow…"
"Cedric. His name is Cedric."
"Cedric then. How long were you involved with him?"
"A year and a half or so. Yes, about that long. The end of my fourth year and all of fifth. My parents made me end things this summer. They said they would pull me from school and have me tutored at home if I didn't comply."
"That was six months ago, and still you cry so much."
"We had started making plans, before everything happened. He'll be graduating this year. We figured he had a year to establish himself before I graduated as well and then…"
"You were thinking of marriage? You were that serious?"

Cho nodded and dabbed at her eyes again. Chuanli let out a breath and stared at the moon.

"I'm sorry, Chuanli. You don't deserve someone like me for a bride. You're a very nice man. If things were different…"

Chuanli shook his head. "Don't act like that. I'm a big boy. I haven't found anyone on my own, and I'm getting older. When my parents told me about this I just figured why not? I've established myself and done well so far in my career, it's just the next step. For me, it was just something expected, something to do. For you though… If you were to choose to be with this Cedric, have you really thought about what it might mean?"

"W-what are you talking about?"
"I was not born yesterday. It has been six months already, but you are holding on tightly to your feelings for this boy though all of it. You are not yet seventeen, but you will be soon. Do you think yourself the only person that has ever made a rash decision for love?"

"I haven't made any decisions. I haven't spoken to Cedric since I ended things."

"Even if you've made no firm plans, that doesn't mean you haven't been considering possibilities. What I am asking you though is whether you have really thought things through. Have you accepted what it might mean to defy the family's wishes in this way? Are you prepared for the consequences? Does this boy of yours mean so much that you are prepared to throw away your entire family for him if they choose not to forgive you? If you and the family were estranged and at odds it might be an acceptable choice if not ideal. You are close to your family and on good terms with them. Are you prepared to lose that if it comes down to it?"

Cho's face crumpled and she hung her head.

"I suppose I had hoped that they would understand and forgive me in time, and listen to me when I tell them that he's a good person and they're wrong about him."

"And if they don't? If you are going to make a decision like this, you should go into it with eyes open and accepting of the consequences of your actions. What's more, does this boy consider it acceptable for you to lose everything so long as he can have you?"

"No, he wouldn't. He would probably argue against it. He knows I would be devastated. He'd rather
I be happy without him."

"I don't mean to upset you, but these are things that you must truly consider. What's more, you need to really thing about the worst case scenario. Would your marriage survive and thrive in spite of its inauspicious beginning, or would you grow to resent him in time for causing you to lose everything? It is a serious question and one you should strive to answer fully before you decide anything."

"Should you really be telling me these things? Shouldn't you be telling me to forget him and think only of you?"

"My telling you to do that wouldn't actually make it happen, and I don't want to marry a girl that keeps crying and thinking of someone else all the time. Right now, it doesn't matter too much to me one way or another whether we actually marry or not. I'm only just getting to know you. My heart isn't involved. From the little I know of you, I think that we could be happy together if we let ourselves be, though that time would be far in the future still, after you're done with school. All I am asking of you is this. Think hard and seriously about the future and what it is you want and what prices you are prepared to pay to have it. When you decide that, you come talk to me and we'll go on from there."

Cho nodded once to show she was listening.

"Good. Now, fix up your face and we will go finish the party. Stop crying so much. Even if he is your own true love it is not worth it to be so miserable all the time. Cheer up and enjoy the present moment. You have time, we all do, to decide our futures."

Cho slanted a wan smile at Chuanli and straightened up, before casting a glamour at her face to hide the evidence of her tears.

Chuanli nodded and slapped his hands on his thighs before standing and offering a hand up.

"I think that's the first time I've seen her smile in the last six months." Luna commented.

"Huh? Who?" Neville wondered.

"Cho. Look."

"Well, how about that. She is smiling, isn't she?" Hannah agreed.

"She doesn't exactly look over the moon, but yeah, she is definitely smiling." Millicent agreed.

"What about Cedric though? Has she just forgotten about him?" Susan wondered, sounding vaguely indignant.

"It's been six months and the guy is still walking around looking like his favorite pet was just brutally murdered in front of him a few minutes prior. He needs to get a grip." Pansy scoffed in reply.

"That's not very nice. He had the woman he loved brutally torn from his side because of something he had nothing to do with and couldn't control." Susan protested.

"Yeah, well, stuff happens. I don't care what the rest of you say, I'm just happy there's an end to the angst in sight. People break up all the time, and sometimes it truly, brutally sucks. A few days of moping and what have you is allowed, but after that no. Where the rest of you see a beautiful tragic
love story, I see two selfish prima donnas that are forcing the rest of us to suffer. They need to get over themselves already."

"Wow, Pansy, you don't have a romantic bone in your body, do you?"

"I do so, but the weepfest those two have been subjecting the rest of us to isn't romance, it's torture. Come on, it is! If Chang was so all bloody madly in love with Diggory she could have just taken a stand for love or whatever."

"She's still underage though, she couldn't." Hannah pointed out.

"Puhlease. She so could have. She could have just told her parents she dumped him but good and then just snuck around with him till she was of age. They could have eloped during the Hogsmeade weekend right after her birthday and wah-lah, true love conquers and the rest of us aren't forced to wallow in the angst alongside them. It hardly takes a bloody genius to figure out that much. What did she do though? She dumped him but good, didn't speak a word to him for six months, but she made a point of falling into his line of sight a few dozen times a day so she could get wobbly-lipped and play tragic martyr. She made damn sure he didn't get a chance to get over her by making him witness all her suffering and longing glances. If she had any decency and wanted to play by her parents rules, she have let him down as gently as she could, and stayed out of his way for a while until he'd had a chance to get over the abrupt end of their relationship and given someone else a chance to sidle in and pick up the pieces. If she'd done it like that, then by the time this engagement of hers became public and official the both of them would have moved on and been able to meet up in the future with a smile for times past. Instead, she's wandering around all weepy and tragic, he's vaguely suicidal, and the fiancé? He's caught in the middle and will either end up with a tragic martyr for a wife, or get dumped just as he's starting to warm up to the idea of them getting married someday."

"You have to admit she has a point." Millicent added her two knuts in while Greg, Vince and Draco nodded sagely.

"I don't really know any of the people involved. I couldn't really say one way or another." Rolf shrugged.

"I don't think she was trying to torture anyone, really. I think she did and maybe still does love Cedric, but I do agree she probably went about things badly. Up until right this moment, I think I would have laid money down on her running off with Cedric at some point…now though. You know, I really think there's a chance it could go either way." Luna mused.

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, just a feeling I have. Her aura is clearer--not a whole lot clearer, but it's definitely there. I think Chuanli might be good for her if she were to give him a chance."

"Cedric was good for her." Susan said loyally.

"I never said he wasn't, I'm just saying she might actually have a more difficult choice to make than she was expecting to."

"I wonder where my parents have gotten to." Draco mused while looking around the room. "I haven't seen them for a while."

"Haven't seen who?" Ron asked absently as he frowned at Hermione, who'd just gone whirling by
with some berk. She was smiling at him.

"My parents."

"I don't know about your mum, but your dad and Professor Snape are outside. I saw them earlier sneaking out into the garden."

"Really? How odd. This bears investigating."

"We'll leave you to it. I'm going to dance." Millicent announced. Vince shrugged at Draco apologetically and followed her to the floor. The rest of the couples slipped off as well.

"Well, that's just marvelous, isn't it. Some friends!"

"I'll go with you. I'm rather curious myself." Pansy assured him. They wandered hand in hand towards the garden and spent a few minutes wandering around and enjoying the view, before Pansy spotted their quarry in the distance. Draco pulled the two of them behind a nearby tree and they peeked out to observe.

"Well. Curioser and curioser. My parents, Madame Maxime and Professor Snape. They're hiding in the bushes spying on someone. Whatever they're watching has got to be good."

"Let's get closer."

"Hang on." Draco cautioned, before hitting each of them with a disillusionment charm. They kept their hands linked so they wouldn't lose track of one another and slowly began making their way towards another clump of bushes a short distance away from where the adults were hidden. Pansy set up a silencing ward around the two of them. "We should be alright to talk. What are they watching?"

"The Dark Lord and Potter."

"Really? Let me see."

Pansy slowly parted a section of the bushes until she had a good view and then cast a quick spell to hold them in place. "I wish we could hear what they're saying. The others are closer, they can probably hear. We should move up some."

"Yeah, let's do it. Let's work around to that stand of trees on the other side. There's some bushes in front of it to help hide us, and it's a lot closer than even the others are."

"Okay." Pansy cancelled her spells and they joined hands to once again start making their way stealthily closer. The two within the gazebo seemed oblivious to their many watchers.

They finally made it to the stand of trees and worked their way close to the edge, just behind the bushes and settled down to wait for them to start talking again, or to just start talking period. Neither of them was sure how long everyone had been out there. Pansy put up her one-way silencing ward again and leaned against Draco's shoulder once she located him. "We're good to talk. I hope we're not just going to sit out here watching the dark lord stare at the moon while Potter stares at him. I wonder why your parents and the others are spying on them?"

"Who knows with them. Oh." Draco settled with a gasp when Tom spoke.
"Come here to gloat?"

"If you're going to be an asshole, I can just leave, now that I've assured myself your eyes aren't red and you're not speaking in the third person." Harry scoffed.

"Oh, that's very nice. You could try having some sympathy."

"She was a bitch and she was nasty to everyone, not just you. In case you've forgotten she was sniping at Madame Maxime, myself and Hermione, not to mention my dead mother before you and she came out here. Hell, the only reason you were even with her is because Lucius and Narcissa decided getting you married off post-haste was a good idea, and you feel so guilty about becoming a murderous snake-man and going on a decades long rampage that you decided to do whatever they wanted to try to make it up to them...that and you have intimacy issues. It probably made you feel more secure having a controlled business arrangement rather than doing the normal thing and just letting yourself fall for someone."

"Is that a little bitterness I sense there? Jealousy doesn't become you, darling."

Harry straightened from where he'd been indolently leaning against one of the posts and strode towards Tom, his eyes flashing in fury.

"Get over yourself. I'm just calling it like I see it."

Tom whirled from his spot staring out over the grounds and stepped towards Harry and then began to slowly circle one another.

"Come now, Harry. We can be honest with one another. We both know what's going on here. You saw opportunity and came running."

"You wish. If you think for one moment I've been pining for you, Mr. two-timing jerk, you've got another thing coming."

"I wasn't two-timing you! I had a perfect plan and you went and ruined it by running off!"

"Oh, is that so? I told you exactly what I thought of your plan and my feelings on the matter haven't changed!"

"If you would just stop being so childish about the whole matter..." Harry scoffed and stopped his restless circling. The tension and fury drained out of him and his face took on a serious mien.

"I don't even know why we're doing this. It hardly matters now--it's too late for any of that. I'm already spoken for, I'm afraid and the contracts are all signed and sealed."

Tom slowly stiffened and his face went blank.

"Excuse me?"

"Did I stutter? I'm betrothed, I'll be getting married as soon as I graduate. It won't be for a few years yet, of course..."

"Who is she?" Tom's voice had gone flat and cold. Harry huffed and crossed his arms.

"Hermione Granger, obviously. You remember her, right? She's my distant cousin, and we all agreed it was for the best to bring her back into the fold, so to speak. She wants to work for a bit before we try for it, but we've already decided on two children." Harry said very matter-of-fact.
"She'll be an asset in many ways. She's intelligent, very organized, and she's already involved with the corporation from the inside, which means she'll likely be a great help to me in running it. It's a good match, really."

He sauntered past Tom and leaned with his back against the rail and studied the other man in silence for a few moments, before letting his eyes roam the length of his body speculatively.

"You know, maybe I was too hasty before. My being married really needn't change anything. Hermione is a sensible girl, I'm sure I can make her understand my need for occasional playtime..." Harry mused as he ran a hand up Tom's arm.

"You want me to be your toy? Coming at your beck and call when you're not too busy? You think I would share you?" Tom hissed in affront.

Harry's playful musing demeanor vanished like mist.

"No. However I think you might now understand a bit of what you put me through when you tried pulling the same shit on me." he smirked in satisfaction. "Still insist you weren't two-timing me, you bastard?" Harry growled, all playfulness gone.

Tom seemed rather off-kilter from the sudden change of attitude, but he quickly pulled himself together and glared at Harry in real irritation.

"Are you getting married or aren't you?"

"What do you think, genius?"

Harry rolled his eyes when Tom just continued glaring at him.

"Unless I miss my guess, Hermione's probably in there right now batting her eyes at Ron Weasley...or nagging him. It's one or the other. His girlfriend was apparently secretly evil, so he's single again, and her and Krum called it quits this summer after trying the long-distance thing for a little while."

The tension, unnoticeable until it drained away, slowly leaked out of Tom and he moved to lean against the rail beside him.

"Yes, I vaguely remember you mentioning that."

They lapsed into silence for a while, each brooding on their separate thoughts.

"You never told your family about us." Tom said quietly into the silence.

"Of course I didn't."

"Ashamed of me?"

"Don't be a moron. I didn't want them paying too much attention to where you were sleeping at night. Neither of them paid much mind when it was just my 'buddy Tom' staying over. It would have been a whole different kettle of fish had it been my boyfriend Tom staying over."

Harry sighed then, sounding tired and out of sorts.

"We never really talked about what we were doing or where it was going or anything. Had it gotten serious and had we started talking about a future I would have. In retrospect I'm glad I never told them. It would have been unbearable having to listen to them going on and on about what a low-
down dirty bastard you were when I was quite miserable enough already. The only one who actually knows anything of what happened with us is Luna."

Tom sighed as well and his hands flexed on the rail as he considered his next question. His mouth ran away with him before he could reconsider whether it was a good idea.

"Do you think we could start over?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure it would be in my best interest to do so."

Tom took a fortifying breath. The question was already out there, he might as well go for broke.

"A clean slate. We could try to do things right this time."

In spite of his outward confidence, he found himself holding his breath while he waited for Harry's answer.

Harry stared out into the darkness for a long time, worrying his lip while he was lost in thought. Finally he nodded slightly as though coming to a decision.

"I'll tell you what. I have several days of holiday vacation left. Come by a time or two to visit and we'll talk."

"Just talk?" Tom asked.

He sounded slightly pouty, not that he would ever admit as much. Harry snorted and bumped their shoulders together.

"Yes." he asserted, sounding slightly exasperated, before growing serious once more.

"The worst part about this whole thing was that I lost my friend Tom. Boyfriend Tom was a pretty new thing and he hadn't been around for too long. Friend Tom had been a huge part of my life for a long time in various ways, and for what, eight months of that time we were living, eating, and sleeping in the same place, and were together most of the time. Give me back my friend Tom. In time, we can work on the other."

Tom struggled with himself for a moment, until he remembered who he was talking to.

"I missed you too."

"Glad to hear it. I did wonder sometimes."

Fireworks began shooting off overhead and they could hear the party guests cheering in the distance and crying "Happy New Year!"

"Happy birthday."

Tom and Harry glanced at each other, smiled wryly and moved in for a kiss. They had both intended for it to be little more than a chaste peck on the lips, a promise of things to come if all went well. It didn't quite work out that way.

When they separated for breath, Harry scowled at him. "We're supposed to be working on being friends again!"

"This always was part of us being friends, Harry, and you know it as well as I do."
Tom sighed as he pulled him in close and wrapped his arms around him. Harry thumped his side lightly, but he didn't move away. His own arms wrapped around Tom and they relaxed into one another.

In the bushes, Draco was rubbing his ear trying to dispel the ringing from the high pitched squeal Pansy had let out.

Across the way, in another set of bushes, Lucius, Narcissa and Snape were staring with their eyes bugged out. Madame Maxime just smiled and nodded to herself in satisfaction.

"Never doubt a Frenchwoman when she speaks on matters of love."

In yet another set of bushes, Sirius sighed while Adeline rubbed his back, Andromeda and Dora both sighed at the romance of it all, and Barty and Ted looked vaguely embarrassed and wondered how they'd been talked into hiding in the bushes in the middle of a party to spy on Harry and his boyfriend.

As always, the Hogwarts Express and platform 9 3/4 was a seething hive of activity as the students and their families got ready to part once more. As the train pulled out the students hung from the windows and waved till the platform was out of sight, before settling down for the long trip back to school.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I am so happy the holidays are over." Ginny grumbled irritably.

"You are? Why?"

"I've been grounded almost the whole bloody time! The only times I got out of the house the whole holiday was to the stupid Ministry party--which my parents drug me home from early, and Ron's stupid chess match. It's boring watching people play chess! The only good part of the whole night was when that nutter Rebekka started shrieking and whacking Ron about the head for beating her. I wish I'd had a camera, it was too funny!"

"Yeah, thanks Gin." Ron replied sourly. His bad mood just made Ginny laugh harder.

Cho stayed in her seat as the other prefects left the compartment. Cedric, head boy that year, had slipped her a note asking her to stay behind once the meeting was over. When the last of them had left--the head girl lingered for a while, taking her own sweet time and eyeing the two of them before she finally ran out of excuses--Cedric locked the door and settled down in on the bench across from her with a sigh and raked his hands through his hair a few times before finally subsiding and fixing her with a serious look.

He looked tired, she realized, tired and ill. Guilt squirmed in her stomach for making him look like that. Cedric just stared at her in silence for several minutes, until the air grew thick with tension. She nearly jumped out of her seat when he finally started to speak.

"Cho… I've been doing a lot of thinking over the holidays."

"Oh?"
"I've been completely miserable, you know. I haven't been able to sleep or eat properly in months. I'm worn out and exhausted and I realized I just can't do this anymore."

Cho's insides froze and she braced herself as though expecting a fearful blow.

"When we leave this car today, I don't want to see you except at prefect meetings. No more longing glances in the hallways, no more tearful eyes across the great hall, no more dramatic pauses in the streets of Hogsmeade. If I see you in the distance, I'm going to turn away, and I want you to do the same. You're engaged, it's not fair to your fiancé for us to keep doing this now that you've chosen to honor your parent's wishes. It's not fair to me either. I can't move on or even just stop hurting while everything stays is this weird limbo. It's not fair to you either, it's hard on you too, anyone can see that."

"Do you expect me to be able to just stop caring about you?"

"No. What I do expect is for you to do some soul searching in the coming months. I want you to think about what it is you really want, and who you want to share your life with. I went to see a moo-vee over the holidays. At first, I was really rooting for Woodward and Isabella--they were in love, and they couldn't stay away from each other. I thought to myself, yeah, that's the way it is. It gets inside you and nothing else matters. The thing is, as the story continued, I began to realize how selfish they were. They didn't care how their relationship was hurting her family or endangering his, they didn't care how it ruined friendships, and that guy Jacques--he was a good friend to her and he loved her and she just kept hurting him again and again, and she didn't care because all that mattered to her was Woodward. I realized that we were acting the same way, like nothing else mattered but the two of us."

"C-Cedric…why are you…I love you!"

"And I love you." Cedric agreed simply. "But tell me, Cho, do you love me enough to give up your family, to tie yourself to someone with an uncertain future? You need to know the answer to that. In the meantime, let me go. You're moving on, give me a chance to do so as well."

Outside, the head girl, assorted prefects--including Padma Patil who had a notebook out and was taking notes for a new story, scrambled away from the door and ducked into nearby compartments to hide as Cedric exited. They peeked out the windows as he passed. He still looked worn, but he seemed at peace for the first time in months. Padma snuck towards the prefects' compartment and peeked inside, to see Cho pensively staring out the window, lost in thought, while absently twirling her engagement ring around on her finger.
Harry ladled out a bit of the potion he was making and let it dribble back into the cauldron. It was like water, even though the book said it should have the consistency of syrup by this stage.

He and Neville had been doing a lot of extra reading in potions and it was slowly paying off, but that didn't mean they'd become experts. He went back over the recipe line by line and tried to see what he'd missed. He thought he had the answer, but he just wasn't sure.

The third ingredient he dimly remembered seeing listed as a 'thickening agent', and yet it hadn't done so here. Was the stuff old or bad and hadn't had the right properties anymore? He didn't think so--he'd taken it from the same stores everyone had and yet he saw a few cauldrons with the right consistency. He dug out the little handbook he and Neville had compiled from a variety of sources which explained the reasons you did certain things at certain times when making potions. It would be nice if someone had already made such a thing--and perhaps they had, it just wasn't at the Hogwarts library. There it was--clockwise stirs to increase potency.

The recipe hadn't called for any stirring between steps. Deciding there was nothing to do but try to fix it, he stirred the concoction and lifted his stirring rod to let the potion slide off. It did look a little thicker, but not enough. According to his research, stirring a magically significant number of times added to the effect. He stirred twice more--improvement, but still not enough. He stirred four more times--couldn't get more significant than seven--and lifted the rod again. It had worked. The potion had thickened to the consistency of syrup.

He checked the recipe and got the next ingredient. It was supposed to turn pale blue next. He dropped in the shredded roots and smiled when it started to turn color--except it kept darkening to sapphire rather than staying at the pale blue it was supposed to be. Harry bit his lip uncertainly and gave the potion three counterclockwise stirs to reduce the effect of the roots, and felt his shoulders unknott as the color dimmed. Perfect. He now just had to let it simmer for fifteen minutes and then cool and he could bottle up a sample.

He dug his potions journal out of the drawer at his workstation and copied down the recipe they were working on, and then added the problems he'd encountered and the steps he'd taken to correct them at the bottom, explaining his reasons why and their effect. He was just finishing up when his timer ran out. He vanished the flames from beneath the cauldron to let it start cooling and began cleaning up his station.

"You should all be finishing up now. Bottle up a sample for me and one for yourselves to keep at your station. When you hand in your sample, I want each of you to take one of these" Snape pointed to a pile of papers on the end of his desk. Look it over and be prepared to brew it next week during class."

Hermione had just finished bottling her samples when she caught sight of Harry's sitting on his workstation. They were pale blue and viscous while hers were both darker blue and runny. Her eyes darted around the rest of the room and she spotted a couple more that had turned out correctly,
though many of them looked like hers did. With a frown she shoved her potions journal into her satchel after putting away her sample in the bottom drawer of her workstation, which had racks to hold the vials of potions they'd made, and went to hand in her day's work, seething in indignation. She didn't know what she'd done wrong—she was sure she'd followed the recipe exactly! It looked like another library trip for research and another evening spent in the labs so she could remake her potion. She grabbed a copy of next week's potion and stalked from the room after taking one last resentful glance at Harry's potion.

Harry headed up to hand in his sample. Snape took it and glanced up to see who it was so he could note it in his book. An odd look crossed his face when he saw it was Harry. He took the potion without comment and bent himself over his book to make notes.

It was odd. He noticed Snape kept looking at him strangely since they'd all returned from the holidays. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

He moved to grab the work for next week and almost ran into Draco. Draco stepped back and waved him on, and waited till he was clear to approach Snape's desk himself. He was another one who was acting strangely. Pansy too, now that he thought on it, though she mostly just kept grinning at him.

He caught up with Neville, who was waiting by the door.

"Something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, no… I was just wondering about something is all."

"Oh? What?"

"Well, this recipe… I think it's…"

"What?"

Neville had an epiphany. "It's got mistakes and is probably missing directions. That's why we got it in advance to make next week. We have to fix it first, just like we had to figure out how to fix the one today. Snape is a sadistic bastard. Tricking us like this does sound like something he'd get a kick out of."

"He might not be being sadistic, you know. Someone working as a healer or a potions master probably has to be able to do this sort of thing on the fly."

"Let's make sure we really do our research then--I remember too well all the different accidents that happened in potions over the years. I don't want the thing exploding in my face."

"He doesn't like explosions in his classroom. It'll probably boil over and give you a painful or disfiguring wound."

"That's not really any better."

"Ginny, come on, practice."

Ginny grimaced and pushed aside her breakfast. "Is it okay if I sit this one out? I'm not feeling so hot."
Angelina, who was captain that year glowered at her. "Fine, but I expect you to make it up on your own time. I'm not having us lose the cup this year just because you're too delicate to do your part."

"Excuse me?" Ginny hissed. Angelina was unimpressed. "You don't look sick to me. If you're skiving off practice to go meet a boy, you're off the team."

Ginny spluttered in outrage--she'd been on the team for years now and she'd never skived off to meet a boy, or skived off at all for that matter! How dare she! It didn't help that Ron, Fred and George didn't defend her, they just flushed--in embarrassment or anger she couldn't tell--and strode off behind Angelina. She was getting really sick of all her brothers treating her like they were all because she'd danced with an older guy at the ball. Katie and Alicia just shrugged and followed them. The nerve of the whole lot of them! She was about to jump up and storm after them to give the bunch of rotters a piece of her mind, but her stomach lurched alarmingly making her rethink the idea.

She felt awful. She'd barely been able to eat anything--half the stuff on the table smelled off to her; she'd had a heck of a time finding something that didn't make her want to puke, and it hadn't been easy trying to eat when her stomach was roiling. The little bit of porridge she'd gotten down was now laying in her stomach like a rock. She stood carefully, wary of setting her nausea off again and started for the door.

"Might as well just bite the bullet and head to the hospital wing for a stomach soother. Once it takes effect, I'm sure I'll be able to convince Madame Pomfrey to let me leave. If I'm lucky I'll make the end of practice--stupid Angelina!--I don't know what George sees in her…or is it Fred? Maybe it's both? They share everything else… Ew! Bad thought, bad thought! Man, this sucks. Why'd I have to ick first to be sick first thing in the morning?"

Ginny was halfway to the hospital wing when a blood-chilling, horrifying, frightening thought occurred to her.

What if she was pregnant?
The thought was so shocking, so terrifying, that she actually saw spots before her eyes as she very nearly fainted.

"Are you alright there, deary?" A nearby portrait asked curiously. Ginny mustered up a smile, though a very weak one. "Fine. I just remembered I forgot to do one of my assignments." she laughed.

"Oh, best get to it then."

"I will."

She needed someplace away from prying eyes and nosy portraits to think. She turned as casually as she could and started towards the second floor near the DADA classroom. There was a section down there with no portraits. She'd just commandeer one of the empty classrooms for a bit.

She found one that would serve for her purposes and sunk down on one of the dusty stools that were packed away in there--just in time, given how her legs were shaking. She covered her face with her hands and wrestled with the urge to either start screaming or crying hysterically. Either one would draw attention which she didn't need right now--not until she'd figured out her next step, anyway.
What was she going to do? She didn't even want to imagine her parents' reactions, let alone her brothers…and what about Rolf? Did she really want to be tied to him for life?
That was when a second horrifying thought occurred to her--what if Rolf refused to marry her?
What was she going to do then? Her life, such as it was, would be over--she'd be ruined. What guy was going to want to marry a girl with a bastard child? No one, that's who.

Another horrible thought crossed her mind--quidditch. She wouldn't be allowed to play once people found out, and if she hid it so she could play anyway and something were to happen, she'd be shunned even worse than for just being unmarried and pregnant in the first place.

She probably wouldn't be able to finish school…and that meant no being scouted by the Harpies, and without any NEWTs she would only be qualified for low-level jobs with poor pay.--Even if she managed to find a job she was willing to take, what the heck was she going to do with the brat when it was born? Her mum had the twins to look after, and she had no money to hire a nanny or anything.

Bit by bit the beautiful future she imagined for herself crumbled down around her. What was she going to do? How was she going to live? She'd be homeless, penniless, destitute, while the bastard child of a self-serving prick whimpered and clawed at her skirts.

She covered her mouth to stifle a scream as she saw all her hopes and dreams crumbling down around her.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, despairing, but as she began to come back to herself a new determination filled her. This was a setback, nothing more. She would have all her dreams come true, it would just take a bit of maneuvering.

She would be able to complete her OWLs this year. So long as she had those, she was a fully qualified witch. The absence of NEWTs would be regrettable, but unimportant so long as she got the rest of what she wanted.

She needed to seduce Harry Potter before the week was out and then go to Madame Pomfrey for a checkup--she didn't dare go near the medical wing before then or the ruse would be up.

Madame Pomfrey when she discovered she was pregnant would call in her family. They would demand to know who had done it to her. She would be reluctant and cry and admit it was Harry. Her father and brothers would go and beat him near to death--unfortunate, but useful in this case. He'd be too out of it to object or deny the charges.

Once Harry was brought in, her dad would call Dumbledore to come and marry them. Once that was done she was home free. She could finish out the year and then go home with Harry to his castle to await the birth. He had house elves--they could take care of the kid, which meant she'd be able to finish school and get scouted for the Harpies. It wouldn't matter even if that didn't happen, because she'd still be rich, have a nice home and everyone would be happy. Problem solved.

Ginny stood and a fierce, determined look overtook her face. She needed to make some love potion, shag Harry six ways to Sunday and then get married. The sooner the better. All her dreams would come true. She would see to it.

Ginny huffed and tossed the library book on top of the others she'd already consulted. There
weren't any love potion recipes in the books she was able to access--at least none that she could find. What was she supposed to do now? The clock was ticking.

She had a sudden thought and sat up straighter. Amortentia. It was NEWT level love potion, and she knew this because her friends in NEWT level potions had made it earlier this year. What's more, there were vials of the stuff just laying around in the classroom. Hermione had told her they were all supposed to keep samples for themselves--probably to compare to the next when they redid them if they didn't turn out right. They'd made amortentia months ago, so no one should notice if she swiped a vial or two. She even knew who to steal it from--Draco Malfoy. Hermione had mentioned once that she sat right up front and he was next to her. He was a nasty smug Slytherin but he did make good potions. She didn't dare steal it from Hermione--she'd go running off to tattle to the teacher first thing. Although...maybe Malfoy would as well. She better make a fake to swap with the real one. No one would ever notice, though if she was going to do that, she'd best just swipe one of Hermione's--she trusted her over ferret-face any day.

Resolved, she sauntered out of the library and started for the dungeons.

It took some time to get to the right classroom--for some reason the dungeons seemed to be jumping today. She ran across no less than two snogging couples, a trio of firsties planning a prank, and Professor Snape strolling around like a big, overgrown bat. It had been far more difficult and annoying than it should have been, but she was finally there.

She peeked in the window and froze, cursing. Hermione and a couple of Hufflepuffs were in there brewing. She wrestled down the urge to scream and stomp her feet and crept down the hall to hide out and wait. She needed this, the sooner the better.

Her patience was rewarded fifteen minutes later--the lunch bell was about to ring. She waited till the students annoyed chatter--apparently Snape had given them a bad recipe that had been missing a couple of steps or something--died away down the hall. She carefully checked up and down the hall and scurried across to the classroom and slipped inside and then ducked down so she wouldn't been seen by anyone passing through the window on the door. She pulled the drawer on Hermione's workstation and quickly went through the neatly labelled vials and smiled in triumph when she found the amortentia. She pulled a vial filled with water from her pocket and cast a quick spell to duplicate Hermione's label on it and, and then charmed the water the same color as the potions she was stealing, before slotting it into the empty spot. Once that was done she crept back out and ghosted down the hall. She took a roundabout route back towards the main part of the castle and headed into lunch. Mission accomplished.

This however, was the easy part. Now, she had to corner Harry somewhere alone and seduce him. Deciding it was better to lay the groundwork before truly putting her plan into action, she dabbed a bit of amortentia behind both ears. It should draw Harry's attention subtly. Hopefully she'd be able to manage to get some into his drink tonight as well. Realizing she'd almost forgotten an important part of her plan, she pulled one of her hairs and dropped it in the vial and watched it dissolve, before capping it and putting it away.

When she arrived at the door of the great hall and started towards the Gryffindor table she smiled in satisfaction--the seat next to Harry was empty. Providence was on her side. Obviously they were meant to be together.

Sadly her elation ended as she started to smell the aroma of dinner. Her stomach started to do a slow roil once more. How unfair--it was afternoon, not morning! She slid into place and shivered slightly at the warmth radiating from Harry. That would soon be hers for eternity. She would have liked to have shivered in delight at the thought, but she was too busy trying to keep from heaving.
She saw Harry's nose twitch slightly and then he inhaled and got a slightly dreamy smile on his face. Yes! It was working already. She started filling her plate with the least objectionable foods she saw and waited for her moment.

Lunch was nearly over before it came. Hermione had her nose buried in a book and wasn't paying the rest of them any mind. Parvati and Lavender were talking to some other girls further down the table. Ron looked away from her direction to search out any platters that still had food on them--the ones closest to him had all been stripped bare. That's when it happened. Harry turned to face Neville. Her eyes darted around, checking everyone as she stealthily dipped a bit of potion into Harry's mostly full cup. She stuck the vial back in her pocket and continued eating very slowly so as not to stir up her stomach again.

She nearly jumped out of her seat when Harry suddenly addressed her.

"What's up with you, Ginny? You're not usually so quiet."

"I'm just tired is all. Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

Harry laughed. "I can't think of anything off the top of my head." He reached for his juice and slowly brought it to his lips. Did he look suspicious there for a second? Had he hesitated?

It was excruciating waiting for him to down the potion while looking innocent and unconcerned. She ate a few more bites and tried to force her heart rate down and willed her hands not to shake. Harry set his cup back down and she chanced a discreet glance at it. It was empty. Victory was hers.

"See you all later. Me and Nev have something to do."

Ginny wanted to scream in frustration. How long did the stuff take to work anyway? Shouldn't he be making moon eyes at her by now? Through sheer force of will she tried to keep any of her thoughts from showing on her face, but it was hard. She frowned slightly when Neville looked back over his shoulder at her before following after Harry. She didn't know why, but that glance made her nervous. She put her worries out of her mind for the moment and tried to concentrate on eating a bit more. She was being silly. Neville didn't know--Harry didn't know; and even if Harry did know, he hadn't said a word to Neville after drinking his juice. She was just being paranoid. The potion should start turning Harry's thoughts towards her. She needed to corner him somewhere secluded and have her wicked way with him…and then in a day or two, she could approach Madame Pomfrey and she'd be home free. She just had to keep it together until then.

Severus Snape was just finishing up his dinner and lingering over his tea when a house elf popped up quietly beside him and handed him a note. He took a discrete glance around to see if he could get any clue who might have sent it but everyone was still at dinner…except for Longbottom, Potter, Montague, Stebbins and Bode. He plucked the note from the elf and nodded to it in thanks and read it over quickly. More curious now, he finished the last of his dinner, drained his cup and set off at a leisurely pace towards the dungeons. Potter and Longbottom were waiting for him in a cross way away from any portraits.

"Yes?"

"Ginny Weasley tried to dose me with amortentia just a few minutes ago. I don't have the tainted pumpkin juice though; I vanished it from my cup while I was pretending to drink it."
"And what makes you so certain there was anything in it?"

"See this?" Potter held up his right hand and showed him the ring on his pinky. "It detects foreign substances in any food or drink you have in your hand. I got it from one of the Slytherins a few years back. It went off after Ginny sat down next to me, but I had drank out of the cup earlier before she arrived. I think she was wearing some of it as well. I remember what mine smelled like when we made it in class before. I noticed the smells when she sat down."

"And why would Miss Weasley resort to love potions, Potter? She seems to be quite the popular girl and she never has before."

"She was nauseous this morning. She either is or thinks she's pregnant. That's our guess at least. The most likely culprit we can surmise is unlikely to step forward. He already pretended to not know who she was when asked if he knew her, and he's betrothed. We figure she's trying to cover her tracks and rope someone into the job before anyone else finds out."

"Amortentia is a NEWT level potion, it isn't easy to make and it's also time consuming to brew. Where would she have gotten it?"

"Our best guess is she stole it from the fifth year potions lab."

"Yeah, she knows we brewed it earlier this year. I'm guessing she either stole it from Hermione or from Draco Malfoy." Harry nodded.

"Why those two?"

"Hermione's smart and she'd trust a potion made by her. She hates Malfoy, but she knows he's good at potions." Neville shrugged.

"She would probably consider it a bonus if he got in trouble for missing some of his work. That's my guess anyway."

"You two seem to have a lot of guesses."

"We know Ginny."

Snape eyed them both for a few moments in silence, before jerking his head to indicate they should leave. "Run along. I'll look into things."

"Thank you, sir."

"Sirius! Adeline! Hellooo!" Harry's voice sounded from the mirror.

"Harry? Hey kiddo! What's wrong?" Sirius demanded, his initial happiness quickly deflating upon taking a good look at his godson's face.

"Is there such a thing as a paternity test in the wizarding world?"

Sirius paled and stared at Harry speechless for several long moments.

"You got someone pregnant."
"No, Sirius, relax. I think someone's trying to say that I did. All I want to know is what options are there to help me prove my innocence. I do not want to find myself being married at wand point and getting stuck raising someone else's kid."

"Just tell them you didn't do it!"

"Who's going to believe me if she insists I did? I can visualize the scenario; I'm sure you can as well:

"It was him! He's the cad that seduced me and stole my innocence!"
"I didn't do it! I'm innocent!"
"Now he's trying to run out on me and our poor, innocent baby! Does his evil know no bounds?"
"You cad!"
"You monster!"
"Think you can treat our baby sister like that? That's it, we're all going to beat you till you're half dead!"
"Someone call a minister! Let's get these two married post-haste!"

Harry did the whole dialogue, complete with voices and dramatic gestures. Sirius ended up laughing in spite of the seriousness of the conversation.

Once he'd calmed a bit he asked "What exactly happened?"

Harry filled him in on the love potion, his and Neville's later surmise about why Ginny had suddenly decided to go that route, and their later conversation with Snape.

"He's on the case? Things should be fine then. He lives to get students in trouble. That was a stupid move on Ginny's part though--amortentia is illegal to use on someone; it's like liquid imperious. The only reason they teach it in NEWT classes is to give everyone a fair chance of recognizing it if it's used."

Harry paled at the thought of having just missed having his will compromised to such a degree. "Just amortentia or all love potions?"

"Amortentia is the strongest. I suppose technically all love potions would fall into the same class as imperious, but most of them just make you slightly more inclined to feel warm and fuzzy towards the target. Amortentia is the strongest one and it completely warps the target's personality making the object of the potion the sole focus of their every thought. How long ago were these potions made?"

"A couple of months ago--October or so."

"It also gets stronger the longer it sits and has a more profound effect. It really is a good thing you didn't drink it--not only would it have warped your mind, it might have done so to such a degree that you just pounced on her right there in the great hall."

Harry paled further and shivered at the thought.

"If you went and told Snape as soon as it happened, everything should be fine. If you end up getting cornered by angry brothers in the meantime, give me a call and I'll be right there. You're underage, they'd have to bring me in to give permission in any case, and if anyone tries to ignore that little fact, raise a ruckus till I get there. I wonder what the hell the girl was even thinking. She could end up in prison for this--they'd probably give her a lighter sentence because she's still a young, stupid kid, but still."
"I doubt that'll happen. The Weasleys are Dumbledore's pet purebloods. She'll probably barely get a slap on the wrist, if that, and the whole thing will likely be covered up. If she is actually pregnant and isn't just panicking though, part of covering everything up would involve getting her married quickly, and I don't intend to be the sacrifice."

"And you won't be. Why'd she go after you, anyway? Wouldn't her last boyfriend have made more sense?"

"Chances are they didn't get that far. The only time they were ever together was at Hogwarts, and while I suppose someone trying hard enough could find the opportunity, it isn't at all easy with portraits, house elves, ghosts, not to mention overprotective brothers, keeping a close watch on where she is. No, me and Neville think it's this guy she was sneaking out of her house to meet, both this summer and we think over the holiday as well, even though he's engaged to someone else… and given some things Ron said, he might have been sneaking into her room. After the Ministry party, Ron said his dad put up wards to keep Ginny from sneaking out anymore. He said she whined about everyone treating her like a baby, but that was about it. Two days later their oldest brother put another set of wards up to keep boys from sneaking in and she went ballistic, Ron said. As for why she chose me, she's been obsessed with me since before she started school. Her dearest wish is to be Mrs. Boy-Who-Lived someday---not Mrs. Harry Potter, you'll notice. I guess she figured if she was stuck anyway, this was her last chance to bag the prize she's been after, so she might as well go for broke."

"Makes sense, I guess. Alright, I'll let you go. Keep me updated."

"Will do."

"Severus, what is this about?" McGonagall demanded as soon as she appeared with Ginny in tow.

"Just a moment. Accio"

Ginny who was already looking twitchy went white and her eyes grew huge in her face as the vial tore out of her pocket. She tried to grab it, but her arms felt like lead and her hands felt numb. Snape caught it and glanced at the label, before scanning it with his wand. He pursed his lips and handed the vial to McGonagall who took it gingerly while looking confused. She hissed when she read the label, both for its contents and the name on it. Snape pulled the fake he had found in Miss Granger's student sample cupboard--he'd almost ignored Potter and Longbottom's assertion that the girl had stolen and used a potion from the classroom when he saw all the racks filled. It was a good thing he'd actually thought to check the potions. He handed it to McGonagall gesturing her to test it, before taking the real potion back from her. McGonagall ran her wand over it and her lips thinned in displeasure. Snape cast a look at Ginny and then at the portraits that were watching in interest. He put up a privacy ward for the next part--whether it was true or not, he didn't want the Weasley family getting word that he was the one who'd spread word the girl was or thought she was pregnant--they were legion, they held grudges, and the twins were here in the castle for the remainder of the year. No thank you. He wanted to be able to eat without fear and sleep sometimes.

McGonagall's face whitened and her eyes grew huge in her face before she thought to try to master her expression. He sympathized--he'd feel much the same should he hear a similar tale about one of his fourth year Slytherins.

When McGonagall was once again in control of herself, Snape took down the ward.
"Come along, Miss Weasley." she ordered. She couldn't seem to be able to bring herself to look at her.

Ginny was looking decidedly pale and shaken by this point.

"W-where are we going?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Come along." McGonagall snapped with uncharacteristic sharpness before striding off.

Ginny flinched and slowly started after her. Snape fell into step behind her. The girl was already desperate and making rash decisions. He didn't intend to let her out of his sight--who knows what she'd get it into her head to do next?

They parted ways at the fourth floor. McGonagall continued on to the hospital wing, Snape detoured to the headmaster's office. One, he didn't want to be there for the girl's exam--probably wouldn't be allowed in any case. Two, he wanted to make sure the barmy old codger actually agreed she needed punishing--he was under no illusion that the old man would actually allow them to call the aurors even though giving anyone amortentia was quite illegal. He would consider it sufficient to look at the girl all disappointed like and let the twinkle die in his eyes for a moment and then send her on her way. Neither he, nor he was guessing Minerva, would stand for that--especially as this wasn't the first time the girl had run amok, even if the potions part was new territory for her. Always in the past Albus had poo-poohed the need for harsh punishment, while nattering on about how sad it was that nasty dark-wizard children were being mean to the poor girl (!) and while casting thinly-veiled reproachful looks at Severus himself--as though he or his Slytherins had anything to do with the girl hexing people. Ugh!

Regardless of whatever other punishments she received, she was going to feel the rough side of his tongue, and do several detentions with him. He'd make sure she read a few horror stories of things going badly because of a foolish mistake in using potions. That amortentia she'd stolen had been sitting for two months at least...actually no, closer to three and a half months--and it got stronger by an exponential amount the longer it sat. It was sheer providence the Potter boy was a paranoid little bastard that wore poison-detecting rings and kept a bezoar on his person at all times. Had the boy actually ingested the amount she'd given him, even diluted by pumpkin juice, chances are he would have pounced on the girl right there in the great hall and savagely raped her in full view of everyone, so great would his obsession be. It didn't bear thinking about.

Once the truth was known, no jury would have convicted him, but his life would have been ruined. It would be hard to ever look at him again without seeing the shadow of that frenzy hanging over him...that's if he survived. Chances are her brothers would have killed the boy the moment he started savaging the girl in the great hall--although that could go both ways. If he'd felt threatened enough with the possibility of his obsession's removal from his grasp, he might have killed the three boys before anyone could stop him. And one couldn't forget the dark lord. If Potter died...the kinder, gentler, most importantly saner dark lord they'd all gotten used to would likely be gone for good.

The stupid twit could have set off a bloody massacre with this stunt that might very well have meant the end of the wizarding world! No, he didn't care what Albus had to say or how much he twinkled or looked disappointed, the girl was going to suffer for her foolishness.

Ginny laid back on the hospital bed and stared at the ceiling miserably. She had nearly fainted on the spot when McGonagall had chivvied her into the hospital wing and sent her off with Madame
Pomfrey for a checkup. She'd never realized there were private rooms off the back until now. "Isolation rooms" Madame Pomfrey had called them, usually only needed if a student came down with an infectious disease like dragon pox or something of the sort, to keep the wider school population from running afoul of it. She didn't have dragon pox, so why she was being treated like she had an infectious disease, she didn't know.

Madame Pomfrey came in a moment later and nodded in satisfaction when she saw she'd changed into the hospital-provided gown, then pulled her wand to start scanning her. She finally put her wand down and nearly sagged in relief.

"Well, good news, girly--you're not pregnant."

Ginny's face drained of blood. "W-why were you testing me for that?"

"I was asked to. Now, why did you think you were pregnant? Have you been missing your monthlies?" she asked while scanning again, moving her wand differently this time.

"I was really nauseous this morning." Ginny replied with a sigh. The cat was out of the bag, it seemed. How, she didn't know, but there was no point beating around the bush any longer.

Pomfrey frowned and altered her scan. "You were hit with a nausea hex…other than that, you seem to be healthy as a horse."

"Nausea hex?" Ginny demanded indignantly. All that worry and trouble because someone cursed her? Who would do such a thing, and why?

"Indeed. Don't worry, it's easily rectified." Pomfrey assured her, flicking her wand once more. The lingering nausea that she'd been determinedly ignoring in the face of other worries vanished like mist and she felt herself relax for the first time all day.

Pomfrey tucked her wand away and fixed her with a basilisk stare while crossing her arms over her chest.

"I do hope you fully appreciate just how very lucky you are, you silly, foolish, reckless girl!"

Ginny recoiled at the woman's scathing words and venomous attitude, but Pomfrey just sniffed and shook her head at her like she was a lost cause.

"I'd best go give Minerva the good news. Get dressed."

Ginny got dressed and blinked back tears of anger and humiliation. She was getting really tired of everyone treating her like she was some dirty thing it was embarrassing to have around. It wasn't fair. So, she liked boys, and liked that boys liked her, so what? Why was that so wrong?

She headed back out into the hospital wing proper and found McGonagall and Pomfrey waiting for
her and talking quietly.

McGonagall's lips pressed down into a thin, white line when she caught sight of her and her eyes grew flinty. Ginny had to force herself to keep from reacting--McGonagall was an old maid. She'd probably never had a boyfriend in her life. She was probably just jealous--old cat.

"Come along, Miss Weasley." she sniffed, and led her towards the floo, not the doors as she had expected.

She held out the floo powder and motioned her to go first. "Headmaster's office. Get going. I'll be right behind you." Ginny scowled and took the powder, and threw it in, all the while wondering why she needed to go there. By the looks of things the stupid potion hadn't even worked. Stupid Hermione. Why didn't the sour old cat just give her detention and be done with it?

She didn't feel any better about things when she stepped out and found a scowling Snape, though merrily twinkling Dumbledore made her feel better.

It was too bad all this business had taken so long--there was probably no chance of making any part of quidditch practice now. Angelina was going to be pissy, but she could deal with that. She'd just have to make it up at the next one. She'd calm down after they won their next game, and she could remind her then that they had her to thank for their winning streak.

McGonagall stepped out a moment later, still looking like a pinched old lemon. Hmph, let her sneer all she liked. Dumbledore would just overrule her, say something barmy about the course of true love never running smoothly and send her on her way. She probably wouldn't even get detention. Feeling much better about everything she smiled and greeted Dumbledore cheerfully and even took one of the candies he offered her, before making herself comfy on the chair facing his desk.

Dumbledore continued twinkling until he got a whiff of something he'd not smelled in years--the curious mix of smells that characterized his childhood home, and the mixture of old books, parchment and faint hint of cologne that had always meant Gellert. It was so unexpected it almost blindsided him for a moment, and the mixture of guilt and old regrets that filled far too many of his private moments welled up in him with the sudden force of a tsunami.

Nearby, Snape was having a similar crisis--he could smell Lily's perfume, though it was a faint scent as though she'd been in the room moments before and the memory of her presence lingered. There was also a faint hint of his new home in Prince, now Snape, manor--summer air wafting in the gardens and a hint of wine. He and Olympe had made a nightly ritual of sorts that summer--a glass of wine before bed in the garden. Both were overpowered by the apple shampoo that Olympe favored and the smell of tropical flowers. He was very glad at times like this that he was a master occlumens--it meant he was able to push down the visceral remembrance of lying entwined with Olympe in their little bungalow, his face buried in her hair, while the warm, tropical air wafted through the window. Their first time together. The first time he'd been with a woman in far, far too long. He was able to hide both his pleased embarrassment from remembering that night so vividly while in his present company, and also his shock at learning that Olympe had claimed two of the three scents he smelled from amortentia--all three used to be related to Lily. She had been the only bright spot and the only happiness in his life for such a long time. Now she claimed only one part of three, and that third was fading.

He pushed it all down to dwell on later and drew his wand, casting a slightly too strong scourgify at the Weasley girl and breathed a sigh of relief when the scents faded from the room.

Ginny flailed at the unexpected attack and jumped to her feet, eyes flashing and hand inching towards her wand. "WHAT THE HELL, YOU GREASY, OVERGROWN BAT!"
McGonagall's voice cracked across the room like a whip. "Be seated, Miss Weasley! Twenty points from Gryffindor! You will keep a civil respectful tongue in your mouth, do you hear me!"

Ginny turned to argue the point, but Snape cut in at that point. "I could always make it more. Sit. Down."

Dumbledore pulled himself together from his unexpected trip down memory lane and regarded Ginny solemnly over his half-moon spectacles. Ginny felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. He no longer looked so twinkly and forgiving, and what's more he hadn't protested the loss of so many points from Gryffindor or chided Snape for hitting her with a spell.

"I've heard some very troubling things about your activities today, Miss Weasley." he said with grave solemnity.

Ginny gave him an abashed, winsome smile.

"I know it was a silly thing to do, headmaster. I don't know what I was thinking, really…I know everyone has told me to be patient, but I just thought if I could only get him to notice me and stop seeing me as his friend's little sister that the rest would work itself out. I've learned my lesson."

"I highly doubt that, girl" Snape cut in sourly. "If you really appreciated the full extent of your foolishness, you wouldn't be sitting here so complacently. You should be thanking your lucky stars that he didn't ingest any of it. You really have no idea what you almost unleashed you stupid, arrogant twit!"

"Now Severus, really" Dumbledore chided in his usual grandfatherly manner. "Young people…"

"No. I don't think you fully appreciate what almost happened either, headmaster. Let me lay out for you the worst case scenario…"

Ginny slowly paled, as did McGonagall as Snape laid out in graphic detail, and with considerable relish, what could have happened had her plan been successful. At first, Dumbledore listened sourly and with some irritation that Snape seemed to think he wouldn't have just been able to subdue the boy before any damage was done…when a horrible thought hit him.

Harry, though he didn't know it, was true master of the elder wand. The wand's first master had died while still master of it, making it an heirloom. One he'd won from Tom, the elder Peverell descendant when he'd bested him while still a baby. If he were in such a desperate frenzy as what Severus was describing, it might have meant that he couldn't have subdued him without borrowing another's wand, or in the worst case scenario--the elder wand might have started working to help him. He suppressed a horrified shudder at the very thought and sat back, chilled to the bone.

He wouldn't let anyone call in any aurors--Arthur and Molly would never forgive him--but he wasn't going to stand in the way of whatever punishment his two teachers wanted to give the girl. By the time they were done, Ginny was a white-faced, shaking mess. She stumbled out of the headmaster's office in a daze to go hide out in her dorm.

"WHAT THE HELL! WHERE ARE ALL OUR POINTS?" Cormac McLagen's horrified shout echoed over the entry hall. The crowd from the Melting Pot, who were like everyone else, headed off to dinner, surged forward to investigate before heading into the great hall. The Gryffindors lingered to stare at their counter, which was down 150 points, putting them in last place, when just earlier that same day they were in the lead. The Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws and Slytherins all bent
their heads together to speculate on what the culprits had done to lose so many points, and whether they should thank them for improving all their chances at the house cup.

The Weasley twins were nearly mobbed by their fellow Gryffindors when they appeared—in most cases one only had to look at them to find the most-likely culprit for point loss, especially so many, but they were as alarmed and indignant as everyone else. While everyone was interrogating everyone else at the table, to find out who did it, professor McGonagall took Angelina Johnson aside to have a brief word with her. Once McGonagall had gone her way, Angelina searched the table by eye for Ginny. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Fred, George! Where's that sister of yours? I want to give her a piece of my mind!"

"We haven't seen her since lunch. We haven't seen her most of the day, actually, since she didn't come to practice. Why?"

"She's off the team."

"Ang, come on! She said she didn't feel well."

"She wouldn't have lied about that, she loves quidditch!"

"Be reasonable!" they concluded in unison.

"Not my decision, McG just told me she was kicked off. I'm going to give her hell for skiving off and now leaving us in the lurch on top of it. Our next match is in three weeks, and I have to hold try outs and train up a new seeker before then. I'm going to kill her!"

Fred and George exchanged an alarmed look. Was Ginny seriously ill, and she'd been taken off for medical reasons?

"Weasleys! Give your sister hell for us! It's her fault we lost all those points!" Cormac declared as he strode towards them from the entryway. "I asked some of the portraits and they said Snape and McGonagall drug her off for stealing love potions and using them on people!"

"THAT LITTLE…" Angelina growled. "It seems I would have been left in the lurch regardless. I told her I'd kick her off if she was sneaking off to meet boys. I'm going to throttle miss hot-pants once I get a hold of her!"

"If Ginny"
"Is responsible"
"For all the lost points"
"She's probably"
"in hiding"

Angelina cracked her knuckles. "She has to sleep sometime. I think I'll be paying her a visit tonight when she tries sneaking into her dorm…if she's not there already. Hmm."

Angelina strode off towards Gryffindor tower to scream at Ginny before dragging her down to face the music. You couldn't properly shun someone if they refused to show their face in public.

While she did that, the twins hurried to where Harry was sitting.

"We need the map. Tell us you have it on you."

Harry glanced at them and dug around in his pouch a bit, withdrawing both the map he'd made and
the original Marauder's map. He tucked his own away and handed over the second.

"What do you need a map for?" Hermione asked curiously while straining her neck to try to see.

"We want to find Ginny and ask what the hell she was up to today."

"Yeah, McLagen seems to think she was slipping people love potions or some rot."

"She did." Harry grunted sourly. "She stole it from Hermione and slipped it to me at lunch. I vanished it before I drank any. This ring I got years ago really came in handy."

"She Did. What?" Hermione asked dangerously.

"Stole one of the potions from your cupboard."

Hermione shook with rage at the very thought. She didn't know why Snape had them keeping all those potions, but for all she knew they might be needed at some future point as part of her grade. No one messed with her grade point average. *No one.*

She snatched the map from the twins hands, boggled at it for a moment once she got a look, then scanned over it quickly with her eyes.

"She's hiding out in the old Melting Pot. Let's go." she growled, before stalking off.

Fred, George, and Ron who had been listening in, scrambled to follow her.

She still had the map in her hand. Harry summoned it back and tucked it away again. Hermione hesitated a moment, torn between her righteous fury and her desire to study a new piece of magic. Figuring she could always bug Harry about it later, her fury won out.

Ginny was sitting by herself, munching on a goody basket from the kitchen, when they found her. She nearly jumped out of her skin when the door slammed open and crashed into the wall, framing Hermione in the doorway. She looked surprisingly scary. Her bushy hair was puffed out more than usual and almost seemed to be crackling with electricity.

Ginny made a squeak that sounded rather like 'eep' and pressed her back into the wall in spite of herself. When Hermione came stomping towards her, she half expected the stones to crack beneath her feet.

"YOU DARE MESS WITH MY GRADES! I'LL KILL YOU!"

It wasn't until Ron spoke up that she even realized her three brothers were standing right behind the girl.

"What the hell, Ginny? You're so desperate to get with Harry you're using love potions now?"

"Just what the hell all did you do? Surely you didn't lose a hundred and fifty points"

"And get kicked off the quidditch team, just for a little thing like that." Fred and George put their two knuts in.

"Someone hit me with a nausea hex, okay? I panicked." Ginny blurted out.

"Nausea? What's that have to do with anything?"
"Nausea…you were nauseous this morning" Hermione said with horrified realization. "Oh you idiot! Tell me you aren't!"

"Aren't what? What's going on?" Ron demanded.

The twins were at first puzzled, but one could see the slow realization dawning on their faces as well. They looked at their baby sister like they'd never seen her before. Hermione pointed her wand at her and cast a spell none of them recognized.

Ginny sputtered and jumped to her feet. "What did you do to me!"

"Let me see your hands." Hermione said icily.

Everyone present looked at Ginny's hands when she held them up fearfully. They were fine.

Hermione stared at them in surprise and then puzzlement.

"But… I'm missing something here. You thought you were pregnant, right?"

"SHE WHAT!" Ron howled.

"I'm not pregnant, you jerk. Shut up!"

"Of course you're not, you idiot. You're still a virgin!" Hermione huffed, before tucking her wand away. "I think I'll let the spell stand though till you're much, much older. If nothing else it'll save us from any more of this sort of drama."

"Okay…is anyone else confused?"

"Yeah. What did you do?"

"Chastity charm. If you're not a virgin when it's cast on you, your hands turn bright red--literally 'caught red-handed'. If nothing happens, the charm took, which means the recipient is still a virgin. I read about it in a book on wizarding contracts. It was mentioned in conjunction with some of the more medieval betrothal contracts. It was cast on the witch about to be bound by contract before the family signed it, in view of both families. The boy's family was assured of a virgin bride for their son, and it made sure she couldn't mess around in the meantime without it being very obvious. Naturally no similar measures were taken on the boy. Stupid, sexist medieval mindsets!"

"What! You can't do that to me!"

"I just did, and you'll have to learn to live with it. Really it's for your own good. You ran around all day thinking you were pregnant and causing all sorts of trouble, when there's no earthly way you could have been. How you grew up on a farm and remained so clueless I'll never know, but it's obvious you're far too uniformed to be allowed to just keep jumping in broom closets with boys willy-nilly. Ignorant as you are, it's only a matter of time before today's scare becomes a reality. Honestly, with the number of boys you've been running around with, it's honestly a miracle you aren't knocked up."

"What the hell does living on a farm have to do with anything?" Ron asked, confused. Ginny was similarly confused.

Hermione looked at both of them and sighed, rolling her eyes. "Think about it." More blank stares.

"Mum always kept Ginny inside during springtime." Fred told Hermione with a snort. "Ron too, by the sound of it."
"Unbelievable. When we get back to the dorms, I'm going to give you a book. You are going to read it from cover to cover and I'll be quizzing you on it later." Hermione ordered.

"You're giving me homework now?" Ginny scoffed.

Hermione just narrowed her eyes and her hair bushed out a bit more. "YES. AND YOU'RE GOING TO DO IT OR YOU HAVE TO ANSWER TO ME."

Ginny shrunk back and 'eeped' again.

"Potter. Come walk with me."

Harry raised an eyebrow at Angelina and sighed, realizing what she must want.

"I need a new seeker. The next game is in three weeks. There isn't anyone particularly outstanding to be the replacement seeker…except you. I already know you can do it. Hell, you didn't even practice at all and you won the one and only game you were in without even trying really."

"Ange, I have a full course load. As it stands I can barely find time to finish all my homework. I don't even hardly have time to hang out in the Melting Pot anymore. How exactly am I supposed to fit quidditch into that?"

"Squeeze in an hour once in a while to run a few drills and I'll be satisfied. The season is already half over. Surely you can do that much for your house. You owe me, Potter. It's your fault I've lost my actual seeker."

"Excuse me?" Harry replied coldly. "It's my fault Ginny Weasley is an obsessed stalker fan girl who thinks taking away someone's free will is the path to true love? Go to hell."

Angelina for a moment looked ready to throttle him, but she closed her eyes and counted back from ten in her mind.

"Sorry, that was uncalled for. I'm just stressed. I'm taking my NEWTs this year, I'm captaining the team and I'm hoping to be scouted for the profession leagues. My hopes on that front were slowly dying as it was given Ron's uneven performance thus far, and now Ginny pulled this crap mid-season with our next game only three weeks away. We really need someone who's cool under pressure and knows their way around the pitch or we don't have half a chance of keeping the cup this year. I don't want Gryffindor losing the cup on my watch--Oliver would never forgive me, nor would McGonagall for that matter. I'm desperate and I'm prepared to play dirty and make life here a living hell for you if you don't come through for us. So? What's it going to be? Can I count on you?"

"I'll run a few drills on my own time when I can squeeze it in. I really can't afford losing several hours a week to team practices. If you agree to that, I'll play the next game."

"Done." Angelina agreed. They even shook on it. She seemed much less stressed once the deal was made. "I'll let the others know and get Hooch to find you a uniform and pads."

"Will do."

Harry glanced over curiously at Hermione when she flopped down in the seat next to him on the
couch, obviously agitated.

"What's up?"

"I want to absolutely throttle Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. It is simply appalling how stupidly ignorant they've left their daughter. All the trouble that could have been avoided had they just had a frank talk with her... Well, I've taken care of it. Maybe I should make copies and make sure the other girls in the dorm read it as well... It would probably be a good idea..."

"What book? What are you talking about?"

"I cast a chastity charm on Ginny"

"Gonna leave her running around red-handed?"

"That's the thing, she wasn't. She's still a virgin. There's no way the silly thing could have been pregnant, but she panicked because she doesn't understand anatomy properly."

"I don't follow you. Did she think you got pregnant from kissing? If so you'd think this mess would have happened years ago."

"No, she's not quite that ignorant. She knows how one normally gets pregnant, or at least has a vague idea."

"What did she think happened then?"

"Happily she and I had this particular conversation when we were alone. I can only imagine how her brothers would have reacted to knowing that she's been getting up to quite a lot even if she is still technically a virgin—that knowledge relieved them of quite a lot of their recent worries about her." Seeing Harry still didn't understand and was getting impatient, she finally got to the point. "She said she swallowed 'man juice' once, and worried that, since it would end up in the same place--her stomach--as if it went in the other end that it might have been enough."

Harry snorted and bit his lip. "Yeah, it's a good thing they weren't around for that particular tidbit. I can't see it going over at all well. But seriously? What an idiot."

"Actually, you'd be surprised the sorts of crazy ideas people can come up with, many of which were widely believed at one time or another because people didn't have factual information about how their bodies worked--pregnancy resulting from being in a public pool alongside men, from using a public toilet seat..."

"Public toilets are one sex only, usually."

"Like I said, crazy. I've given her a book that explains everything in a clear, concise manner. There's even a section debunking many of the myths and illogical ideas people have believed at one time or another. I'm sure it will be of great help to her."

"In a manner of speaking. Yeah, there won't be any more pregnancy scares unless she goes further, but she might become the very enthusiastic blow job queen of Hogwarts now that she knows it's safe."

Hermione grimaced. "I hadn't thought of that. Goodness, I hope she has more sense than that. I would hope this entire debacle would finally bring home that she's been pushing the envelope a little too far."
"She's hot-headed, stubborn, and does what she pleases. I don't think it's going to make any
difference, personally. If she ends up in trouble a year or two down the line because she refuses to
listen to anyone, that's on her. So long as she never tries again to rope me into being a meal-ticket
for herself and her bastard children I don't give a damn."

Luna arrived then and sat down across from them.

"Hi Luna. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

Harry stared at her a moment. "It was you, wasn't it? The nausea hex?"

"Yes. Rolf's been writing to me, you see, and I still wasn't sure if I quite believed his explanation. I
didn't realize my little test was going to have such far-reaching reactions."

Harry grimaced in sympathy. "You really liked him, didn't you?"

"I was starting to. I was even getting to the point where spending the rest of my life with him had
started to seem like a viable option. When I realized that, I decided I needed to clear up my doubts
one way or another."

"I thought it was just a unofficial, 'if it works out we'd all be pleased' sort of thing." Hermione said
in surprise.

"It was, till this holiday break. They were dating. In the afternoons and early evenings Luna and
Rolf were going on dates, getting to know each other, meeting up with his friends and having
dinner with his family."

Hermione's eyes grew wide in her face and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Um, Luna…I don't know if it helps any, but Ginny's still a virgin."

"Immaterial, they were getting up to quite enough to justify Luna ending things with him." Harry
snapped.

"Oh, good. I was beginning to worry I might have gone too far."

"What did you do?"

"I sent him a letter…and a small gift."

Meanwhile at Durmstrang.

"Professor Schultz isn't here yet?"

"No, the door is locked."

Rolf sighed and queued up with the rest of his classmates against the wall. Further down in the line
a scuffle broke out, sending the two boys behind him staggering into him and sending him
staggering into the boy ahead of him. The moment Rolf's front touched Dimitri's back, a dreamy
voice began echoing out of his pants.
"Chastity violation imminent. Back away from the penis. Back away from the penis."

Rolf froze and started down at his crotch, horrified. All around him, everyone else froze as well.

The temperature in the hallway suddenly seemed to drop twenty degrees. Rolf looked up slowly and found Dimitri staring at him, spooked and horrified.

"Just what were you trying to do to me?!!"

Rolf didn't have a chance to defend himself or explain. The last thing he saw was Dimitri's fist heading towards his face at high speed, and then everything went black.

Harry shook his head. "Whatever you did to him, I'm sure he deserves it."

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

Cho smiled happily at all her friends and hugged everyone nearby.

"Seventeen. How's it feel?"

"Sadly, not any different than sixteen."

"That's the same thing I said." Marietta laughed.

"I remember."

There was cake, and there were presents. While it was just she and her closest friends there in the corner of the room, the other denizens of the Melting Pot stopped by to offer their best wishes as well.

"It goes by so fast, doesn't it? It seems like just the other day we were ickle firsties shaking in our boots and worrying about what was going to happen during the Sorting, and now look at us. We're already most of the way through our sixth year and after next we'll be gone."

"Geez, you make us sound so old."

"Well, we're not old, but we're getting there, aren't we? Remember when it was all about hiding out in our secret clubhouse and playing games all the time? Now we're all so busy with our studies we hardly have a free moment to just hang out, and our concerns have all taken a decidedly more adult turn. No more secret clubhouses--these days it's all about who's going for what job, and who's marrying who…even who's having a baby."

"Celia Michaels?"

"Yeah, you heard huh?"

"Yeah, my mum mentioned it in her last letter. She's barely been out of school a year and she's having kids already."

"Speaking of all our adult concerns…” Robyn Pucey the seventh year prefect trailed off
meaningfully before turning expectant eyes on Cho. The other girls followed suit and Cho froze under their avid gazes.

"Um, yes?"

"Well? Spill, girl! We've all been counting the days till your birthday! What's it going to be?"

Cho sighed and smiled wryly at her friends.

"Truthfully? I've no idea."

The girls all slumped in stunned disbelief.

"Oh, come on!"

"Are you kidding me?"

She held up her hands to quiet the protest that broke out and explained herself.

"This last month or so has been good for me, really. Cedric was right…all the drama. I didn't realize how exhausted I was until I just stopped and decided to just let things go for a while. After a week of getting a good night's sleep every night I realized I was torturing myself for nothing. No matter what I choose, nothing is going to change for me for a good year and a half at least. By the time graduation rolls around, something might have changed or… I realized there was no rush, and no need for all the tears and the drama and everything else--it's all in the future and I have to try to live more in the moment. I've been hanging out with my friends, focusing on my studies and thinking about the future in terms of what sort of dreams I have that are just for me--do I want a job of some sort, and if so where and doing what? That kind of thing. I was so wrapped up in only focusing on my love life I let all that sort of thing kind of fall to the wayside. It's been good for me. Sadly, I think this break has been good for Cedric too. He's starting to look like his old self again. He seems happier. Healthier, too."

"He is." Marietta admitted. "I still talk to him sometimes."

Cho smiled sadly and nodded. "I'm glad. No matter what else happens, I want him to be happy."

"So that's it then? You're just going to not worry about it?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Cho agreed with something close to her old smile.

"So…there's a Hogsmeade weekend coming up? Is um…"

"Chuanli will be coming by. We are engaged, the family will expect it."

"So we'll all get to meet him then?"

"If you want. I think you'll like him, actually."

"Oh?" the girls leaned in, hoping for juicy details.

"He's older and very mature, really. He's also nice…truthfully, he's rather good-looking as well."

"Oooh?"

"Stop it. I haven't made any final decisions, but the truth is…I don't think being married to Chuanli would be a hardship if it were to come down to it."
The girls were agog. Cho had been so wrapped up in Cedric for so long, it was honestly astonishing to hear the intruder fiancé get such a glowing report. They all remembered all too vividly how she had cried and cried the whole week leading up to the holiday break when she knew she would be meeting him for the first time.

"Wow. I definitely have to meet this guy."

"Too right."

Severus Snape paced in his office, very carefully not looking at the small box perched in the center of his desk. In a fit of madness, he had slipped off and acquired it, and now he had it and it seemed to crouch there like an elephant in the room, taunting him.

He stopped pacing upon hearing the ridiculous thoughts running through his mind, and forced himself to face his desk and what he planned to do. Steeling himself as though preparing to face a starving, enraged nundu, he strode forward and opened the box, exposing what lay within.

The cause of all this drama?

A ring.

It wasn't even a particularly bizarre ring--a simple silver band, a step-cut square emerald (Olympe's birthstone), bordered by a pair of small diamonds--he would have liked to include his own birthstone as a symbolic measure, but the jeweler had no garnets that would have looked as nice with the emerald he'd picked out. He picked the ring up gently and examined it in the light and forced himself to face up to his own mad impulses.

Valentine's day was swiftly approaching, and he'd decided on a whim to ask Olympe to marry him. What the hell had he been thinking?

He put the ring back and continued pacing and cursing himself for being a silly, sentimental idiot. Finally he sighed and fetched the half-empty vial of amortentia from his desk, opened it and sniffed the aroma.

The lingering traces of Lily's perfume had vanished and been replaced by Olympe's. He'd smelled it often enough, lingering in the air faintly after she'd left the room. It had been...comforting. He wasn't used to rattling around in such a large house by himself, and her lingering perfume had always let him know he wasn't alone, that she was right nearby within earshot and would answer if he called. He recapped the vial and replaced it in his desk.

He knew exactly what he'd been thinking. That day in the headmaster's office he had realized that having Olympe in his life had improved it in every way imaginable, to the point that the painful ghosts from his past were being driven away and he hadn't even noticed because being with her was simple and easy and he was surprisingly content with her intrusion into his solitary life.

He had realized if he waited too long to keep her there he might well lose out on the best thing that ever happened to him. He gently shut the box and slipped it into his pocket. Valentine's day was swiftly approaching. He had letters to write and plans to make...and who knows? Maybe for once in his life things would go right and she wouldn't laugh in his face for his presumption.

Who knows? She might even say yes.
"Hey, I'm home." Adeline announced as she came into the parlor. "Where's the baby?"

"Sleeping. I just put him down."

"Two glasses. Did someone come over?"

"Yeah, Remus."

"Is something wrong? He's not usually much of a drinker."

"Werewolf angst."

"But he's not…"

"I know. Apparently the many deep-seated malfunctions that came along with being one aren't as easily dealt with as the curse was."

"What happened?"

"He bought a ring."

"He did?"

"Yep. He bought a ring and now he's brooding about it. Is it too soon, will she laugh at me, am I just rushing because I realize I can have children now and I'm pushing the envelope because, let's face it, Pam doesn't have too many years where she could conceivably have any more, witch or not. That sort of thing."

Adeline facepalmed and started laughing.

"What?"

"I ran into Pam while I was out. We had tea and got to talking. She told me she half-considered asking Remus to run away with her to get married so they can have a few babies. She apparently always wanted to have more, but Amos thought Cedric was plenty. She wonders if she's being mad and reckless and it's just her biological clock ticking away and she's just being crazy. She said he makes her feel like a giddy teenager and wonders if it's all just a side-effect of that."

"You know what this means, don't you?"

"We interfere? Just what I was thinking. We should invite them to dinner and confront them."

"Hell no! Are you crazy? We kidnap them and steal their clothes and lock them in a cabin for the weekend and let nature take its course. We should probably make sure we bring Remus' ring too. We leave it out in plain view, she sees it, realizes they're on the same page and boom! She'll be all over him. We come fetch them when the weekend is over and either take them to Gretna Green or start planning a wedding. Either or."

"What is it with you and wanting to kidnap people and steal their clothes?"

"What? It's a classic. Come on, if we do things your way they'll both panic and clam up. It might even end up ending their relationship. Nah, we invite them to dinner and kidnap them. Admit it, it's a much better plan."
"Next weekend?"

"Valentine's day. Perfect. I'll call Moony."
"Mail's here."

Squeals, smiles and blushes erupted around the great hall as cards, gifts, flowers and candy were delivered to a few lucky recipients.

Neville got a card from Hannah, Dean from Tracy, Seamus from Morag MacDougal.

A rather regal looking owl landed in front of Harry--Tom's owl, which he'd given the odd name of Blodeuwedd, which was something from mythology to do with owls and a woman made of flowers or something. He'd told him once, but he didn't really remember the details. He removed the letter from her foot and gave her some bacon before moving to open it, only to realize that everyone was watching him expectantly and trying to see the letter.

"Yeess?"

"Who's it from? What's it say? Do you have a secret admirer?" Hermione asked very fast.

"It's not a secret from me, what it says is no one's business but mine." he replied, voice curt.

"Oh come on, mate, we're your friends." Ron objected, trying to read it over his shoulder.

"Then why aren't you badgering our other friends for similar details on their love notes, hmm? Bugger off."

Harry read through the missive with a slight smile on his face--it was short and to the point, and not really a love letter at all, though he'd hadn't been expecting it to be. It was a simple invite to join him for the day in Hogsmeade. He caught everyone watching with undaunted curiosity as he tapped the bottom of the letter with his wand, and everyone craned to see when something popped out of the letter.

"Is that a key?"

Harry just smiled and tucked it away. It was indeed a key--to a house in Hogsmeade, of all things. Tom would be waiting for him there. He supposed he wanted privacy--and given the date, he could well imagine what for.

"Someone's got a hot date." Dean said knowingly.

"She must be out of school already."

"Older women are just your thing, huh?"

"Come on, mate, spill already? Who is it? Do we know her?"

"You all might as well stop asking. I'm not saying a word."
"What's the matter? Ashamed of her?" Ginny asked snidely. Harry turned slightly to face her and she flinched without meaning to at the cold look in his eyes.

"Considering what happened to the last person I was openly dating, Miss Weasley, and at your hands no less, what the hell makes you think I would openly discuss them amongst the present company? Given that you tried to feed me a love potion just a few short weeks ago, I'm am in no way convinced that the identity of any love interest of mine is a good thing for you, of all people to know." He switched his gaze to Hermione, and she shrank back slightly from having the same cold gaze turned on her as well. Harry could hold a grudge for some time for offenses against himself; it seemed he was far more unforgiving about offenses against people he did or used to care about.

"Hey, Luna got something too." Neville interjected into the awkward silence. Harry glanced over and saw Luna had a letter and a box in front of her. She pointed her wand at the letter and opened it rather hesitantly after scanning it for spells. She read it through without any discernible expression on her face and then opened the box. The contents immediately drew curious and envious gasps from the girls seated nearby. It was a bouquet of Scandinavian ice-lilies. They were a magical breed of flower noted for their captivating perfume. They were also quite lovely to look at--white with a faint tinge of blue, they actually looked like they were made of ice, though they were in fact ordinary flowers.

Neville whistled. "That cost a fortune. They're finicky flowers, hard to breed."

"I wonder who sent her those?" Ron wondered.

"Probably Rolf. He screwed up big time, he knows it, and now he's stuck with a talking willy for the foreseeable future. He's probably hoping to soften her up and get her to forgive him." Harry shrugged.

Hermione slanted a concerned glance Ginny's way. Already depressed from Harry's ongoing hostility, Ginny was now staring at the box of flowers in front of Luna with an unreadable look on her face. She hadn't taken it well that while she and Rolf had been 'frolicking' in the woods during the holidays, and he'd been denying knowing her in public, he'd been treating Luna like a princess and buying her presents.

He'd never written to her, not after their fling during the summer, nor after their more serious fling during the winter holidays. He had written to Luna, several times in fact, and was still plying her with expensive presents after they'd 'broken up'--even if it was only to get her to remove the curse she'd put on him. She'd spent the last few weeks being shunned for the loss of points to Gryffindor, and wild rumors had been flying about her since then. Now, it was Valentine's day and she had no new boyfriend, no one had sent her any presents, Harry Potter refused to so much as acknowledge her existence anymore--and on rare occasions like today he was openly hostile. Losing her appetite, she pushed away her plate.

"Come on, you lot. Put away your flowers, it's time for quidditch!" Angelina called from further down the table.

She only felt worse when the team left without her and didn't look back.

"Come on, Ginny. We should head down." Hermione urged once breakfast was over. "Yeah." Ginny scoffed bitterly. "I should be on the pitch, not in the stands!"

Hermione sighed impatiently. "Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you decided to drug someone!" She shook her head at her and hurried her steps to catch up with the rest of her
"Oh! Hermione! Hi!"

Hermione glanced up in surprise at hearing her name called. Lavender and Parvati slowed as well, looked the guy up and down, grinned at her and gave her a surreptitious thumbs up. Hermione flushed and made a shooing motion. They did, though they were giggling and grinning as they did.

"Mickey. Hello. Nice to see you again. What brings you here?"

"I was in the area, and saw everyone headed this way." he shrugged. "There's a game today?"

"Yes, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw."

"You're a Gryffindor, right? So your team's playing? They any good?"

"There are a lot of talented players…though I'll admit quidditch isn't really my thing."

"Didn't you used to date Viktor Krum?"

"Yes. He was very sweet and enjoyed a chance to talk about something other than quidditch once in a while." Hermione sniffed. "So, what have you been up to lately?"

"Filming another movie."

"The sequel to Nightfall… or no…your character died, didn't he?"

"Yeah. I'm doing some pirate thing now."

"The Marauders?"

"Yeah, you know it?"

"I helped write it, actually."

"Really? Wow. I never read the book, just the screenplay. It's kind of a weird story."

"We were first years when we wrote it."

"Yeah? Wow. You're just multi-talented, aren't you?"

"Well…yes." Hermione agreed.

"Modest too." Mickey grinned, laughing.

Hermione's cheeks pinked and she smiled wryly. "That did sound a bit arrogant, didn't it?"

"Confident, I'd say. That's not a bad thing," he laughed again. "So, uh…you have to head back after the game or what?"

"Oh, well, no. It's Hogsmeade weekend. Everyone third year and up will be heading to the village."

"Can you head down now?"

"Now?"
"Well, yeah. I was just thinking that I'm kind of thirsty. I was wondering if you'd like to join me."

Hermione was torn for a moment. It seemed rather disloyal to just not go to the game when Ron and Harry would both be playing…but at the same time, Ron had been a nervous wreck all year and Harry was playing under protest. She'd already been marked off the list as she'd been heading down here…

"Um, well, alright. That sounds like fun."
"Yeah? Brilliant."

"Moony! Pam! Good to see you both again!"

"Thanks for inviting us."

Remus happened to glance at Adeline as he was about to remove his cloak, and noticed there was an odd, almost apologetic look on her face, though she tried to hide it when she realized he was looking at her. Years of friendship with Sirius, coupled with his last conversation with the man, added to the look on Sirius' wife's face was enough for him to realize something was up, and given his friend's personality, he could make an educated guess as to what it might be. He reacted without thinking, grabbing Pam and spinning them both out of the path of Sirius' raised wand. "Sirius, NO!"

Pam clutched at him and gave Sirius a frightened look. Sirius pouted and Adeline sighed and moved to intervene.

"Relax, Pam…my husband is actually trying to help you both."

"By attacking us?" Pam squeaked.

"Remus, show her what's in your pocket."

Remus glared at his friends before slanting a nervous look Pam's way.

"What's in his pocket?"

"Remember our talk last weekend?"

Pam nodded, slanting a nervous look Remus' way.

"He had the same talk with my husband. We may have gone about things badly, but we were trying to help."

Remus and Pam both stared at them blankly for a moment, before a slow dawning realization crossed both their faces.

"Remus?" Pam asked breathlessly.

Remus slowly pulled a small box from his pocket and opened it. Pam gasped and then smiled. Feeling more confident now, Remus dropped to one knee. Pam covered her mouth with both her hands.

"I had a speech all planned out, but I can't remember any of it now. I know we've not been together for very long, but you've made me very happy these last months, and I hope you'll keep on making me happy for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?"
Pam blinked away tears and nodded her head up and down. "Yes. Yes I will. Oh, Remus!"

Remus' face went blank with shock and then a brilliant smile overtook his whole face. With shaking hands he slipped the ring on her outstretched hand and then rose to embrace his new fiancée warmly.

Sirius and Adeline were both beaming at them.

"Congrats!"
"Congratulations. May you have a long and happy life together."

Remus was still too elated to be properly angry. "What is it with you wanting to kidnap people and steal their clothes?"

Pam blanched and sidled to hide halfway behind Remus. "What?!"

"What? It worked for Frank and Alice."

"Just what were you planning to do?"

"Kidnap you and lock you in a cabin for the weekend. Which reminds me…what are we going to do with the cabin? It's already paid for."

"You have it for the whole weekend?" Remus asked curiously.

"Remus!" Pam squeaked before slapping him playfully on the arm.

Remus blushed scarlet and quickly defended himself. "I was just thinking that…well, Gretna Green isn't too far from here now, and…"

Pam looked startled and then giggled. "Run off and elope, just like that?"

Remus grinned back, looking young and carefree. "Why not? You only live once."

Pam smiled back and then laughed. "Sure, why not. Let's go to Gretna Green."

"Woo hoo! Oddment! Bring us four brooms!" Sirius shouted gleefully.

"Oh, let me get my camera!"

A few minutes later, the giggling foursome (plus baby Regulus, who was grabbed from his cradle and strapped to Sirius' chest for the ride) rode off on brooms towards Greta Green so the new couple could be married by a blacksmith--an elderly goblin named Snarltooth.

Severus Snape took a fortifying breath and strode forward to meet his destiny.

"What is it with the melodramatic turn my thoughts have taken lately?"

The palace of Beauxbatons was just ahead, as was its winter garden. Monsieur Chevalier, the assistant headmaster, had assured him that everything would be ready for them. Olympe had confided once that the winter garden at Beauxbatons was her favorite place on the school's campus, which was filled with beautiful places, and was to her one of the loveliest places in all the
world. He'd had the mad thought that asking his question while they were in her favorite place might make her more amenable to agreeing. Monsieur Chevalier was waiting for him by the gates, and much to his consternation, a number of giggly students seemed to be crowded at every doorway and window. Chevalier positively beamed at him as he approached.

"Monsieur Snape! Right on time! Ze Madame will be along shortly. Why do you not go and wait for her? Clarisse can show you the way."

A giggly upper year student stepped forward, smiling brightly and gestured for him to follow her. Snape took the time to look around as they walked. Even in its new world surroundings, Beauxbatons was a striking place. The school itself looked rather like a fairytale castle from an insipid Disney movie—all tall towers, delicate arches and the like. The surrounding campus was much the same—everywhere you looked the trees and flowers and boulders and moss and random small creatures and fairies all seemed to be arranged in such a way as to present an aesthetically pleasing view. The salty smell of the ocean on the breeze just seemed to add to the ambiance. The student eventually led them to a wrought-iron archway and gestured for him to precede her. As he was about to pass through, the girl grinned, showing off charming dimples.

"Good luck, Monsieur Snape. We all 'ope you and ze Madame are very 'appy together. Trust in your 'earts and believe in love!"

With this cheery advice, she pranced off and left him to enter the garden alone. As he watched the girl retreat, he realized with a sinking feeling that Monsieur Chevalier was a big, fat, loudmouth who must have told everyone in the school that he'd come here today to ask Olympe to marry him. "Damnation," he muttered as he strode inside, and wiped his damp palms on his robes. He stopped dead just inside and looked around. It seemed they'd also decided to decorate.

Ginny fetched a school broom from the equipment shed after everyone had started down to Hogsmeade. She didn't want to hang out in the Melting Pot with the first and second years, but she didn't really want to go to Hogsmeade and be stuck around all the happy couples, or on the outside of the celebration over winning the game.

To Ginny's surprise, there was someone already down on the pitch when she arrived. It was Cedric Diggory. It wasn't too hard to guess why he was avoiding everyone. He was probably enjoying this day about as much as she was.

"Oh, Ginny. I wasn't expecting anyone else to be down here," Cedric said, sounding somewhat embarrassed, when he caught sight of her.

"Same here." Ginny agreed as she mounted her broom. "Fancy a race?"

Cedric shrugged amiably. "Why not?"

"To the far goals and back?"

"Let's do it. Count of three?"

"1…2…3!"

They took off side by side like a shot. Ginny was smaller and lighter, so she gained an early lead. Cedric made up for this by executing a very tight flip when he reached the far goal, rather than
circling around it like she did. They were neck in neck for the final stretch, but Ginny squeezed ahead a few inches before they reached their goal.

"What brings you down here anyway?" Cedric wondered. "You're still young enough, Hogsmeade shouldn't have lost most of its charm yet."

"I'm not in the mood to be surrounded by happy couples."

Cedric smiled wryly and nodded. "That makes two of us then. Still, I'm surprised--you've always seemed to be rather popular."

For the first time, being told that didn't make Ginny preen or feel smug. It left her feeling surprisingly wretched, actually.

"I think that's part of the problem, actually. It's not fair. No one treats boys like this if they're popular."

Cedric looked rather flustered by the turn the conversation had taken, but he was a Hufflepuff, and had a natural big-brotherliness about him that made him push aside his discomfort in the interests of being a good listener. Ginny ended up saying more than perhaps she wanted to, though she kept her recent troubles to broad outlines with few incriminating details; enough to give him the facts of the situation in a way that didn't make her look like a complete slag.

"See? I didn't do anything bad, but everyone's treating me like I have. Okay, the love potion was a bad idea, but in my defense I was panicked and not thinking clearly. The worst part is that it was all for nothing. I'm still 'pure', but I've been very sheltered and I didn't realize there was no cause for concern. Had I been a boy and acted the same way, no one would treat me like this."

"Well, you'd probably have been arrested for dosing someone with amortentia." Cedric said pointedly. "As for the rest, perhaps not, but it happens in other ways. I'm sure you're aware of boys developing bad reputations among girls--too grabby, don't treat girls well, that sort of thing. It is perhaps a double standard, but keep in mind, a girl can't walk away from the consequences of being "too popular" the way a boy can. There's also the fact that, like it or not, the future of one's bloodline and heritage is in the hands of the witch one marries. I'm sure I don't speak just for myself, but for my peers as well. You want the witch you marry to be someone respectable, someone who has self-respect as well--someone who considers herself worth more than a quick grope in a broom closet and nothing more. From what you've said, your only real missteps were your fling with the Durmstrang boy--you weren't in a relationship and you let him take too many liberties with no thought for any consequences for yourself. The quidditch player at the ministry ball was also a bad move on your part. I guess it seemed flattering, and you were feeling vengeful towards your boyfriend. It doesn't paint you in the best light. I guess the only thing I can really tell you is to be a bit more discerning in your future relationships, and conduct yourself as a person worthy of respect at all times. Most importantly, you should keep in mind that any 'fun and games' could have devastating consequences, and you should weigh such considerations accordingly. You should also apologize to Harry if you haven't done so already." he added sternly.

Ginny crossed her arms and scowled. "He's been snubbing me."

"Do you blame him? How would you have felt had the situation been reversed?"

"I've been in love with him for years! I would have been thrilled. I also would have told him he was being a prat and next time to just ask me out like a normal person."

"Bad example then. Alright, think of a boy you're not interested in, and consider how you'd have
felt if he'd given you love potion."

A number of faces flashed through her mind and she shuddered at the very thought. Bits and pieces of Snape's horror story of what could have happened flitted through her mind as well, with both Harry and the other boys she'd pictured in the lead role. They were all equally horrifying.

"I think you'll agree, given your reaction, that you owe him an apology at the very least."

"Stupid jerk. If he'd have just owned up to being my bloody soul mate years ago, none of this ever would have happened."

"If he was your soul mate" Cedric snorted while making air quotes "You would have come together naturally, no coercion needed."

Ginny looked away and refused to acknowledge the point. The assurance that they were meant to be had been so much a part of her for so much of her life, even now when she'd been having nightmares of crazed Harry mauling her in the great hall, she couldn't easily let it go. She'd tried flirting, she'd tried staking a claim and driving away any competition, she'd backed off and tried to be friends with him, dated other boys to make him jealous, but nothing worked. In fact, the only time he'd shown any interest in her was the day she'd given him the potion--he'd asked if she was alright and commented on how quiet she was. Now, he ignored her like she didn't exist--she might as well be silent and invisible… though she was coming to realize that being outright ignored was preferable to how he looked at her when he did acknowledge her. His eyes had been so cold, and he'd had a sneer on his face worthy of a Malfoy. One would almost think he hated her. She blinked several times in an effort to hold back the tears she could feel pricking at her eyes. This was the worst school year ever.

"Looks like we're here." Hannah noted.
"Good. I've got a date to get to." Harry said, instantly cheering. "What are you going to be doing, Luna?"
"Doing some shopping and then I'm meeting Theo later."
"Nott?"
"We've been bonding over cheating exes."
"Yeah? Good luck with that. The rest of you enjoy your day as well."
"You too, Harry." Neville nodded.

Harry was out of sight almost as soon as the carriage stopped, with a smile on his face and a spring in his step.
"Wow. Whoever this girl is, she certainly makes him happy." Ron muttered.

Neville and Luna exchanged a look and Luna giggled. "What makes you so sure it's a girl?"
"WHAT?" Ron shrieked.

Cho was actually having a pretty good day so far. The weather was still cold and the ground covered in snow, but the day itself was brisk and clear. Chuanli was sweet and her friends all seemed to like him. She took a moment to look around as they exited the Three Broomsticks and saw a distant dot flying over the quidditch pitch. It was Cedric. A lump formed in her throat and her previous cheer flickered and went out like a snuffed candle. She closed her eyes and gave herself a stern talking to. She and Cedric were broken up. She'd been having fun, there was nothing wrong with that. Resolved to continue enjoying her day she opened her eyes and gasped. There were two dots flying over the pitch. Cedric, and Ginny Weasley. They were playing around, doing tricks, chasing each other. Cedric was laughing and smiling and seemed to be enjoying
himself. A feeling of profound emptiness filled her chest until for a moment she felt like she couldn't breathe.

"Cho? Are you alright?"

Cho blinked and came back to herself with a start. Chuanli and the rest of her friends were looking at her in concern. Somehow she mustered up a smile, though it never reached her eyes.

"I'm fine. Where does everyone want to go next?"

Her friends all exchanged looks. It was obvious they didn't believe her, but they let it drop for the moment, much to her relief. As the group continued on, Chuanli cast a speculative look at the two dots flying in the distance. It didn't take much to figure out who one of them must be.

"Severus! You sly man, you! You came to surprise me!" Olympe said with a smile when she arrived at the garden. She stopped then and looked around in astonishment. The gazebo in the center had been decorated with flowers, and a trail of rose petals lined the walkway leading to it. Alternating streamers of red and white had been strung from the top of the gazebo and stretched out to attach to the surrounding trees. As she looked around, the wood nymph trio that usually serenaded the students when they had dinner began to sing softly, accompanied by the local fauns and satyrs on their flutes, pipes and lyres, and the dryads began to dance in the open space. Bemused, she began walking forward, towards Severus, who had remained in the gazebo and watched her approach. Just as she reached him thousands of glittering fairies, who until then had stayed hidden on the inner ceiling of the gazebo erupted in every direction, filling the whole clearing with sparkles.

"Severus?" she repeated. He reached for her hands, which she offered readily. He gave her hands a light squeeze and stared at her mutely for a long moment, seemingly at a loss for words. "You..." he began "have brought joy to what was a rather bleak and empty life. You make me happy. I've found I've begun looking forward to the new day because I know you'll be there. I'd like to be certain you'll continue to be there." he struggled for a moment. Sap and poetry really was not his forte. "Marry me. Please." he managed to get out before his throat closed up.

"Yes."
"Yes?"
"Yes! Oh, you beautiful man. Come here!"
"Gladly."

Unbeknownst to both of them, while they were busy kissing, the fairies flew upward and formed a big heart overhead to let the students know the happy news. The halls of Beauxbatons erupted in cheers.

"Woohoo!"
"You lucky bastard!"

Whistles and catcalls greeted the fourteenth couple in the last two hours that had decided to get married. The little wizarding village of Gretna Green had turned into a carnival--people were dancing in the street, drink was flowing, a few enterprising souls had popped home for food to add to the potluck reception that had sprung up. When Remus and Pam had decided to elope, none of them had expected it to turn into this.
They'd ended up leading a veritable parade to the village: people had seen the four of them flying and laughing, and had called out to ask what was going on, or had fetched their own brooms to find out. The more folks that had joined their party, the more curious the rest along the route had gotten. Before they knew it, they were leading half of wizarding Britain to the blacksmith's shop to witness the wedding. The wild ride and the festive atmosphere had done their job, and before they knew it there was a party in the streets, and others were lining up to get married as well. Naturally the spectacle had drawn a few reporters. Sirius wouldn't be surprised if they ended up in the paper.

"This is something else, huh?"

"I know" Adeline agreed with a laugh. "Remus and Pam seemed to be going through a second childhood--they seem to have brought everyone else along with them."

"Moony deserves it if anyone does. I'm just glad he bounced back so well from that whole mess with Charity."

"I am as well. How much do you want to bet we'll be welcoming a new mini-Marauder in a few months' time?"

"No bet. I think it's pretty much guaranteed unless one of them can't have kids, and I can't see that being the case for either of them."

"I wonder how Pam's son is going to feel about all this?"

"Oh, crap…you know I completely forgot about him. Oh Merlin…there were reporters here. Did either of them send word to the kid?"

"You know as well as I that they didn't…damn. They've already left. I have no earthly desire to interrupt their honeymoon to bring it to their attention either."

"Yeah, me either. Oh well, on their heads be it."

Bill Weasley and his new bride went spinning by, laughing and smiling.

"Congrats, you two! May you have a long and happy life together!"

"Thanks!"

"Merci"

"Give our best to Remus as well!"

"Will do!"

Sirius waited till they were out of earshot and shook his head. "Molly is going to bloody well murder them both."

Adeline winced, picturing the Weasley matron's likely reaction. "That she is. Oh well, there's nothing saying they can't have a more formal ceremony and reception later."

"True, but I doubt she'll be so easily placated. Man, this really is a crazy day."

Ginny stretched as she sauntered down the hall. It was kind of nice having the castle almost to herself. All the first and second years were in the Melting Pot, enjoying the chance to spread out and have the place to themselves for once. Almost all the upper years barring a few NEWT
students in the library and Cedric were down in the village. She'd been keeping to odd corners of the castle most days when not in class to avoid everyone. It had been three weeks and there were still people sore about the point loss, Angelina still gave her dirty looks for getting kicked off the team, rumors were still flying--and it had brought some unwelcome attention from boys, something she never thought she'd ever think. Until recently, all attention from boys had been welcome. Now that there were rumors going around that she was a scarlet woman with no morals who'd do anything to anybody… Yeah, it hadn't been fun, to say the least.

She'd hexed a fair number until the jerks of Hogwarts had finally stopped bothering her--for once she hadn't really gotten in much trouble either--she just had to tell the teacher the sorts of lewd suggestions the boy had made and they usually received detention and a lecture on the behavior of a gentleman. McGonagall and Pomfrey had both stopped looking at her like something scraped off an old shoe after Hermione had a talk with them. She'd had to sit through a truly humiliating talk with the mediwitch on the 'facts of life', but it was worth it to get them to stop looking at her like that.

She was relaxed and had let down her guard for the first time in weeks, which is why the sudden attack took her so completely by surprise.

When Ginny came to she discovered she was tied up, and her head was throbbing--she probably whacked it on the stone floor when she was stupefied. There was a nasty taste in her mouth as well--it seemed vaguely familiar but she couldn't place it. She tried to loosen her bonds, but whoever had tied her up had done a thorough job of things. She was starting to get scared, wondering if one of the creeps she'd hexed had decided on some payback when Cho Chang circled around her and crossed her arms, glaring.

"Are you dating Cedric?" she demanded.
"No."
"Meeting up for a quick grope in a broom closet?"
"No."
"Have you kissed him?"
"No."
Cho blinked and began to look uncertain.
"Have you done anything of a romantic or sexual nature with him?"
"No."
"Do you want to?"
"I wouldn't say no. He's pretty dishy."
"Has he shown any interest in you like that?"
"No. Big brother all the way. I have enough to recognize the signs."

The nasty taste in her mouth suddenly made sense. "You fed me a truth potion!"

"Of course I did. You're sneaky, underhanded and mean."
"What! I am not!"
"Oh please, spare me." Cho snorted in disdain. "You go through boys like a person with a bad cold goes through tissues. You hex people whenever you feel like it, break up relationships, drug your housemates, and sleep with your friends fiancés!"
"I'M A VIRGIN!"
"Oh like I believe that."
"IT'S TRUE!"
"Really? Prove it then, drink up." Cho held up a vial of potion.
Ginny sneered at her hatefully, but she weighed the pros and cons and decided it might help in the long run--proof under potion would help the worst of her recent problems, even if it wouldn't help
her with getting back on the team this year.
"Bring it on."

Cho looked honestly shocked. Ginny was surprised to realize that it hurt a little that everyone believed the rumors so easily. Yeah, she kissed a lot of boys, but she wasn't a tramp, no matter what anyone thought. She let Cho feed her more of the stuff and glared at her, daring her to take her best shot.

"Are you a virgin?"
"YES."
"How is that even possible when you've had so many boyfriends?"
"I keep track of where their hands are trying to wander, and my brothers usually show up before too long.
"What happened with Luna's fiancé?"
"I was using him to sabotage my relationship with Dean, and later because I was feeling trapped."

Cho raised an eyebrow.
"Why were you sabotaging your relationship?"
"Things were going good and I really liked him, but when I told my mum who he was she was all but planning the wedding already. She was really excited because he's rich and she thought my brother Percy could take over the hospital. I started feeling trapped."

"What happened with the Puddlemere chaser."
"Dean ditched me at the party to wander off with a creepy old man that was ogling me to discuss a summer job. I realized I could use it as an excuse to get rid of him in a way that wouldn't have mum mad at me or going after me to get back with him. The chaser asked me to dance and I figured why not. He led me off in a dark corner after and tried to convince me to go home with him when Oliver Wood showed up."

It was becoming obvious to Cho that some of what was coming out of Ginny's mouth was a surprise to her.
"After you and Dean broke up did you keep seeing Luna's fiancé?"
"Yes."
"Did you know they were dating and getting serious?"
"No. He only mentioned her once and said their families were friends. He never said that things had changed."
"Would you have continued if you'd known?"
"No. Luna's my friend. I only really liked him because we weren't dating, and my mum wasn't likely to start planning a wedding once she knew he was committed elsewhere, even if only casually."

"You've had a lot of boyfriends. Why'd you break up?"
"Michael was pissy that I didn't throw the game in Ravenclaw's favor. I told him to piss off. Steve was too grabby and had trouble taking no for an answer. Stephen was always staring at me and telling me he loved me and wanted to be with me forever. I felt like I couldn't breathe around him, so I ended things after just a few days. Simon and I never dated, he just told people I was all over him. It never happened. Cormac was really clingy and possessive and always talking about forever. I couldn't take it so I dumped him. Dean, I really liked. We had fun together and it was pretty casual. The thought of him made my skin crawl once my mum started going on about what a nice addition to the family he'd be. I don't want to be tied down."

"If you don't want to be tied down, why the bloody hell are you so desperately trying to trap Harry?"
"That's the way it's supposed to be. I've always known that. He's the hero, I'm the princess. He fights evil and we get married."
"That sounds like one of those stupid Harry Potter books, not real life. Do you want to marry him?"
"No. I don't want to be the princess, trapped and helpless and waiting to be rescued. That's why I've always wanted to be a Harpy--they're fierce and skilled and take no guff from anyone and they fight on even terms with men all the time."

"If you don't even want it why the hell do you keep doing it?"
"Because it's what everyone wants and it's what I'm expected to do, I've always known that."
"Everyone who?"
"Mum, Dumbledore, Ron…McGonagall and Lupin and Slughorn too, but only because we remind them of James and Lily Potter and they miss them."
"Your brother wants you chasing after Harry like a nutter?"
"No. He's always known when he came to Hogwarts Harry would be his best friend and one day he and I would get married and he'd become a Weasley."
"Uh, don't you mean you'd be a Potter?"
"He didn't have anyone in the world, not like us. In every important way he'd be a Weasley, and my mum and dad would be his new mum and dad and my brothers would all be his brothers."

"Why? Why go to all this trouble?"
"Probably for money. He's supposed to be quite rich. My mum really hates being poor, especially because she has rich relatives and keeps losing out."

Ginny's lips were trembling as the answers kept pouring out of her.

"And how did you think it would work? You're both underage. You'd need your families permission to marry. Do you really think his godfather would just say okay without checking for love potions and stuff--especially since Harry left a request that he be checked for such things if anything like this ever came up?"
"He was supposed to be raised by muggles and not know anything. His godfather was in prison. We would have been his only family, other than Dumbledore and he approves."

Tears began rolling down Ginny's face one after another. She felt used and betrayed and dirty. She'd been desperately chasing after Harry for years, making enemies left and right, ruining her reputation and making herself sick because her mum trained her up at a young age to be a man-trap for a little orphan boy that was supposed to be alone, ignorant and ripe for the plucking. Her brother had been trained up too, but he'd had an easier time of things. He and Harry were friends, though he'd had to accept that friendship on Harry's terms, but they were and he was content. Her job had been harder and she'd been slogging away all this time for something she didn't even really want.

Yeah, Harry was dishy and rich, but she didn't want to get married straight out of school, let alone before school ended, and start popping out babies. She wasn't ready, didn't want to be tied to the kitchen her whole life like her mother…she wanted freedom and fun and a career and a great love that didn't make her feel like she was suffocating.

The last of the potion wore off and Ginny started sobbing in earnest. Cho untied her and wrapped her arms around her shoulders and let her do so. When Ginny's cries devolved to the occasional snifflle, Cho stepped back to let her regain her composure. She froze at the sight of Ginny's wand.

"Turnabout is fair play." she croaked. "Stupify."
"All alone today? A good looking fellow like you?"

"I could say the same for you, Miss…?"

"Li. Ju Li. I didn't realize today was going to be a Hogsmeade weekend for the school. I should have realized it would be. Hogwarts likes to keep the amorous couples outside in the cold as much as possible." she laughed.

"I can see how that might be a priority with so many teenagers." Chuanli agreed with a smile. "How rude of me, I did not introduce myself. Chuanli Chang, at your service."

"Visiting a sibling?"

"My fiancée, actually."

"Oh." Ju said without enthusiasm. "Stepped off to the ladies room, has she?"

"No, she headed back to school already. She's sixteen."

"Like them young, do you?"

"Arranged match. I'm not expecting it to last much longer."

"Oh? You don't get along?"

"No we get along fine. She's very sweet, really, but as I said, she's sixteen…well, seventeen now. Her birthday was last week. She had a boyfriend her parents made her end things with to enact our engagement."

"You think she's going to do a runner?"

"A runner? Are you asking if I think they will elope? There's a good chance they might. The jury is still out at the moment."

"So you're not really free."

"I am always free to make new friends, Miss Li. What brings you here?"

"I'm hiding, sadly enough."

"Hiding? Has something happened?"

"Yes, my ex-boyfriend as of two days ago has a new girlfriend already. Worse, it's my neighbor, and someone I considered a good friend. I saw them together and hopped in the floo. This place was the first one I thought of. I wasn't expecting it to be so crowded. I did get to see my little sister, though not for as long as I might have liked. She was here with her boyfriend, who seems to be a much nicer fellow than mine was."

"I am sorry for your loss, Miss Li."

"It happens, I guess. It seems much harder than it should be to find a good one. I know I haven't had much luck."

"You are not alone in that. I consented to my engagement for much the same reason. I thought maybe my parents would have more luck than I did."
"I wouldn't trust my parents with something like that. They thought my old boyfriend was a catch."

"Well, mine thought a school girl a decade my junior was a good match, so maybe I shouldn't have either."

"I thought you said she was sweet."

"She is, and she has giggly friends, who while very nice are still children. I felt like a father or a fond uncle escorting a group of youngsters on an outing more than I did like a man who is courting. If the match continues, she'll at least be a bit older by the time we marry, but I do wonder if it will be enough."

"Things are tough all over, huh?"

"So they are."

"Who are you looking at?" Theo asked curiously.

"Cho's fiancé and Su's sister. They seem to be getting on pretty well." Luna replied idly. "I do hope Cho hasn't started falling for him, or the situation could get even messier than it is already."

"Isn't anyone faithful nowadays?"

"They're at separate tables and just talking. He strikes me as the sort who'd be upfront about things, though I've only spoken to him briefly."

"I don't trust anyone to be upfront, not anymore." Theo grumbled bitterly. "You shouldn't let Romilda sour you on people."

"We were dating for six months and she was cheating on me most of that time, and with Cormac McLagen, that's the worst part! The guy is an asshole!"

"That he is, but then I've never really cared for Romilda myself. Personally I think she and Cormac are well matched."

"Wow, that was almost catty. You have hidden depths."

"I'm not sure being mildly catty is something to be proud of."

"Maybe not, but it shows you have limits. I've sometimes wondered. You seem to let most things roll off of you."

"Not everything it seems. I cursed Rolf."

"Yeah? What'd you do to him?"

"I cursed his willy to tell people to back off when he gets too close to them...or to farm animals, house elves and geese."

"Why farm animals, house elves and geese?"

"Why not?"

Theo laughed delightedly. "I'm sort of surprised you didn't hex Romilda, considering you're still so bitter."

"It's one of those things--if she had hexed me, everyone would have assumed I deserved it. If I hexed her, I'm just a jerk."

"You could have hexed Cormac."

"Wow, you've gotten bloodthirsty."

"Not really, I'm just making conversation."

"I suppose I should have...in fact there he is now. You about done?"

"Yes."

"Good. Head for the door. I'll be right there."

"Don't go overboard."

Luna waited idly outside the door. When Theo appeared a few minutes later, she could hear Cormac gagging and see the people nearby grimacing in disgust.
"You made him vomit slugs?"
"Why not? It's a classic."
"I doubt Madame Rosmerta appreciates it."
"Eh, I'll send her a fruit basket."
"You should sign Romilda's name to it."
"I like how you think."

Harry jolted awake with a start and looked around blearily for the cause.

"Tom? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

Harry sat up and shivered lightly at the coolness of the room before reaching out to run his hand down Tom's bare back.

"You're freezing. Come here."

Tom resisted a bit, but Harry refused to take no for an answer. He got Tom to lay back down, gathered up the covers that had gotten kicked down to the foot of the bed and pulled them over both of them, before wrapping himself around him. Tom slowly relaxed, and warmed up. He finally unbent enough to wrap his arms around Harry. Once he did so he sighed and the remaining tension bled out of him. He tightened his hold and buried his face in Harry's hair.

"What was all that?"

"It was nothing, don't worry"

"Did you have a nightmare or something?"

A very faint tremor rippled through him; Harry probably wouldn't have noticed had he not been all but laying on top of him. "Tom?" he repeated hesitantly.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Whatever it was left you ice-cold and shaking. What do you think?"

"It wasn't a nightmare. It was a…flashback, I guess you could say."

"To what?"

Tom hesitated to speak, but Harry's gaze, full of nothing but honest concern made him reconsider.

"The horcruxes. I must have kicked off the covers. It's cool here, with the fire so low. I got cold and then…" Another fine tremor shook him for a moment.

His jaw tightened in frustration and embarrassment at his weakness. He'd once been able to break his soul into seven pieces and had thought nothing of it at the time--really, only the first time had been difficult, but he'd been determined to see it through. After that it had been painful but almost easy. Now, he couldn't even contemplate the idea without revulsion and horror--his soul rebelled at even the thought. Just now, during his flashback he'd been back there again--broken, cold, trapped--every moment an eternity of torment and emptiness, though he'd been so broken he hadn't been able to fully appreciate the full horror of what he'd done to himself. It was really only now that he
was whole once more that he could truly understand what he'd done.

A warm hand on his face jolted his thoughts away from remembering and he found himself drinking in the warmth and human contact as a bane against further flashbacks. Harry's emerald gaze was filled with sorrow and concern--no pity, no disgust, no derision. He'd been honestly afraid to look at him for that very reason; he'd been sure he'd have seen something of the sort on his face and wasn't sure he could have borne it. A feeling of warmth welled up in his chest which drove away the lingering shards of ice that seemed to have become lodged deep in the heart of him. He remembered then what Harry had said to him when they'd first stumbled across one another at Wan Shi Tong's library-- the power the dark lord knows not was nothing more than plain, ordinary human feelings. Perhaps there really had been some truth to that.

"What time is it?" Harry asked.

Tom looked at him askance, a bit insulted that he'd pushed aside his dreadful experience so easily that he was worried about curfew. He cast an irritable glance at the clock on the mantel. "Half two. In a hurry, are you?"

"Hardly. I wanted to know how much time I had left."

"You have somewhere to be?"

Harry sighed, sounding exasperated. "And here I thought getting laid was supposed to put a guy in a good mood."

"It had" Tom thought to himself in the privacy of his own mind.

Any further thoughts he might have had went right out of his head when Harry ran his hand lightly down Tom's chest, his stomach until he reached his cock, which he took in a firm, sure grip.

"I'm right where I want to be." he assured him as he began to stroke him. "I'm in no hurry to be anywhere but right here, in this bed, with you" he added before shifting slightly so Tom could feel a matching hard length against his hip. He reached down further to fondle his balls for a bit, before running his hand back up Tom's body, and smiled in placid satisfaction when Tom rolled them till he was on top of him.

"Didn't have enough earlier?"

Harry arched into him and hissed. "Of you? Never."

Tom fumbled for his wand, which was on the bedside table and hurriedly cast the spells needed to 'ease his passage' so to speak, and let it drop to the floor without care. What little blood remained in his head rushed south as Harry smiled in anticipation and lightly stroked himself as he spread himself wide to receive him.

"Half two you said? Excellent. Let's see how many times we can remind you you're alive before I have to head back."

Tom's cock actually twitched, as though ready to seek out that tight, welcoming heat on its own if he didn't get on with it.

And to think--the first time he'd been a teenager, he'd had nothing but endless disdain for his classmates for being so preoccupied by such matters. His younger self was an idiot.
Cho and Cedric jumped apart guiltily as the door to the abandoned classroom they'd commandeered opened. Padma Patil stepped inside, busily scribbling notes on the small notepad that seemed to always be with her these days. She finished what she was writing, tucked the notepad and quill away and then smiled at the two of them expectantly.

"You two need to meet with the club heads tomorrow after dinner. They'll be expecting you." she handed the two of them a note with directions to the meeting place. "Don't be late."

She left as quickly as she'd arrived and with as little fanfare.

"Um…what was that all about?"

"I don't know."

"She didn't seem surprised to see us here together."

"I noticed. Gossip really travels fast."

"We were discreet."

"This is Hogwarts. There's not really any such thing as a secret in these walls."

"What about the Melting Pot?"

"A large chunk of the student body was keeping that secret—not that a secret shared by hundreds is much of a secret, but still. The teachers caught on before too long. If any of them had the time or inclination to pay attention to all of us outside classes it wouldn't have stayed secret even that long."

"I guess. What do you think they want?"

"I haven't the foggiest. I guess we'll find out tomorrow night."

Cedric nodded and then glanced at his companion pensively. He'd been beyond ecstatic when Cho found him earlier and told him she'd made a choice and it was him. Now, that the initial euphoria had worn off and they'd been so oddly interrupted, all his worries and doubts came creeping back.

"Cho…are you sure? About us, I mean?"

Cho smiled sadly and reached up to stroke Cedric's cheek.

"I was made to realize a lot of things about myself earlier. I realized that all along it was always you, and I knew that-- I was just afraid of the consequences of following my heart. I've never gone against my parent's wishes in anything my entire life. There was never any need to--they're not unreasonable, and minor differences were usually resolved by small compromises. This is really the first time that what we each want differed so significantly and they refused to listen to me when I tried to tell them my side of things. I never really had to make any large decisions for myself, and I was afraid to do so this time, knowing my parents wouldn't approve. I have always been a dutiful daughter, and I didn't want to anger or upset them. When I saw you flying today with Ginny, it really hit me all at once that this wasn't a choice I could let be made for me, not by my parents or by my own inaction. You'll be graduating in just a few short months and then you'll be gone and I might never see you again, or if I did it might be too late and it felt like someone reached down my throat and tore out my heart and half my soul. I realized then that I couldn't keep dithering about a decision that would affect the rest of my adult life, and that to really be an adult I needed to make a
decision, stick with it and accept the consequences, come what may. I want my future to be with you. Once I decided that, the rest was easy. I'll write to Chuanli tonight. I wanted to see you first."

"How is he going to take things? And is it wise to tip our hand so early? It's still four months till the end of term."

"I'm not actually worried about it. I don't think Chuanli is going to be either disappointed or surprised. You'd probably like him, really."

"I'll take your word for it." Cedric replied dubiously.

Cho just nodded in acceptance; had their positions been reversed, she doubted she'd be too keen to get friendly with Cedric's ex-fiancée either.

"You're really sure?" Cedric asked one last time.

"I'm positive. It's you, Cedric. It's only ever been you."

Cedric didn't reply, he just wrapped his arms around her and held on tightly.
The MODERN Mudhole

Chapter Summary

Everyone finds out about Remus' wedding and Snape's engagement, Fleur gets to see her new home...and she's less than impressed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The great hall froze when headmaster Dumbledore opened his paper, and spit his pumpkin juice out all over the table. Everyone stared at him and then began eagerly opening their papers to see what had caused such a reaction.

There on the front page was a picture of their own professor Lupin kissing Cedric's mom, while a wizened goblin blacksmith watched them with benign joy. Everyone turned to look as Cedric Diggory spit out his pumpkin juice all over his own table.

He set down his cup with a shaking hand and held up the paper to stare at the photograph. It was true. His DADA teacher, professor Lupin, was apparently now his step-father.

"Wow, man, why didn't you tell us?"

"That would be because I didn't know. Excuse me."

"Where are you going?"

"To send a howler."

Up at the staff table, the paper was being passed down to be goggled at by all the teachers. None of them had even known Remus was dating anyone, let alone getting married. None of them had been invited to the wedding either. They felt a little better when they read the article and saw it was a surprise elopement that had gotten out of hand, but he still had a lot of explaining to do come Monday morning.

"Oh, Merlin!" Ginny suddenly shouted.

"What?"

"What is it?"

"Bill married Phlegm! Mum's gonna kill them!"

"Uh…phlegm? Can you do that?" Dean asked, making a face.

"She means Fleur Delacour. They don't get on." Ron answered, rolling his eyes.

"Beauxbatons champion Fleur Delacour? Whoah, lucky bastard!" Seamus crowed.

"That's kind of rude, isn't it? What's she ever done to you? Wait…I forgot who I was talking to there for a minute." Harry interjected, voice bland.
"Oh my goodness!" Hermione suddenly exclaimed. "Look at this!"

"Holy hell! Snape got engaged to Madame Maxime!" Neville said in surprise.

Everyone scrambled to get to the right section and all boggled at the picture of the two of them. Snape was obviously trying to look dignified, but a big stupid grin kept breaking out over his face, seemingly without his permission.

They all turned and looked at the man himself. He had seemingly gotten himself under control at some point, but it could not be denied that he seemed rather mellow that morning.

"Hey, Professor! Congrats!" Seamus called out cheerfully. "Page E5 for anyone that hasn't seen it yet!" he called out to the rest of the great hall.

Snape glanced up, then froze when he realized Seamus was looking at him. He looked around nervously when he realized everyone was rooting through their papers, boggling at whatever they'd found, and then staring at him with their mouths hanging open.

"Severus Snape! When were you going to tell us!" McGonagall demanded, brandishing the paper.

He snatched the paper and boggled at the engagement announcement, before recovering himself. "When we weren't in the middle of the great hall, preferably."

He'd say this much for Olympe's students, they certainly were an interfering lot. Very organized, but quite interfering.

"Ready to see our new home?" Bill asked.

"Yes, take ze blindfold off, I am so excited!" Fleur squealed.

"Alright, ready? Here we are, darling, casa de Weasley!"

Fleur smiled excitedly as the blindfold dropped and gazed out over the village revealed, only for her smile to freeze and then drop off her face.

"Eet is a mudhole."

Bill winced and then waved his arm dismissively.

"It needs a bit of work, it's true, but think of the possibilities! I got this place for a fraction of what we were expecting to spend, and it was already assembled. Since I only spent a small amount we have lots left for improvements, and I've got people who'll be moving in once we have things up and running--renters, no permanent residents yet, but those will come in time. Try to imagine what it will look like in time, not what it looks like now."

"Eet is still a mudhole. Until ze improvements are made it will be a terrible place to live."

"True, which is why we're going to live with my parents until this summer. Hopefully the place will be fixed up by then--it'll be rather crowded once everyone's home from Hogwarts. It's perfect, isn't it? Ah, geez...we still haven't told mum about us getting married. She's going to go mental. Ah well, she'll calm down in a week or so. I sure am glad I'll be heading back to work soon." Bill laughed. "No help for it, I guess. We should get it over with. I hope she has something good on for dinner tonight."
Fleur looked at the mudhole, pictured living with her new husband's overbearing mother for the next couple of months, and sighed. Perhaps they had jumped the gun just a little in getting married like they did.

Bill just beamed at her amiably and ambled off into the mud to take a better look around.

Fleur sighed, drew out her phone and dialed.

"Hello?"
"Help me 'arry Potter. You are my only 'ope."
"Just call me Obi Wan. What's the problem?"
"My new 'usband wants me to live in a mudhole." Fleur sniffled.
"School doesn't end for a couple of months, I'm not sure what all I can reasonably do right now."
"Tell ze school I will pay for any assistance. I am desperate."
"I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, if you could send photos of the place and the area around it that would probably be helpful."
"I need to get a camera but I will do so at ze first opportunity."
"Alright then. I'll give you a call when I know anything."

They said their goodbyes, and Fleur tucked away her phone--just in time to hear Bill exclaim "Whoa! Look at the size of these mud worms! Slugs and snails too! You could probably feed a family our size on one of them!"

Fleur shuddered, and refused to step foot in the mud. It was one thing to eat escargot--she never had and never would gather the things herself.

"Ah, Minerva, what brings you here this evening?" the headmaster greeted.

"Miss Fleur Delacour…well, Mrs. Weasley now, had sent an inquiry to Hogwarts about the feasibility of hiring some of our students to help beautify the ahem, 'mud hole', her new husband wants her to live in. She has expressed willingness to pay for such a service. It's out of the question, of course, but I told Mr. Potter I would pass along the message."

"I see. Young Mrs. Weasley is being very unkind, is she not? I was at the Burrow just this past summer. While not a palace, I would hardly classify it as a mud hole."

"Mr. Weasley purchased the temporary village put up by that awful Charity Burbage and her band of miscreants. I've never been to the place myself, but those who have been also characterized it as a mud hole, so I'm going to venture a guess that the description is accurate. She's going to send photographs of the place."

"Well, it's not something we normally do, but I see no harm in extending a helping hand to our fellow witches and wizards."

"You don't mean you're actually considering it?"

"If you ask me the students have far too much free time on their hands. A bit of work might do them some good."

"Albus! They're students, not indentured servants!"

"Nonsense, Minerva, sending the children out to do a bit of cleanup is hardly making servants of them, not if we do it on a volunteer basis…although I suppose we'll have to get the parents'
permission to let them leave the school…that will be a bother. Just how much is she offering to pay us?"

"Don't you think this will set a bad precedent?"

"Hardly. A good many of our students would benefit from a day’s honest work, if you ask me."

"And what's next? Renting them out to do farm work? Hiring them out as janitors?"

"I suppose that would depend on how successful this little venture is. It could be a good thing in disguise, really. Let's see how reluctant the Ministry is to fork over funds to the school when the alternative means their little pampered darlings will be off slogging in the mud to help cover costs."

"But…Albus!"

"Really, it's a splendid idea. I don't know why I didn't think of it years ago."

Cho and Cedric peeked their heads into the room and saw all the club heads seated around a table waiting for them. They took a seat, and exchanged a look, wondering why they'd been summoned.

"So…you all wanted to see us?"

"Yes. We're all here to discuss your wedding. There is going to be a wedding, correct?" Padma asked.

"At some point in the future."

"During the end of year fair, you mean. Turns out Dumbledore can perform weddings. You're both of age, and I imagine you want things finalized before Cho goes home for the summer to her family, who I believe are still against your union?" Harry disagreed.

"They are, though I'm hoping they'll come around eventually."

"So, indoor or out?" Dean asked.

"Um…"

"Do you want an eastern or a western theme? We have lots of ideas for either one." Parvati offered.

"How many attendants? Do you have a color preference?" Draco demanded.

"What sort of flowers were you thinking of?" Hannah this time.

Cho and Cedric shrunk back in their seats as the questions continued to be fired at them at high speed.

"H-how long have all of you been planning this?"

"Since you broke up…well, two months after you broke up. We figure with all the misery your epic love has inflicted on the student body, you owe us a happy ending. So…inside or out? Inquiring minds want to know." Pansy sniffed.
"Hey, Harry, what's that?"

An owl had just delivered a package of photographs. Harry unwrapped them and whistled as he flipped through the stack.

"Damn, no wonder she sounded so desperate. That place really is a mudhole. I wonder how much it set him back?"

"Ugh. What is that place?" Hermione wondered as she peered over his shoulder.

"This would be the village now owned by Bill and Fleur Weasley. She called me for help when Bill showed her the place."

"Village? My brother has a village?" Ron demanded.

The Weasley siblings crowded around the photographs as well. Ginny laughed delightedly at the thought of Fleur living in such a place.

"Wait, what do you mean she called you for help?" she then demanded.

"She called me and wondered if the Melting Pot could help pretty the place up. As one can imagine she wasn't too thrilled when Bill told her it would be their new home. She's currently living with your parents. From what I've heard she's not settled in too well. Your mum was really pissed that they eloped and gyped her out of a wedding, and then Bill went back to work right after and left Fleur to deal with your mum's bad temper on her own. She's still there though, because this is the alternative."

"I think it suits her."

"Man, I can't believe Bill actually paid money for that place." Fred marveled while George shuddered in horror.

"She offered more if we could make it livable. I put it to professor McGonagall, but she hasn't said anything more about it one way or another, so I don't even know if we're allowed to help out."

He gathered the photos back up and called Colin over.

"Hey, could you make a couple of copies each of these, enough to disseminate to the different clubs? I'd like everyone to pitch ideas on how to improve the place in a cheap, doable and permanent way. If the art club could do a couple of presentation posters showing the ideas in action that would be good too. If anyone can estimate materials cost and the like while they're at it, that would be even better."

"Sure, will do."

"Thanks. Even if we can't do the work ourselves, we can at least give her some ideas or something." Harry explained.

McGonagall entered the staff room and tossed a packet of photographs Dumbledore's way.

"What are these?"

"Remember a week or so back I told you we had gotten a request for help from the students? This is what they need help with."
"What's this?" Flitwick asked curiously.

While Dumbledore was flipping through the photos and grimacing and shuddering in disgust, McGonagall explained about the Weasley newlyweds and the trouble they were having with their new village.

"Having seen the place now, I no longer wonder why the poor girl was so desperate. No new bride wants to see a place like that and be told it's to be their new home. The poor girl has probably been having nightmares of having her children disappear into the sucking mud, never to be seen again. I can't imagine what young Mr. Weasley was thinking."

Flitwick held a hand out for the photos, and began to flip through them while Sprout peered over his shoulder—as did Snape, though he tried to pretend he wasn't at all curious. Lupin moved to stand behind Flitwick so he could see as well.

"That's the village Charity and her people put up. I couldn't imagine why they had built it in such a place, though according to Ted when he asked the same they said it wasn't like that when they arrived. They were convinced someone cursed the place to punish them for being muggleborn. Why Bill paid good money for it I'll never know. I realize the Weasleys aren't wealthy, but come on."

"Arthur and Molly aren't wealthy, but they also have nine children and only Arthur is working… for pay, that is. I don't doubt Molly works quite a lot looking after that brood of hers. Bill is a young man working as a curse-breaker. While I doubt he's rich, he should be reasonably well off even as a relative newcomer to Gringott's. He's just being cheap, I would imagine." Snape disagreed.

"There doesn't look to be any foundations. The silly buggers didn't do any sort of preparatory work, I wouldn't doubt. They probably broke something in the ground and that's groundwater seeping up from below that's causing the mess. If that's the case, it should be fixable if we can find the cause and the location that the problem is originating from. A well, a fountain, laying in some foundations and getting those poor little houses out of the mud before they sink or disintegrate… considering the haphazard job they did of setting up their town, I wouldn't doubt they didn't put in any water-repelling or pest resistance charms. They might have to lay in new wood on the bottom of the houses, if they've just been there soaking in muddy water all this time. It'll be a pain, but it should be doable. Once the problem is taken care of the ground should start drying out, and then they should be able to lay in streets and some greenery, which will do wonders for the place. Those little houses all need charming for weather resistance and the like, and then a few good coats of paint should fix them right up…" Sprout mused as she studied the photos.

"Would you like to lead the first group of student volunteers?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"What say you, Filius? Want to come along? You're part goblin and a dab hand with charms. We could use your expertise in finding the problem in the ground."

"A weekend field trip? Well, that might be fun. It would be nice to give the students a chance to use what they're learning for a useful, real-life purpose. Not to mention a bit of tutelage now might save future villages and homes from the same fate this one experienced… Why not? It might be interesting."

Early Saturday morning, Ron eyed Neville blearily, noting he was dressed as though planning to work, and that he had his cloak near to hand as though he were planning to head outside.
"Herbology club?" he guessed.

"No, I'm going out as part of the group to fix Bill and Fleur's village--me and a few other NEWT Herbology students and Professors Sprout and Flitwick. We're going to see if we can fix whatever's causing all the mud and then we're going to make plans for landscaping and such. Next weekend, if the ground has dried sufficiently once we're done fixing the problem, another group is going to head out to help add foundations, repair the houses and whatnot. Depending on what all needs doing, there might be a group heading out a few weekends after that as well. I guess we'll see. I know my group will be heading out at least once more to do the landscaping once we've made plans. The rest just depends on how bad the houses are and what all needs to be done to make the village livable. You must have seen the notices in the common room?"

"I did, but pfeh, Bill can fix his own bloody village. Why should I waste my weekends on something like that?"

"I thought it might be fun." Neville shrugged.

"I'm going to be going next weekend." Hermione informed them. "I have lots of practical experience in this sort of thing already after a summer with the corporation. In fact, about half the group going are all interns, because we're already dab hands with a whole array of house-related and building charms."

"Barmy, eh mate?" Ron nudged Harry in the side.

"I'm going next weekend too."

"What?"

"What? It's a chance to get out of the castle for a weekend and do something different. Why wouldn't I go?"

"Because you'll be stuck working instead of hanging out and having fun!"

"I like to be busy."

"Can you believe this lot?"

"I'm with you, mate." Seamus laughed "Dean, however…"

"I'm not going till the weekend after next to help pretty the place up once all the structural stuff is taken care of. I want to make sure the decorating adheres to our vision for the place." Dean defended himself.

"Your vision? What are you now, a seer?" Ron scoffed.

"No, I was the lead in drawing up a decorating scheme for the village. We made three, mine won."

"Artsy bohemian?" Neville asked.

"Yeah. Apparently Fleur thinks it's 'charming'."

"What's this then?" Ron asked.

"Didn't you see the concept drawings?" Dean sighed.

"The what now?"
"The pictures the art club made of the village all fixed up." Hermione explained.

"Oh, those."

"Yeah. Dean's design won. Once the mud is cleared and the houses prepped, he and his team are going to go decorate them so the place looks like his drawing, and Neville's team is going to landscape to finish it up. I can't wait to see the finished product." Lavender agreed.

"Me either. This is so exciting." Hermione agreed cheerfully.

"Mental. Absolutely mental." Ron shook his head in disgust.

Remus smiled nervously as he opened the door. "Ah…Mr. Diggory…Cedric…um…oh! Come in, please."

Cedric, face expressionless, followed Remus into the room and looked around curiously. The room was sparsely furnished, and surprisingly bare.

"I've sent most of my things home. I'm still going to have quarters here, but the plan is to try and go home nights for the most part. It should be doable--quick jaunt to Hogsmeade and a portkey. There may be evenings when I need to stick around for one reason or another, so I'm not giving up my quarters here altogether, but…under the circumstances, I'd like to be able to live in my own home when I can." he trailed off nervously.

Cedric's eyes narrowed at the reminder of why he was there. Remus saw this and smiled wanly while running an agitated hand through his hair.

"I'm sure you've gotten your mother's letter by now, and well, I just wanted to add my words to hers. I really am so, so sorry about how everything fell out. My only real defense is that there was no malicious intent whatsoever…we just got caught up in the moment. Would you like tea?"

Cedric pursed his lips, not giving an inch, but then his innate sense of fair play made him unbend enough to accept.

Remus called a house elf, who returned shortly with a pot of tea, two cups and all the fixings, as well as a plate of chocolate-dipped biscuits as well as a few with strawberry topping, Cedric's favorite. Cedric cast a suspicious look Remus' way and he smiled nervously.

"Your mother might have mentioned they were your favorite."

They each spent a few moments fixing their tea to their liking. Remus snagged one of the chocolate biscuits and gobbled it down with every evidence of enjoyment.

Once the tea was made and each had taken their share of the biscuits, they sat in awkward silence for a few moments while Remus tried to think of how to fix things. Pam was devastated at how they had inadvertently treated her son--she'd been near inconsolable when she'd received his howler. It had rather put a damper on the whole honeymoon. Remus sighed and pushed his tea aside to cool and decided he was best off just being frank and open about how things had happened.

"Look…please believe it was never our intention to deceive you or leave you in the dark. I don't read Witch Weekly, and I didn't really think about what it meant that there were people running around taking photos. It was a crazy day and everything just happened so fast… I care about your
mother very much…and to my continued amazement, she seems to feel the same way about me. All those years when I was a werewolf…thought I was a werewolf” he quickly corrected himself "I thought there was no future for me—no family, no job, just endless painful transformations and fear. Charity Burbage was my first girlfriend, and well, you know how that turned out. I was in a pretty bad place when I ran into your mother…and well, she wasn't doing too well either. We got to talking and well, before I knew it we were dating and…it was wonderful. I had worked myself into a bit of a tizzy when I went and impulsively bought a ring and immediately started second-guessing myself. When she accepted"

Remus trailed off as a giddy, amazed smile crossed his face

"I couldn't believe it. Here was this wonderful woman…and she said yes. I'm rarely impulsive--I had always left that to my friends. Someone had to be the level-headed responsible one, after all. Considering what a mess we made, I suppose it was a good thing I do impulsive things so rarely. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry things happened the way they did…but I'm not sorry about what happened with your mother. She is the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I plan to spend the rest of my life making sure she knows it. Your mother loves you, and she feels terribly about everything. I just ask that you don't hold it against her--blame me. I was the one who got so caught up that I stopped thinking for a short while. I would hate if this awkward start were to in any way sour you relationship with your mother. I hope in time you'll see your way clear to forgiving her."

Cedric frowned down into this tea. He just wasn't good at holding grudges, for all that he really wanted to stay furious at both of them. Remus' earnest contrition seemed to have softened him in spite of his intentions otherwise. He sighed and stared down into his cup as though it held the secrets of the universe before meeting Remus' worried gaze finally.

"I think that, had Gretna Green been nearby when Cho and I got back together, we might have done something similarly impulsive. I suppose I can't really hold a grudge over something I might have done myself had things worked out that way." Cedric allowed. "Though fair warning, if I have to find out about another major development in my mother's life in the paper, I won't be so forgiving!"

"That's reasonable." Remus agreed quickly. "So…you and Cho have gotten back together? What about her fiancé?"

"He has a new girlfriend already. He met her Valentine's day. He's fine with things. He wasn't attached and we think he realized what was going to happen. He and she are going to sneak around until news of our marriage breaks."

"Oh…well that's good."

Cedric just nodded.

"Um…you'll be graduating soon. What are your plans for the future?"

Cedric grimaced and downed the last of his tea.

"My plan had been to follow my father into the Ministry…but with everything, I thought a change of plans might be in order. I'm going to be heading out to the desert to be a honey farmer in August. I'll be there all year while Cho's in school. I'll see how that goes before deciding if a change is in order."

"A honey farmer? That sounds familiar for some reason"
"Do you know any dragon tamers?"

"Charlie Weasley…that's right…there's some sort of giant bees out there or something, correct?"

"Giant bee-wasps. They have a settlement out where they nest inside the mesa. There's a whole carved-out village there in the base. I'll be helping tend the bee-wasps, gathering honey and helping transport it to the merchants and shops."

"Sounds interesting."

"I guess. It really wasn't my first choice of a career, but who knows, maybe I'll like it."

"That's right, look on the bright side. More tea?"

"Sure."

Remus froze in the doorway to the staff lounge when every eye turned his way.

"Well?" McGonagall asked impatiently.

"Well what?"

"Cedric, my boy! How did things go?"

Remus opened his mouth and all the staff leaned forward just a bit. Remus closed his mouth and headed to the sideboard to fix himself a cup of tea.

"Remus! Come on now, answer us!"

"All in good time." he replied blithely. Was it bad of him that he was enjoying their disgruntled rumblings as much as he was?

Five minutes later he seated himself at the table and took a sip from his cup. McGonagall twitched and glowered at him for his trouble. "If you don't start talking soon, I'm going to box your ears!"

"Goodness, Minerva, I had no idea traits from one's animagus form bled over to such a degree" Remus teased. McGonagall blushed as the other teachers snickered quietly.

"For the love of Merlin, wolf, would you just spill your guts already? They're not going to quit hounding you till you do." Snape muttered before re-immersing himself in the book he was reading.

"Fine, fine. I've had my fun. Things went fine. We seem to have cleared the air, and even had a nice chat afterwards."

"Well, that's good to hear. It would be a rather inauspicious start to your marriage were you and she to remain at odds with her son. I'm glad things worked out. I've always been rather fond of Mr. Diggory."

"He is a nice boy. He's a lot like his mother, actually."

"He has a lot of his father in him too, though given the recent past, that's probably not something he or anyone else wants to hear. I still don't understand what got into that boy." Professor Kettleburn mused. "I will say this much, Amos was a bit of a blowhard even as a youth. His son never has
been. Ah well, he'll make a good replacement for his father in the Ministry."

"He's not going to the Ministry." Remus corrected "He's headed out to the desert in August to be a honey farmer. With everything that happened with his father, he felt a change of career was in order."


"Don't scoff, Minnie, I've seen the place the lad is going. Those things are bee-wasps and they're the size of small horses. They've got stingers as long as a man's leg, and they swarm when they get annoyed. They've got dragon tamers out there running the place now." Kettleburn chuckled.

"Good Lord."

"So, not going to the Ministry, eh? I'll keep that in mind. He was a good student, and he's great with the kiddies. Maybe I'll have a chat with young Mr. Diggory about maybe replacing me in a few years when I retire. I was going to a few years ago, but with Hagrid's beasties getting cleared out it wasn't so pressing a need. The lad'll have a few years to get some seasoning. Yes, maybe I'll do that."

"That's an excellent idea, Silvanus, Mr. Diggory would make an excellent addition to the staff in a few years." Sprout nodded.

"Did you all know that he and Cho got back together?" Remus asked curiously.

"No."
"No."
"I did." Snape muttered.

The teachers all turned to look at him in astonishment.

"How on earth did you know?"

"Draco. He comes by to help me sometimes when I have orders to fill. He had to beg off because he and some of the other children were busy planning Diggory's wedding. He nattered on for an hour about the 'fabulous robes and décor' and then told me I couldn't tell anyone because it was a secret. The boy never did have much sense."

"Why are the children planning the wedding? And where are they holding it?"

"As to why they're planning it, they apparently feel they're owed a happy ending after all the lovelorn angst. They're holding it here at the end of the year." Remus chuckled.

"They are? Who's performing it?" Dumbledore sputtered. He was really getting tired of everyone just making plans and changes in the castle without consulting him.

"I was told you were." Snape offered.

"No one bothered telling me that! No one mentioned any wedding at all!"

"Hmm…maybe they assumed Diggory and Chang would approach you."

"Cedric and Cho probably assumed the other children did so since they were handling everything else. I'll send them to your office after dinner." Remus offered.

"That would be for the best. This isn't Gretna Green--there's paperwork and procedures that need to
be followed for it to be legal and binding. I'm not actually allowed to just flit around performing weddings on the fly." Dumbledore sighed.

"Hey, Nev. How'd things go today?"

"Oh, man. you're all going to have your work cut out for you next weekend. What a mess. That M.O.D.E.R.N. bunch were not only a bunch of nutters, they were completely incompetent as well. They did crack something in the ground. The area they put their houses up has a whole bunch of underground streams running criss-cross the whole area. There were some large boulders nearby that they seem to have levitated and flung to one side and piled up on top of each other. They cracked three of the underground streams, which all started seeping upwards. We fixed the damage and put in a large pond and a waterfall. While the teachers and the upper years were doing that, the rest of us got to levitate houses. Even with the measures we took to fix things, it wasn't the best place to build a village. We did a survey and found a spot about fifty yards away that was solid rock down a good distance into the ground, beneath the layer of topsoil. So, that's what we were doing. We set up a foundation, and then a group of us would levitate one of the houses over to put it in place. We only got about a third of the houses moved. We'll try to finish the rest tomorrow. The bottoms are going to all have to be replaced, they're warped and rotted, and completely drenched in thick, sticky mud. It smells awful, even after we cleaned up as best we could while moving everything. It's really a good thing Fleur called for help—she said Bill had already felt out a bunch of possible tenants. He probably would have made a lot of enemies if he tried to move anyone into those places, let alone charge for the privilege. What a mess."

"Yech. Sounds like we will have our work cut out for us. Geez."

"It'll be good experience... in case there's ever a flood or something." Hermione offered.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Heh, see? What'd I tell you, you're all mental. Now, for being stupid enough to volunteer, you all get to work on rotted houses that smell bad all weekend, while I'll be sleeping in, taking a fly around the pitch, accepting the accolades of adoring fans after we score another victory for Gryffindor... speaking of quidditch, are you ready for the game?" he asked Harry. "You'd better be, mate. I don't want you holding us back on our path to victory"

"Excuse me?" Harry sputtered, while George, who was sitting nearby, smacked Ron in the back of the head.

"Unlike you, Ronniekins, Harry doesn't panic when he gets out on the pitch. You're the one who needs to make sure he's prepared. You need to find a way to stay calm and focused while you're out there."

"Yeah. It's infuriating really. We know you can fly, and we know you can play. Having you fall apart during games is not doing our point standings any good." Fred agreed.

Ron scowled at both of them. "Sure, take perfect Potter's side."

"I beg your pardon?" Harry demanded his voice icy. "What the hell has gotten into you today?"

"Don't mind Ronniekins, he's having love troubles."

"What kind of love troubles?" Neville asked curiously.
"He found out Hermione's been writing back and forth to her new fella, the movie star."

"Too bad, but stop taking it out on me." Harry grumbled.

Neville sauntered upstairs to get changed after a long day of classes. The dorm was empty when he arrived. He started to get undressed, but he could feel someone watching him. He looked around, saw the dorm was still empty and made another attempt, but the longer he was in the room, the more convinced he became that someone was in there and watching silently. Thoroughly creeped out, he scurried from the room.

Fred Weasley clomped down the stairs from the dorms into the common room and found Neville surrounded by the rest of his roommates.

"It was creepy!" Neville insisted. "There was someone watching me!"

"But you said yourself you didn't see anyone." Ron pointed out.

"Hey…have you lot been having a kinky photo shoot in your dorms or something?" Fred asked curiously.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, when I was coming down, I saw really bright flashing lights coming out from under the door to your dorm. I peeked inside, but I didn't see anyone."

"We're all here. There wasn't anyone in the dorm." Seamus gestured, indicating himself, Ron, Neville and Harry.

"Dean's not here." Neville realized.

"Oh, Merlin! Dean's dead! He's becoming a ghost…that explains everything! The feeling that there was someone in there watching you, the flashing lights…” Ron said in horror.

"Dean! Oh man, I can't believe this!" Neville gasped.

"Why would Dean be dead? That's ridiculous!" Harry demanded.

"I haven't seen him in a while, have you?" Ron sniffled.

"That doesn't mean he's dead." Harry pointed out.

"If a ghost is forming in our dorm, who else could it be?" Seamus said in a lost voice, before sinking down on to the couch when his legs would no longer hold him.

"Bloody hell. Dean." he whimpered.

Neville sunk down beside him in equal misery. Ron, who was pale and wild eyed sunk down beside them and hung his head.

"He's too young to die."

"Too right. The best of all us, Dean is."

"He's a good mate…even if he thinks his weird muggle football thing in any way compares to quidditch."

The three of them were so sunk in their misery, they didn't see the portrait hole open and Dean step
"Hey Dean. Good to see you. Can you tell our roommates you're alive so they'll stop crying already?" Harry sighed.

Dean shot him a bemused, puzzled look and started towards them, only to be tackled by Ron, Neville and Seamus.

"DEAN! YOU'RE ALIVE!" they all shouted.

"Why the hell wouldn't I be?"

Once assured that Dean was, in fact, alive, life went more or less back to normal. There were no further strange incidents in the dorm--no more creepy feeling of being watched, no more flashing lights. It remained a mystery, but everyone eventually put it out of their minds.

"Hey Harry, something wrong?"

"Hedwig isn't here again. She's gone."

"Maybe she just doesn't have any mail to bring."

"You don't understand. She's gone. I haven't sent mail in two weeks, because I haven't been able to find her anywhere. She's not been in the owlery, she's not on the grounds anywhere that I've seen. I've tried calling for her, but she hasn't answered. She's gone."

"Prolly eaten by something. Tough luck, mate." Ron said around a mouthful of toast.

Harry reared back like he'd been struck and his face paled. Lavender and Parvati each took it upon themselves to smack Ron in the back of the head.

"Don't listen to him. It's spring. Maybe she had babies and can't come." Lavender assured him.

"Yeah, that's probably all it is. You'll see. She'll show up again." Parvati nodded.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. She'll come back. Don't worry about it."

Harry seemed considerably cheered by the prospect, and finished his breakfast, already imagining a trio of tiny Hedwigs. He asked around, but no one else's owl seemed to be missing, which begged the question--who was the father?

"Hey! My mum had the baby! It's a girl! I'm a big brother!" Neville suddenly exclaimed.

"Congrats, Neville. What's her name?"

"Agatha Alice Longbottom."

"Give our best to your parents and the new baby."

"Wow. A big brother."
The rest of them all smiled. It seemed things really were better with Neville and his family. They could all remember how upset he’d been when he first found out.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who are curious, the flashing lights was Tom and Harry dimension hopping. If you want to read about their adventures, they're in "Adventures in Dimension Hopping."
Neville woke and stretched, before sitting up in bed with a yawn. He spotted Harry sitting on his bed, Hedwig on his knee, flipping through a photo album.

"Oh, hey, Hedwig's back. Did she have babies?" he questioned as he rose to start gathering his things for the day.

Harry smirked and stroked Hedwig's feathered breast.

"No. She just had herself a bit of adventure is all." Harry replied before glancing up at him. Harry suddenly bit his lip and seemed to be trying not to laugh.

"New look there, Nev?"

"Huh? Whaddya mean?" Neville wondered, looking at his friend. His eyes suddenly widened and he started chuckling.

"Harry, mate, were you aware you have marker all over your face?"

"What are you talking about? You're the one with marker all over your face."

"No I'm not…wait…really?" Neville ran into the bathroom and shouted in dismay.

Harry sauntered in after him, glanced in the mirror and made a face at the fake moustache, monocle and beard he was sporting, all of it drawn on his skin. Neville had whiskers, the end of his nose was blackened in a triangle to resemble a cat nose, and his eyes were outlined in black.

"I'm gonna kill whoever did this!" Neville muttered, before storming back out to the dorm to shake the others awake and demand answers.

Unfortunately, there were no answers to be found. Dean, Ron and Seamus had also been drawn on some time in the night--Dean in white, so it showed up against his dark skin as starkly as the black on the others. There was much howling and outrage amongst the four of them as they got dressed, all vowing hotly to find the perpetrators and string them up by their ankles. All but Harry. He simply scourgified his face, got dressed and assured them it was a harmless prank and no big deal. The others weren't so easily placated, but settled down once they had some breakfast in them.

Hedwig's sudden return was greeted with joy by the Gryffindors girls, who had felt terribly about her absence, given how upset Harry obviously was by it. She was a lovely owl, they all thought, and they were quite relieved to find out she had not, in fact, been eaten by anything--as many of them had begun to fear, their words to the contrary notwithstanding.

Breakfast was nearly over when Neville, who had lapsed deep into thought halfway through, suddenly straightened in his seat and fixed Harry with a gimlet stare. Harry just grinned and
winked and sauntered out the door as the bell rang.

"Harry, you bastard. You wrote on everyone, didn't you?"

"Nope. I can honestly say I didn't. I only wrote on myself."

"Huh? But…then who did the rest?"

"Tom."

"Tom? Tom who?"

"You know, Tom. You've met him."

"He's not even a student here!"

"He has his ways."

"Why the hell would your boyfriend break into Hogwarts just to draw on us?"

"It would be pretty weird if that's what he did. No, he came here to get me so we could go on vacation for a bit."

Neville glowered at him and then sighed.

"More time travel?"

Harry just grinned. "I'll show you my photo album later."

Neville glowered some more.

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe I'd like to go on a wacky adventure vacation some time?"

"I'll keep it in mind if there's ever a next time. I honestly wasn't expecting it this time. He just showed up and said, 'Hey, come with me. We're going adventuring.'"

"Just like that?"

"Pretty much."

"How'd he even get in?"

"Family secret. He's part of Slytherin's bloodline. They have their ways."

"So unfair."

"Them's the breaks."

They entered the potions classroom and settled down at their workstations. Potions had been difficult this year, and it would likely only grow more so in the next two years, but Harry found that, oddly, he was really enjoying it.

"Settle down, everyone." Snape barked as he entered the classroom behind them.

He spun in place upon reaching the front and looked out over the students measuringly.

"We're going to try something different for your end of year exams this year." he announced once
he had everyone's attention. "I'm going to give you a list of ingredients. By year's end, I expect you to know what everything on the list does, how it interacts with other ingredients, and what sort of things it is used for. You'll be compiling such a list from now until year's end. For your exam, you'll receive a short list taken from the larger--two to five ingredients. Your task will be to try to develop a theoretical idea of what sort of potions could be made from the ingredients you're given. You'll be expected to explain why you think such a thing could be made, what steps might have to be taken to get the ingredients to work together properly, what other ingredients might, theoretically, have to be added to make your idea work. Even if, should it be proven, that your idea does not in fact work in actuality, do not fear for your grade. Your grade will be based on your understanding of the processes involved, and your ability to explain to me why you think it might work as you've supposed."

He flicked his wand, and a list of ingredients wrote themselves out neatly on the board.

"Copy this down. This is the master list. It would behoove you all to know it backwards and forwards by the time the exams roll around."

Everyone scrambled to start copying. Around the room, some of the students looked intrigued by the task, the rest look either frightened or ill. It was like no other potions exam they'd ever had in the time they'd been at Hogwarts.

After everyone had copied the list, the regular class got underway. Snape didn't appreciate anyone talking or goofing around in his class, so everyone was forced to hold out until class was over before talking about the upcoming exam.

"Merlin! What kind of an exam is that? I'm going to fail!"

"Tell me about it. Man."

"He said it's all about whether you understand the processes involved, not whether the potion you come up with will actually work as you think. Stop worrying so much. Potions researchers rarely get it right on the first try. They come up with a theory, try it out, take notes, try again. He just wants to see whether you have the basics down and can figure out how you think it should work." Draco assured everyone.

"Yeah, so long as you learn everything on the list, you should be fine." Blaise agreed.

Neville noted Hermione still seemed ill at ease about the upcoming exam.

"Alright there, Hermione?"

"I don't like this at all." she admitted.

"I would think you'd be jumping for joy. You usually love having a chance to show off how smart you are." Hannah said.

"There aren't any right answers though!"

"Of course there are. If you say something that would be good in a sleeping draught would be good for a love potion or something, you'd be marked wrong. If you know what the stuff's properties are, how they interact with the other ingredients, and can theorize a rough idea of what you might be able to make with it--so long as it's well argued, and seems to hold up in theory at least, it's a right answer." Draco disagreed.

"But you don't know that! It could be all wrong!"
"He said theoretical. He's not expecting us to just whip up a brand new potion on the fly and have it work. He's testing our theory knowledge. So long as you have that part down it should be fine." Harry interjected.

"I still don't like it."

"I think it sounds like fun, strangely enough." Harry admitted.

Hermione cast an unhappy glance his way and hurried towards their next class.

By dinner time there were a lot of unhappy NEWT students. Professor Snape wasn't the only one that had decided to test them rigorously for their theoretical knowledge of whatever subject they were to be tested in. It seemed many of their classes that year were going to do something similar.

In charms class they'd been told they were going to be given a list of actions or events and they were going to have to figure out what the charm to do the thing would look like based on their knowledge of charms thus far.

Runes class was going to be doing something similar--the exam that year was going to be to construct a theoretical runic array to achieve some end or other that would be given to them at test time. Harry had a feeling that the rest of their classes would be doing something similar. There was a lot of worry and bellyaching at the table that night.

"Why are they doing this? Why can't they just give us a regular test and be done with it?" Lavender fretted.

"They know we know the answers to most of the questions they're likely to ask. They've seen us play interrogation enough times. They want to make sure we actually understand the material and don't just know a lot of rote answers from our games. " Dean realized.

"It's so unfair. The exams this year are gonna be murder!" Seamus sighed.

"We should add a review of Latin and Greek roots and wand movements to interrogation. They should be a big help to everyone for the Charms exam."

Ron stared at Hermione blankly. "What the hell are you on about?"

Hermione just gave him a pitying look back. "You'd best reread your books from beginning to end. I'd get started right away if I were you."

Ron paled and sunk into a ball of misery over his dinner, convinced he was going to fail all his exams that year.

"So…next week, last quidditch game of the year." Neville piped in brightly. Far from cheering Ron up, he just looked more miserable.

"Don't remind me. Angelina has taken to stopping me randomly in the halls and breaking down our point standing and reminding me that I absolutely have to stop any goals from getting through next game."

"Yeah, she's had you guys out there a lot, hasn't she?" Dean nodded.

"Yeah, everyone but our seeker, who for some reason gets special treatment." Ron added bitterly with a sour glance in Harry's direction. At the reminder of who had taken her spot on the team, Ginny cast a sour glance Harry's way as well.
"That was the deal. I have a heavier class load than the rest of you, and I didn't want to be on the team. I'm doing a favor. Anyway, it's not like the seeker really needs practice--you spot the snitch, you catch it. I've been going out flying for an hour here and there whenever I have a chance to keep my edge, but I'm not giving up every moment of my spare time to go to practices. I need that time for homework."

"Still unfair. The rest of us have to go."

"The rest of you tried out and wanted to be on the team."

"Hogsmeade weekend after the game. That'll be nice, won't it?" Hermione interjected before Ron could continue arguing.

Ron, instead of brightening just got even more morose. Last Hogsmeade weekend had been Valentines day. He'd been stuck wandering alone, while Hermione was off with some berk, and Harry was off with his secret girlfriend that might actually be a boyfriend.

The final quidditch game of the year was Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff. The point standings were close enough that the quidditch cup could go either way. Angelina hustled everyone outside to the locker room halfway through breakfast to get ready.

"Even if we win, we might not get the cup if we do it without the points. Ron, you need to stay focused and pay attention! We can't afford for them to rack up too many points. Fred, George, I want you two to help him as much as possible, if he looks like he needs it. Foul the chasers when they're trying to score. Girls, we need to be in synch and we need to score as many goals as possible. Potter, we need at least two hundred points before you catch the snitch. Keep track of the score, make sure Diggory doesn't get the snitch. I need all of you to do your part. If we don't get the cup, you're all going to answer to me…Understood?"

"Aye, aye, Cap'n!" Fred and George chorused cheerfully.

Angelina seemed to be in no mood for their antics. Her face stayed grim and firm as she looked over the group. "Let's move out and LET'S WIN THIS THING!"

"YEAH!" the team shouted together.

Ron swallowed, grabbed his broom and trudged out after the rest of them looking ill.

"You alright there, mate?"

"Huh? Yeah. I'm fine. Just peachy, in fact."

"You're your own worst enemy. Just relax and let go. You know how to play the game. You're better than some professionals…if they're Chudley Cannons, anyway. No matter what happens today, it's over till next year. Don't sweat it. Just go out there and do your best." Harry told him.

"Easy for you to say. You don't even come to practice and you win games."

"Look at it this way… You're scared of making a fool of yourself, right? Well, you've already done that somewhat, and the world didn't end."

"Oh, yeah, thanks. That really helps."
"What? It's true. You were so busy worrying, you freaked out and were a sickly, sodden mess by game's end. You're still here, and Gryffindor is still in the running. Just relax, don't worry about the crowd, and try to have fun. Just imagine you're in your backyard playing against your siblings. It's not supposed to be torture."

Harry clapped him on the back and hurried to catch up to the others.

Ron hesitated at the edge of the field and looked around at the stands. They were filled with familiar faces--folks he was in classes with, goofed off in his free time with. Friends and acquaintances. What was he really so afraid of? Harry was right--he'd already made a fool out of himself. The world hadn't ended. He'd gotten a bit of teasing here and there, but that was all. It was the last game of the year. He'd been making himself sick, spending sleepless nights, unable to eat…and for what? A game. He could do better than he had--he knew it, his brothers and sister knew it, his friends knew it. The rest of Hogwarts didn't know it, but then he hadn't shown them, had he? He'd been so afraid of messing up, he'd messed up big time. This was his last chance to show everyone that he actually deserved to be on the team.

"Pretend I'm playing in the yard at the Burrow? Yeah. I can do that." he whispered to himself. He straightened his shoulders, tightened his grip on his broom and strode off to join the rest of the team.

Up in the stands, baby Regulus had gained a fan club. He was cheerfully smiling and babbling and pointing at things, the girls of Gryffindor were cooing in response. He was dressed in a tiny red robe, but was wearing a blue hat, scarf and mittens even though Ravenclaw wasn't playing that day. Sirius and Adeline were both already trying to influence his eventual house placement. Poor kid.

"I'm afraid to watch." Hermione sighed before she began biting her nails in worry.

"So am I." Neville admitted.

"What's this?" Sirius demanded.

"It's Ron. Every game this year he's completely choked. We're lucky Gryffindor is even in the running, honestly." Seamus explained. "The rest of the team is brilliant, but it hasn't mattered this year, because Ron's just been falling apart and letting pretty much every goal in."

"It's pathetic--especially considering how he used to brag before he got on the team. He was worse than Ginny."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ginny growled.

"It means you're a braggart. Duh." Parvati scoffed to the redhead.

"It's not bragging if you can deliver."

"Just keep telling yourself that." Lavender snorted. "You never hear Harry going around like you do, and he doesn't even practice."

"Looks like it's showtime."

Ginny scowled unhappily at the team as they rose. She should be out there.
Hufflepuff seemed pretty confident as the game began. They got possession of the quaffle and began a barrage of attacks on the Gryffindor goals. One, two, three, four. They were all repelled, one after another. A stir went through the Gryffindor stands at the sight, and the students leaned forward in interest.

Some fancy teamwork got the quaffle back in Gryffindor hands. Angelina made the first shot and it was narrowly repelled by the Hufflepuff keeper. Katie Bell snatched the ball as it fell and managed a goal before he recovered. It was now 10-0 in Gryffindor's favor. The crowd went wild.

Alicia snagged the ball and tried for another goal, which was repelled, only to have the ball snagged by Angelina and another goal made. One of the Hufflepuff chasers managed to grab the ball as it fell, and hightailed it towards the Gryffindor goal, narrowly dodging bludgers, courtesy of Fred and George as he travelled the length of the field.

Ron was flying high near the center goal. The chaser threw the ball beneath him, expecting an easy goal, but Ron swung down underneath his broom, hanging by one leg and one hand, grabbed the ball and chucked it to Katie as she flew nearby. Hermione swooned, thinking Ron had just fallen off his broom. When she had recovered, she looked around at the cheering crowd, wondering how they could be so insensitive about Ron being dead. Teary eyed, she glanced towards the Gryffindor goals, but found Ron still on his broom and still playing. He was even diverting another goal.

"Ron's still alive!"

"Yeah…Why wouldn't he be?" Sirius shouted over the cheering crowd.

"I thought he fell off his broom!"

"No. He did a classic sloth maneuver! I don’t know why everyone's so down on the poor kid, he's a great keeper!"

"Today he is. He normally sucks! You must be good luck or something. You need to keep coming to the games!" Seamus shouted back.

Ron's winning streak continued until the score was 210-40 in Gryffindor's favor. That's when the seekers suddenly shot down through the crowd chasing the snitch. Ron let another two goals through while watching them. He caught the third attempt while the seekers were weaving through the stands neck in neck and tossed it to Angelina who hightailed it back to the Ravenclaw goal. She and the other chasers managed another goal just as Harry leaned forward and did a flip off the front of his broom and landed on the ground ten feet below, holding the snitch aloft.

"POTTER HAS CAUGHT THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS! FINAL SCORE 370-60! GRYFFINDOR WINS THE CUP!"

There was a moment of shocked delight and then the Gryffindor stands roared as they began to stream down onto the field. Fred and George flew to Ron and grabbed him, cheering and laughing. They drifted down to the field in a weird tangle of arms legs and brooms. When they landed, the rest of the team followed, shrieking in delight and pounding Ron on the back. All of Gryffindor joined them and gathered around as Angelina held the cup aloft.

Ron smiled at everyone in relief and delight as they shouted his name. Hermione pounced on him, shrieking, and hugged him hard enough to cut off his air. Neville, Seamus and Dean laughed and pulled her off so he could breathe, then hoisted him to their shoulders to carry him off towards the locker room.
It was the best day of his life.

Harry was just getting out of the shower—the last of the team to do so, as the others had already headed for Hogsmeade—when Tom suddenly showed up, backed him into the nearest wall and started kissing him like his life depended on it. When they parted for air, Harry noted two things. One, the angle of the light slanting into the windows had changed. Two, he and Tom were joined at the neck by a familiar chain, from which dangled a small hourglass surrounded by a trio of gold rings.

"Is there some reason we just traveled back in time?"

"Yes. Your godparents and their son are here and intend to spend the day with you at Hogsmeade. As I was already planning to do the same…and more importantly, my plans for the day most assuredly don't include the three of them, I thought it behooved us to make sure we can be in two places at once. Our counterparts have already joined them for said outing while we were busy, I'm sure."

"What time is it?"

"It should be roughly seven o’ clock. I would imagine your past self is at breakfast right now."

"We should leave soon then. Angelina drug us out here before breakfast was half over."

Tom sighed and removed the chain from their necks and let Harry get dressed. They were still forced to duck under Harry's invisibility cloak to escape the team as they entered to start getting changed. Once around the trees and out of sight, Harry tucked away the cloak and they transformed to their animagus forms, and began flying low beneath the tree line towards the outskirts of Hogsmeade, where the little house Tom had acquired somewhere resided.

Once inside and the door locked, Harry found himself pressed against it, while Tom did his best to get him back out of the clothing he's so recently put on. Harry returned the favor with interest. Harry winced as Tom's elbow caught him, and Tom winced as he banged his lip against Harry's teeth. They looked at one another and started laughing while rubbing at their respective hurts.

"We probably looked a bit ridiculous there, didn't we?"

"I'm sure we did. Oh well, no one here but us."

Harry flicked his wand at Tom's cut lip and then kissed where the wound had been. While he was so occupied, Tom pulled his own wand, flicked it to remove the remainder of their clothing.

"You didn't vanish them, I hope? I don't have any other clothes here, and I don't fancy traipsing around in the buff later."

Tom pulled them so their naked bodies were pressed together and they both hissed at the contact.

"Clothes fine. Less talking more Mmmph!" his words cut off as Harry followed his commands eagerly and devoured his mouth like a starving man. Some awkward scooching and fumbling while so distracted got them further up the bed and no longer hanging off the edge.

"Need you." Tom gasped as they parted for breath. Harry smiled and rolled them so he was on top,
"Relax, lover. We have hours."

Sirius and Adeline glanced away from Regulus who was unsteadily toddling around on the ground chasing some sort of beetle that was buzzing nearby when Harry exited the locker room. Regulus spotted him as well and grinned, changing direction to toddle towards him.

"Up!"

"Well! Listen to you there, big guy! Getting bossy in your old age, are you?" Harry laughed, before swinging the small boy up and over his head. "Uh-oh! Belly monster is coming to get you! Ha HA HA!"

Regulus shrieked as Harry buzzed his belly then lifted him high overhead before dropping him once more so he could do it again. Regulus shrieked.

"Rhy!"

"I'm not Harry! I'm the belly monster! I'm going to gobble you up! HA HA HA!"

"Okay, Mr. belly monster. I think that's enough." Adeline chuckled, before grabbing her son to settle him on the ground.

Regulus was still flushed and breathless, but he reached for his father's hand and bounced in place. Walking was his new favorite thing to do. They started off at a slow pace in deference to Regulus' still shaky ability to walk. He got bored holding his parents hands and pulled free to wander off and explore. Harry reached for the kid instinctively, worried about how he'd manage the incline and wary of him getting too far, when a faint blue shimmer, like a pyramid without a top flashed around him when he seemed about to take a tumble and halted his progress five feet from his parents.

"What the heck is that thing?"

"What thing?"

"The blue…pyramid thingy."

"It's a child safety walker and tether." Sirius answered as though he should have known.

"Oh. Muggles have contraptions they stuff kids into when they're still learning to walk. I've never seen a spell like that before."

"It's pretty standard. Catches him before he takes a tumble, won't let him wander off too far."

"I had no idea there were spells like that, though I suppose I should have realized."

"Well, of course. Kids are rambunctious at this age, tend to fall down and wander off. This takes the misery out of it. A real godsend, I'll tell you. Champ there is a determined little bloke. If we let him have his way, he'd be halfway to Timbuktu the moment we took our eyes off him."

"I've been in the wizarding world for five years now and there's still so much I don't know."
"Stuff like this is usually learned when you see it used on younger siblings…or from helpful relatives, or friends who already have children when you have your own. There's no reason you would know spells like this otherwise as there's been no need." Adeline gently reminded him.

"Yeah, but still. It seems no matter how much reading I do there's always whole reams of stuff that I don't know and don't know that I don't know because I never thought to look into it, because it never occurred to me."

"Even people who grew up in the wizarding world have stuff like that happen."

"No they don't…they at least know stuff like this is possible. For me, there's so much stuff where I only know the muggle equivalent, not the wizard one."

"Harry, if you were an only child, you wouldn't know stuff like this. I would imagine all your little friends, the ones who were only children till recently are just finding out about this stuff for the first time as well."

"I doubt it. Some of my little friends have other friends that have younger siblings. If they visited them at all during childhood they'd know about this stuff. I feel like I'm going to be playing catch up for the rest of my life."

"You really are being too hard on yourself. Do you think I knew most of these spells? The portraits are where I learned them." Adeline admitted. "I was an only child myself. My father didn't know these things when they had me. He grew up in a muggle household. He mostly kept his mouth shut about it. For one, no one really expected him to know a plethora of child care spells, being a young first time father…he was still embarrassed and bitter about his ignorance. He and my grandfather had a very troubled relationship. He blamed him for his lack of knowledge."

"I didn't know a lot of the stuff either. I was two when Reg was born, and my cousins were all older than me. You really are making too much of it." Sirius added.

Harry let the subject drop, because he realized neither of them really understood. He'd been placed with the Dursleys with the intent of him being raised in ignorance so he would be clueless and dependent and not know anything about anything. He'd taken steps to correct that, but every year showed him just how far he still had to go.

He didn't like being ignorant--knowledge was power. What if, one day, he was tripped up by something simple that he would have known if not for Dumbledore's interference? He didn't like being vulnerable like that, and there never seemed to be enough time to play catch up…not that reading always was the answer.

Stuff like the seasonal dances weren't in any book. There was a lot of stuff that was just passed down in the family--but his family was dead and there were no portraits to fill in the blanks for him. He knew he should count his blessings. He did have his family grimoire, but even that only told a small part of the story--it was only the stuff someone felt important enough to write down, and it hadn't been added to by his great-grandfather, grandfather or father. He didn't know if they just had nothing they felt needed to be added, or if they hadn't known the grimoire existed.

Regulus got tired before they'd gotten very far--he hadn't quite built up the stamina needed to do as much walking as he'd apparently like to. He expressed his frustration by getting sniffly after plopping himself down in the road. Sirius chuckled at him, flicked his wand to remove the spells on him and swung him up into his arms with the ease of long practice. The baby cheered up pretty quickly and went back to looking around, pointing out things that caught his interest and babbling about them at length.
"He's become quite a chatterbox, hasn't he?"

"You've no idea. He wakes up in the morning talking, talks through most of the day, mutters to himself in his sleep. I can't imagine where he gets it from…" Sirius trailed off and Harry turned his head to see what he was looking at.

Tom was up ahead, leaning against the outer gate, arms crossed and lost in thought. Harry grinned at him, happy to be back in his company once more.

Happy as he was to see the others, there was a small part of him that mourned the necessity of cutting their day together short to come meet them; though honestly, it was probably a good thing they'd had to, as they had both been getting a bit sore…

Tom glanced up and their eyes met. Harry leered at him playfully, which prompted a small, somewhat embarrassed grin and rolled eyes from the other boy. Sirius and Adeline watched the byplay and traded a look. They had known that they'd made up at New Year's, so it wasn't a complete surprise to see him there.

Tom straightened as they approached. Adeline smiled, Sirius nodded with resignation. Regulus studied him a moment and then pointed at him in triumph.

"Ta!"

Sirius glared at the top of his son's head, and Adeline bit her lip to keep from laughing at his expression.

"Good job, Reg. Yeah, that's Tom." Harry laughed.

Regulus nodded. "Up!" he ordered, holding out his arms.

Tom stared at the baby in consternation, as did Sirius, before hesitantly moving to grab him.
"You've gotten bossy, I see."

Regulus just grinned at him and thumped his chest. "Ta." he repeated with conviction.

"Correct. We really need to work on improving your vocabulary."

The baby stared at him a moment and then pointed towards the sky. "Ow."


"Ow."

"We'll keep working on it."

"Give him a break. He's still a baby. He can't say his l's yet." Harry laughed.

"So, where are we headed? Madame Puddifoots again?" Adeline asked.

"Maybe we should brave the Three Broomsticks. It'll be crowded, but I could use some real food, I think." Sirius offered.

"Same here. I'm starving." Tom agreed. At his words, Harry grinned rather smugly and slanted a naughty look his way. "Shut up" Tom whispered in his ear as they set off towards the town. Sirius looked between the two of them suspiciously, but headed off towards the Three Broomsticks without a word.
The Three Broomsticks was quite crowded, as it usually was on Hogsmeade weekends, though students were still trekking into town, so there were still tables left, though not many. They took a booth in the back, out of the way of the rowdy students, where they had a nice view of the whole common room.

Harry spotted Ron strutting and bragging near the bar, messing up his hair to make it look windblown and glancing around to see if anyone was watching him. Rosmerta looked bored but indulgent as she listened to him recounting his game at length--she'd probably heard it all before from other students over the years. Sadly, the only one who seemed to be watching him at the moment was Hermione, and she didn't look impressed. The rest of the team had a table in the center of the common room, and were having quite the party.

"Maybe we shouldn't have stuck around; I imagine you want to be over there with your teammates."

"I'm not on the team, I'm just a replacement."

"Harry, really. I'm sure they don't feel that way at all."

"No, that's how I feel. I didn't really want to be on the team--the endless practices take up too much time. The only reason I agreed to fill in is because I figured it would be more hassle than it was worth if I said no outright. Everyone in Gryffindor would have been bugging me night and day and whining about my lack of house pride. I only agreed if I could skip out on practices. As it was, I still almost said no. Angelina kind of pissed me off. She said I owed her since it was my fault her team was short a player. " he snorted with remembered anger.

"How does she figure that?" Sirius demanded, sounding indignant.

"Well obviously it's my fault Ginny's a psycho stalker with low morals and access to illegal love potions."

"How does she figure that?" Tom demanded, sounding equally indignant.

"Didn't you know? Apparently everything Ginny does is my fault. She went on a rampage as a first year and hexed all the third year Ravenclaw girls. She was caught in the act, got a mess of detentions and lost a load of points. Her brothers said it was my fault because she wanted to go flying with me. Psh. The twins are alright most of the time, it's just when it comes to Ginny that they're a pain. Angelina tends to piss me off a lot. Alicia I hardly know. Katie's cool. Ron's fun to hang out with for mindless fun, and is cool about 60% of the time. The rest of the time he's bickering with Hermione, moping and being an asshole over other people's good fortune or letting his rotten temper and insecurity get the better of him. We've been working on him since first year. We hope that by the time we graduate we can get his cool factor up to 80%. He's still a work in progress."

Roslerta came by shortly after to take their orders. Ron was back at the table, looking a bit annoyed that his favored audience was busy. When Roslerta passed by on her way to the kitchen, Ron straightened, sucked in his small paunch, and tried to look sexy and sophisticated. Roslerta sighed, gave him an exasperated smile and kept walking. Ron watched her walking away till she was out of sight, messed up his hair some more and turned around to see if anyone else wanted a bit of Ron Weasley, quidditch hero.

"So, whatever happened with the Weasley's village anyway?" Sirius asked, changing the subject.
"The Weasleys have a village?" Tom asked. "I didn't hear about that."

"Not all of them. The oldest son, Bill, bought the village owned by M.O.D.E.R.N. at a discount because it was already built, and in the middle of a mudhole. As you can imagine, Fleur wasn't too impressed when he took her there after they eloped. She called me for help. The school agreed to send out some volunteer groups to help her out. It turns out Charity and her bunch didn't set foundations and ended up cracking through to some underwater streams while they were clearing the ground to build. The water started seeping up and turned the whole place into a mud pit. They thought they'd been cursed because they were muggleborn, apparently. Professor Flitwick sealed off some of the underground streams and they built a pond there. They had to move the houses about fifty meters away and replace the rotted bottoms on all of them. You'd never know it was the same place now. We put in streets, fixed and decorated the outside of the houses, and a few folks set up shops here and there, and the herbology club landscaped the place a bit. It looks great. The last time we were there, the first tenants were moving in. Fleur was very grateful. She's still pretty pissed at Bill. He went off back to his job, left her to deal with his mother bitching constantly about them eloping, left her with a mudhole village. Can you imagine if the tenants that had already paid for their houses had shown up and saw it like it was? She would have had a riot on her hands."

"The poor girl. I'm glad everything worked out." Adeline tutted.

"You should go see the place, really."

"We'll do that. I'll ask Ted for directions." Sirius nodded.

"It's about halfway between Weasley territory and New Caledonia. In fact…I might actually have pictures. Hold on."

While Harry was digging around for photos, Rosmerta returned with their food. Adeline, who had been holding Regulus and letting him climb around on the bench they were on, flicked her wand. The center of the bench rose up, creating an on-the-fly high chair for the baby to sit in. Adeline slid him in, and the thing attached itself to the end of the table, both holding him in place and letting him be up there with the rest of them. Regulus squealed and started trying to grab all the food in sight. Sirius and Adeline evaded his grasping hands, got him food cut down into small pieces and got him to eat with the competent ease of long practice. Regulus was soon happily chomping down, though he seemed to be wearing more of his food than he'd eaten. Tom and Harry watched the spectacle with bemused horror.

"I'd have been beaten half to death and locked in the cupboard for months for making such a mess." Harry muttered quietly.

"I can remember being fed at that age. Everything was roughly shoved into your mouth, and god help you if you choked or tried spitting it out. There wasn't enough to go around to let any of it be wasted." Tom agreed, equally quiet.

Sirius and Adeline traded a sick look over Regulus' head before looking down at their son--so happy, so healthy, so secure in their love and his place in the world, then back at the other two, who were bent over their lunches and eating with quick, neat efficiency--not a drop spilled, not a morsel wasted, as though they both expected to have it taken away at any moment, even after all these years.

They turned their attention to their own lunch, while keeping half an eye on Regulus. They both knew from experience that neither of the boys would have much to say until they were at least halfway done their food-- another safety measure against having it taken away unexpectedly most likely. Sure enough, the boys relaxed their focus a bit--likely at the point where they were no
longer hungry, though they would continue to eat steadily until whatever was in front of them was finished.

"Anything else interesting been going on?"

Cho and Cedric got back together. Don't spread that around. She's still engaged, so far as her family knows. Her fiancé knows and is fine with it, and already has a new girlfriend, but they don't want it getting out till Cedric and Cho get married."

"They're getting married? When?"

"At the end of school fair at Hogwarts. The art club has been making decorations, the fashion club has been designing clothes for the wedding party, and the culinary arts club will be overseeing the menu. We told them they owed us for making us live through the months of depression and angst after they broke up."

"Hogwarts sure has changed a lot since I went there." Tom mused.
"You aren't kidding." Sirius laughed.
A lovely day at the Wizengamot

Chapter Summary

A wedding, a surprise visit from the airbenders, and then school's out for summer. Harry writes a scathing letter, goes to the Wizengamot. Arthur has a bad day and fails at land-lording.

Chuanli Chang, and his girlfriend, the lovely Ju Li whom he had met some months ago in Hogsmeade, were having breakfast and enjoying the quiet of the morning when they were both startled by loud banging on the door, just as the fireplace flared and his parents stepped out, looking agitated. Ju glanced at Chuanli, then at his parents, who were both gaping at her in affront, and did her best to smile.

"I'll just…get the door, shall I?"

"Who is that woman?" his mother demanded.

"That would be my girlfriend."

"WHAT? You shamed your fiancée! It's no wonder she's run off like she has!"

"AHA! Betrayer!" Cho's father shouted angrily from the door as he pushed his way inside, followed by the rest of Cho's family.

"We broke up a few months ago, actually." Chuanli answered calmly.

Ju sidled closer to him and he took her hand and gave it a squeeze. He'd known this was coming for some time, but that didn't mean he was happy about it.

"What's going on?" Ju whispered.

"I'll tell you what's going on! We just heard on the wireless that our Cho married the fairy killer at Hogwarts!" Cho's father roared.

Everyone began talking at once, and shouting over one another. Chuanli and Ju sighed, glanced at the remains of their breakfast and mourned the loss of their quiet morning.

"EVERYONE! BE QUIET!" Chuanli finally shouted when he'd had enough. "You all need to think about something here. The boy that Cho married has a father who did evil things, it's true…but by and large, the son seems to be held in high regard. The entire school knew that they were going to elope, and they've been rooting for them. That wouldn't have happened if he were the murderous monster you all seem to have decided he was, without ever having met him or talked to him, I might add."

He held up a hand for silence when they all began arguing again.

"You, my parents, and you, arranged this match between the two of us…but I and she were the ones that signed the contract. We decided, together, that we weren't going to go through with it. She, because her heart was committed elsewhere, and I because I found a bride so much my junior
was not to my taste. She is of age, and she has decided to follow her heart, in the full expectation that she will be shunned and disowned for her actions."

Cho's mother let out a sob.

"She has decided that being with the one she has chosen for herself is important enough to her to risk such a result. At this point, if they have announced it on the wireless, the wedding is over and there is nothing you can do at this point to stop it. The only thing all of you can do now is this—decide whether you are going to in fact disown her and never speak to her again…or whether you are going to get your daughter and your new son-in-law a wedding present."

Back at Hogwarts the students were laughing and cheering as Cedric and Cho ran from the castle hand in hand. Their trunks were packed and shrunken, and they each had a broom in their hands. Their friends, who had acted as groomsmen and bridesmaids, were waiting for them at the gates to say their own goodbyes, before the new couple left to spend the summer together, before Cho's last year at Hogwarts, and Cedric's upcoming job as a bee-wasp tamer and honey farmer, separated the two of them for a year. The last to step forward was Cedric's mother and new stepfather, who offered their own best wishes before they left, as well as thanks for not keeping them away after their own problematical elopement.

"Everyone did a wonderful job. The ceremony was lovely." Hermione sighed.

"Yeah, it was alright, I guess. Is there any food left?" Ron wondered.

"Honestly!"

"Oh, hey, I forgot to mention to everyone. There's a movie of our book coming out this summer. That'll be weird, won't it? A movie about all of us. Too bad we're too old to play ourselves." Harry announced.

"Really? There's going to be a movie? That's brilliant!" Ron cheered.

“I actually already knew about it. Mickey mentioned it. He’s going to be the paper-thin disguise salesman.” Hermione offered.

Ron grimaced at the mention of Mickey and glowered at her unhappily.

"Will we be getting royalties of any sort?" Hermione wondered.

"We're each getting a small sum for purchase of the story, but that's all. The screenplay and movie will be their own thing and belong to the writer and the production company. We'll be getting a small royalty on any tie-in merchandising as well, so we're not completely cut out of things. Split eight ways it won't be a lot, but it's still free money, more or less, so I'm not complaining."

"Cool. Writing to Mr. Lovegood was the best idea we ever had. I can't believe this." Ron chortled before wandering off to look for any leftovers from the wedding feast.

"Yeah, who knew our little book would pay off so well and for so long?" Neville nodded.

"I hope it translates well to the big screen. Books sometimes don't." Hermione fretted.
"I'm not actually too worried about that. Our book is so weird, I have a feeling it'll translate really easily." Harry laughed.

"Are they going to use our names for the characters?" she asked. "I forgot to ask Mickey that when he mentioned it."

"I don't know. I guess we'll find out when the movie starts playing. I never actually saw the finished screenplay. Still, it's pretty cool, isn't it?"

"It is. I'm going to go tell the others." Hermione decided.

After she was out of earshot, Neville glanced at Harry questioningly. "We're part of the board of directors for the corporation. Won't we still be getting dividends on the movie? I mean...we own the production company."

"Yep."

"Then why... Hermione and Ron aren't on the board. They're the only ones of the group that aren't. They're only going to be getting royalties on the other stuff."

"Actually, Ron is on the board but he doesn't know it. When we were first setting up, he was rather morose that his share was in trust and he couldn't touch it and unlike the rest of us he didn't have a trust vault or even just some mad money to throw into the pot. I wrote to Griphook and explained. Gringott's bank held the trust, and as trustees they could invest the money if the account owner agreed. They added his part of the profits into the pot and have been adding his dividends to the trust account since then."

"Wow. And he has no idea, does he?"

"No, but there was no point. He can't access the trust fund till he's seventeen as that was how it was originally set up. I didn't tell him when it was first done because if he'd gone to check to see how much was in there, he would have freaked out to learn it was essentially empty for most of a year. The second year he had about a quarter of what was originally there. It's really only now that it's showing any growth. He'll be turning seventeen in April. That's soon enough to let him know what was done, and it may well have doubled by then if all continues to go well."

"Wow. The company is really made that much?" Hannah marveled.

"His was a relatively small investment compared to what some of the rest of us put in. Myself, Luna, Dean, Vince, Greg, Draco, Blaise, Theo and Justin also added to our initial investment since the board was first set up. The others just added more money to the pot. I did that and I gave the corporation use of Lestrange castle, and hosted the telecomm department. I haven't doubled my money—it'll take a bit longer for that, but now that we've gotten most of the startup businesses up and running, the resort, and we've started getting trade agreements in, I expect that to change before too long. I knew when we started all this that I was going to have to be patient and not fret too much about the money I was pouring into things because eventually it would turn around. That's why I set aside a bulk of money for the corporation and left the remainder of my inheritance alone. I wanted to make sure I had money to live on even if it took a while for things to get going."

"That was risky even so," Hannah scolded.

"You have to spend money to make money, and I had a budget worked out for what remained that would see me able to live comfortably for a little while post Hogwarts while I looked for a job. I wasn't too worried about things. This was actually the perfect time to do things. I don't really have
any expenses right now, beyond stuff I laid in for the move that is. I live with my godfather, he's been buying most of my clothes, school books and the like. My tuition is already taken care of. It would have been harder while I was living on my own and paying bills."

"You know, it's really a shame. That means Hermione is the only one of the eight of you that's been left out." Hannah realized.

"From a certain point of view. She's part of the intern program and is getting extra tutelage in the summer, free room and board, her tuition, uniforms and books paid for so that she doesn't have to touch her vault while in school, and she has guaranteed employment for five years after she graduates. Yeah, she has to work during the summer, but overall she's gotten a lot more from the corporation than any of the rest of us have to date."

"That's a good point, actually. I guess everything works out then."

The end of year fair kicked into gear once the wedding was over and cleaned up. It had grown rather considerably since they'd unveiled it first year. They now had not only folks from Hogsmeade trooping up to take part, but also folks from the mainland, as well as a surprise visit from the airbenders.

"Aang! Hey! I wasn't expecting to see you here again!"

"I'm taking some of the ladies to see the western air temple. We've got another stockpile of bison fur. We figured we'd try doing something with it this year."

"You could just give it to us again."

"I would...the stuff you traded us for everything came in handy over the last year...but I think we need to learn how to do things ourselves and not just depend on you guys like that. I'd like the temple to be self-sufficient as much as possible."

"Alright, if that's how you want it. Do we still have a deal to harvest a portion of the fruits and vegetables from the unoccupied temples?"

"Yeah. It's been useful having some kind of income coming in, and with everyone still all living at the southern temple, it would all just mostly go to waste, wouldn't it?"

"A lot of it would, yeah. We've been leaving enough behind to make sure the animals in the area don't starve, of course, but yeah, a lot of it tended to just wither away after falling off the vines from what we saw. You should see a larger return this year. The folks that were harvesting the area gathered seeds and have planted more crops and been tending those that were already there. There should be a sizeable harvest at the western and northern temples at least. We mostly left the eastern alone, except for gathering part of the fruits that grow there. We're still trying to convince the guru that a small group there to tend the greenery won't be too disruptive."

"I think we're getting to the point where we're going to take over tending and harvesting everything. It would be useful for training, and it'll mean self-sufficiency once we start occupying the remaining temples."

"Why don't you send a few of your people to each temple to work with our people next growing season? They can learn alongside the folks who've been doing it already for a while. When enough of your folks know the how and what, then maybe the year after or the year after that you can all just take over wholesale and we'll just buy or trade extra crops directly from you?"
"That would probably work." Aang agreed, sounding relieved. "I only helped out with the food a few times. That was mostly left to the older acolytes. Kids my age were in lessons all day mostly. I was a bit worried about screwing up things somehow and ruining the harvest. I don't really know anything about being a farmer…it's apparently a lot more complicated than just having stuff grow."

"It can be. There are likely to be those among your people who do have experience with such things. I'm sure the transfer will go smoothly and your temples will be self-sufficient in no time. I have to ask though…what have you all been doing at the southern temple?"

"Just gathering stuff off the trees…well, mostly the lemurs have been. I found a few others beside Momo living wild in the mountains. We've got them trained up now and they've been helping gather stuff. I think some of the folks have been sneaking off down the mountain to go fishing and stuff too." he admitted sourly.

"Most of them probably weren't raised as vegetarians. It's probably still something they're getting used to."

"They seem to be sneaking off less since we started making tofu and trading for eggs and stuff."

"Yeah, if they needed more protein, that would have solved that problem. It sounds like you're starting to work out some of the bugs at least."

"There aren't any bugs at the temple."

"Not those kind of bugs. I meant small problems and such."

"Yeah. I took your advice and we had a general meeting to work out how to keep things running smoothly. You were right. Everyone had ideas and knew how to do different stuff. We have regular laundry service, regular meals, and the place is cleaner and neater too.""Glad to hear it. How's Longshot doing with his training?"

"He's getting close to where he'll need to go to the northern temple for advanced training. Meifeng and her daughters too"

"Who… Oh! King Kuei’s concubine. Good for her…them."

"That's why we're heading out to visit the other temples—to make sure the northern temple is ready for the advanced training, and to make sure we have the bison nursery ready for when they start having babies, and to make new clothes for everyone. Also…everyone really wanted to get out and explore a bit. We're nomads at heart, but everyone has been pretty much stuck at the Southern temple for a while now. We all needed the chance to roam around a bit."

"I can imagine."

Harry glanced around at all the airbenders who were roaming around the fair, chatting with the students. He saw Dennis and Colin Creevy hanging out with their dad…and by the look of it, Susan Bones with her mum. He hadn't even realized…and Susan had never mentioned it around him. So, her mum was a squib, not a muggle all along. He was glad for it, it was just too bad Justin and Hermione and the other's parents hadn't been magical enough to make the transition…although, maybe some of them had and had chosen not to. He'd seen Aunt Petunia and Dudley both, though not uncle Vernon. He'd known they could have come if they wanted to. They'd chosen to stay behind, content in the muggle world…and truthfully he was just as happy with their decision. He decided not to mention his speculations to Hermione or Justin. They already felt bad enough choosing to go; they'd probably just feel worse if they knew there was a possibility that some of
their parents had the option and had chosen not to come.

He shook off his musings and glanced back at Mrs. Bones and her husband, both of whom had obviously been living with the airbenders. She looked pregnant. He spotted Longshot and a girl further away and realized with a start the girl was Smellerbee. She looked a lot different. When they'd met the former freedom fighter, she was a lanky, skin and bones person that could easily have been mistaken for a boy. That was no longer the case. Her hair was a lot longer, her face fuller, her body had filled out and developed…and she appeared to be pregnant too. He eyed the rest of the women that had come with the airbenders and realized a good many of them appeared to be pregnant.

"Wow. Your population seems to be growing by leaps and bounds."

"Yeah. That was the other reason for all this. We're going to have more people, more mouths to feed. I figure next autumn, everyone that didn't have babies this year will probably have one then." Off Harry's look he explained. "Airbenders are always born in autumn. It's just a thing with us."

"Ah." Harry nodded. He then did a double take. "Mrs. Figg is pregnant? I would have thought she was too old."

"Yeah. She was sure surprised. She and Argus seem really excited though."

"Argus? As in Filch?"

"Yeah. They already knew each other before they came to the temple. Argus never married or had children…Arabella was a widow and her only son died during a war on your world."

"Did he? She never mentioned. She mostly just would show me pictures of her cats when she watched me. Speaking of…where are her cats while you're all traveling?"

"She sold all of them to a pet store. They ate all the small animals in the area and were getting hungry and kept having babies. The temple couldn't really support them anymore."

"How about Mrs. Norris? I can't see Filch getting rid of her."

"She died of old age a few months ago. He was real broken up about it, so I gave him a lemur."

"What'd he name it?"

"Mr. Norris."

"Have you seen any of the others lately?"

At his question, Aang's face fell, his shoulders slumped and he sighed miserably.

"Ah. Let me guess. Katara is getting married? To who?"

"Remember that guy Sokka kept fighting with over Yue? The big, enormous jerk? Him. I don't know what Katara was thinking!"

"Have you ever talked to the guy?"

"Well, no, but Sokka said…"

"Yeah, but he liked the guy's fiancee and wanted him out of the picture. He's not an unbiased source."
"What do you…"

"Put yourself in the guy's shoes. Or better yet…what did you think of Jet?"

"He was a big jerk"

"Yeah, just like that. Jet had problems, but I think at heart he really was the guy we thought he was when we first met him. He was all twisted up with hatred and it changed him over time. You think that as well, but the whole thing with he and Katara really made you dislike him, right? Look at it this way—he can't be that awful. The Northern tribe had a large enough population that he wasn't the only choice of a spouse for Yue. Her dad thought well enough of him to let him marry his daughter and possibly one day be chief. He has to have some good qualities in there. If Hakoda agreed to the match for his daughter, he definitely has at least some good qualities. We saw for ourselves that he puts the welfare of his tribe and his children first. If he thought he wasn't going to be a good husband for Katara, he would have said no and that would have been that. Does she seem happy?"

Aang sighed again and nodded. "Yeah, she does."

"I'm sorry, Aang. I really am."

Aang shook his head and stared out into the distance. "Maybe it's better this way. We sort of were together for a short time after the war, after you guys left. She wanted me to live at the South Pole when we weren't off doing Avatar stuff. She wouldn't even consider coming to the temple to live full time. I almost stayed but…we had found other airbenders and they needed training and I wanted to see the temples filled again and I couldn't just turn my back on all that, right?"

"Of course not Aang. Personally, I think you made the right choice, even if it doesn't feel that way right now. You'll find someone."

"I hope so."

"Don't sound so down. You're still young. You're only fifteen. You've got time. Unless you're looking to be a father right now, I'd just relax and enjoy life for the moment."

"I guess."

"How about everyone else?"

"Sokka left the south pole to go live on Kyoshi Island with Suki. He was real torn for a long time, but he figured no one really needed him there since so many people came from the North Pole and we brought all those extra water benders. He's got a ship. He and the Kyoshi said they'd come visit."

"Oh. That's good, actually. That means I can visit Sokka when I visit Kyoshi Island this summer."

"You're going to Kyoshi Island?"

"Yeah. Remember, Suki invited the Raging Valkyries? I have a ship, but it only got finished at the end of last summer, and we've all been in school since then. I told them I'd take them this summer, and Neville wanted to go on a trip on the ship too since he helped build it. Between all of us, we should have enough hands to run it round the clock while we're travelling, so we should make good time. I was going to write to Suki once I knew when everyone was free so I could give her some warning."
"I'm sure they'll both like that. Sokka especially. He's happy enough to be with Suki, but I don't think he's actually too happy living there."

"He probably just hasn't found his place yet. Once he does it'll be better."

"I hope so."

"How about Toph? And Zuko?"

"Well, Toph is still living in Fire Nation. Her parents are still talking about betrothing her to someone, and she wants no part of it. She wants to travel and have adventures and participate in the Earth rumbles. Zuko has been talking about arranging a fake betrothal for her to get her parents off her back, but she's not having that either."

"Maybe you should start taking her with you when you do Avatar stuff again. You can tell her parents that you need her too much for the moment. Maybe that'll get them to back off for a while."

"Hmmm. Yeah, maybe. I think she has been getting bored staying in the palace. She's actually been getting her hair and nails done, that's how bored she is!"

"Wow. That's pretty bored. I guess Azula's been dragging her?"

"Yeah. They've actually become pretty good friends, if you can believe it."

"They're both adventurous tomboys that think highly of themselves. It doesn't actually surprise me that much. How are Zuko and Mai doing?"

"They're expecting a baby this summer. Zuko's really freaked out."

"Wow. Yeah. I guess he is. Mai too for that matter."

Aang nodded. "It's weird huh? Our friends are starting to have babies."

"Yeah. Time flies. I'll have to make sure to send a present. I should send one to Katara too. When is the wedding?"

Aang sighed again. "This summer. The weather is too fierce and uncertain in winter for stuff like that, though I think it would be their preference otherwise. Winter is their season, and that's when their babies tend to be born."

"I'm guessing Earth nation babies are born in spring and Fire nation in summer?"

"Yeah. When are your people's babies born?"

"Nine months after they're conceived, whenever that might be."

"What? Just…whenever?"

"Yeah. I was born in midsummer, Tom in midwinter. Neville midsummer, Hermione just before autumn, Ron in spring, my godfather in autumn, my godbrother in spring, Luna in winter, my mum in winter, my dad in spring. Yeah, whenever."

"That's so weird."

"Say, how's Ty Lee doing?"
"She's back living in Fire Nation. She got bored with the circus. She said there were no cute guys
her age working there and the ones that came by to see the show always left again."

"So she's back home looking for cute boys?"

"Seems like it."

"Well, good luck to her… in fact, given your own lack of female companionship…maybe you
should try chatting up Ty Lee one of these days. She's a bit older than you, but that didn't seem to
bother you with Katara. Ty Lee's pretty, she's sweet, she's into the whole no-killing, pacifism thing,
she's adventurous, she likes animals. You two actually have lots in common. She's also got grey
eyes like you do. Even though she doesn't seem to be an airbender herself, I wouldn't be surprised
to find out she has some in her background somewhere. Heck, even if you don't end up having a
relationship, it might still give you practice in meeting and talking to girls. She's nice. If you do
something goofy or act like a spaz, she wouldn't laugh at you about it."

"Why do you think that's important?" Aang asked suspiciously "You think I'm just going to be
stupid around her?"

"Well, you're older now than you were when you were chasing after Katara, the other airbenders
are making little airbenders, and I would imagine your sixth arrow has been making itself known
more and more…"

Aang flushed red and squirmed in his seat.

"Don't be embarrassed, it happens to everyone."

"I don't think it does." Aang disagreed. "No one else seems to have it just popping up all the time
and making a nuisance of itself…"

Harry flushed in embarrassment and no little amusement and sighed.

"Come on, Aang. Let's go somewhere a little more private. It looks like it's time for us to finish that
talk we started a couple of years ago."

Aang hopped to his feet and Harry climbed to his own with a bit more reluctance. This really
wasn't a talk he wanted to have, but it seemed no one else had stepped up to take care of it in the
meantime. An honorary big brother's job never ended it seemed…

The year was finally over and it was time to leave for the summer.

"Are you going to be in the chess tournament this summer?" Neville asked Ron curiously.

"Um, yeah, I guess. Might as well, right? It's easy money, innit?"

"Daddy and I are supposed to go searching for new world animals with the Scamanders at some
point." Luna offered.

"Does you dad know about everything that went down?"

"Yes. He's not so keen on us getting married anymore. He still figures I should take the curse off
Rolf though. He thinks six months with a talking penis is long enough."

Hermione sighed despondently. "I wish I could go."
"You'll be taking a trip this summer yourself, one you'll probably enjoy more than a small island full of kung-fu warrior girls. From what I've heard, after the harvest on the islands are done, you'll all be heading out across Earth kingdom setting up a passenger and freight railway and making sure all the shops and depots we made deals with are ready to open business when the railway is ready. You'll be starting on the coast of the far peninsula. We're hoping you'll get as far as Gaoling by summer's end. There's already another bit of track being laid from the far coast, near the Foggy Swamp, not too far from Kyoshi Island. Gaoling is roughly the midpoint. We're hoping to ease transport of goods and trade across the continent. If that leg of the railway gets done quickly enough you might be sent to help do another bit going up the far coast towards the Fire Nation colonies. What's more, while you're at the first building sites on the coast, you all won't be too terribly far from Wan Shi Tong's library. I believe you'll all be getting an opportunity to visit at some point. You'll get to see a good bit of the country."

By the time Harry'd finished, Hermione's eyes were shining in anticipation and she was all but vibrating in her seat, eager to get started.

"Oh, that sounds wonderful! I can't wait!"

The area around King's Cross station had changed in the almost year since they'd been away at school. There was now a movie theatre, a shop selling goods offered and produced by N.W.E. and associated businesses, and a day spa and salon--another N.W.E. project. They fronted part of the money and some help setting up to the witches who wanted to open the place and now owned a percentage of the business. There was also a couple of new restaurants and a pub. The area probably saw a good bit of traffic--the Hogwarts express, the hospital and the wizarding public library as well as a few guild halls were all nearby. Streets had been laid out connecting everything, with landscaped garden squares interspersed throughout. The area looked both inviting and prosperous.

"I wish I could stick around and look around a bit, but I suppose I'd better check in at Headquarters. Enjoy your summers, everyone!" Hermione said before disappearing into the floo to the Leaky Cauldron.

In ones and twos the rest of Harry's friends separated to their homes, all promising to write soon with more definitive plans for the summer so he could arrange their trip.

"Ready, kiddo? Where's Hedwig?"

"She wasn't at Hogwarts when I left. She sometimes seems to know when people have letters for me, or want to contact me. She probably went to the south pole so Katara can invite me to her wedding. Knowing Hedwig, she might just make the rounds of everyone to collect any mail and then come back. She'll be along."

"Strange owl."
"I prefer smart."

"She's that too. Come on."

Adeline was waiting in the parlor when they arrived. Harry looked around for the baby but he was nowhere to be seen. Adeline grinned and pointed. Regulus was napping on the floor, though he hadn't been able to see him from where he'd been standing. He was sprawled out among his toys, and looked like he'd conked out mid play. Harry grinned and moved into the room quietly to keep from waking him.
"He'll be thrilled to see you again. He misses his Rhy when he's gone. He was inconsolable after you left after the holidays. He kept looking around, waiting for you to come play with him."

"I feel guilty now. I'm probably not going to see him too much this summer while I'm on my trip."

"You want to sail to that island where your friends are, right?"

"Depending on the dates involved and when everyone is available we might end up making a couple of stops. Zuko and Mai are expecting a baby, Suki and Sokka are on Kyoshi Island, and Katara's getting married sometime this summer. I'm going to have to find out when, in what order and how long it's all going to take, not to mention I need to finish fitting out the ship before we go. I also need to take time to attend the summer board meetings, any Wizengamot sessions that are lined up, check over my village, not to mention the summer house. There never seems to be enough time."

"Who all's going to be going on this trip of yours anyway?"

"Well, me, Tom, Neville, Luna, as well as the rest of the Raging Valkyries minus Ginny, so-- Millicent, Su, Hannah, Susan to start with. Vince might want to since Millie is going, and if he goes Greg will want to. Now, whether any of them will actually get permission to go is something altogether different. If everyone actually gets permission, well, you see why I need to work on the boat--there's no way I can fit that many people given the state it's in right now."

"Yeah, that's what, ten people? I can't see most of them giving permission though--six teenage girls and five teenage boys on a ship doing Merlin knows what for half if not the whole summer? Yeah, good luck with that."

"I guess we'll see."

Not long after, an owl came in for Harry from Barty.

“What’s up?” Sirius asked curiously when he saw the sour look on his face.

“No. In fact, hell no. Miss Psycho isn’t getting anywhere near my company, and I’m in no way amenable to footing any of her bills after what she tried pulling. Arthur Weasley, his bitch wife and their hellspawn can all rot for all I care.” Harry growled.

“Harry?"

“Arthur Weasley sent in an application for Ron and Ginny to be interns. He’s apparently been buying prefab houses every time he got paid, and just realized he won’t have enough for their tuition this year. Ron is technically on the board, though it doesn’t do him any good until his birthday passes. I’ll write Griphook and have them deposit his tuition when they do the interns, and then just take it back from his trust once it opens. He can do his school shopping with his winnings from the tournament… if he loses, I’ll have the bank give him a small amount to be paid back from the trust after the school letters come out. The dumbass will spend it all otherwise. Ginny’s out of luck unless her parents either take out a loan or get Dumbledore to foot the bill for them. I’m not doing it."

He wrote up a quick letter to Ron, explaining about the trust, and included the application his father submitted for him with the word DENIED across it in bright red. He did the same to the application for Ginny and wrote a letter to Arthur.

Harry read through the letter and nodded, satisfied. “Short, simple, and to the point.”
Sirius took the thing and read through it before passing it to Adeline.

“Well, you certainly don’t pull any punches.”

“Why the hell should I? They’ve certainly never showed any particular care for me.” Harry said indifferently. Oddment popped up and took the letters to send out a moment later since Hedwig was still gone.

“This is probably going to cause problems for the twins and Percy, you realize, since all three are involved in your company.”

“Percy and Penny already live in the employee village, and Fred and George just got a house there. There’s an Auror presence there on rotation. If Arthur or Molly try to do anything they’ll be escorted off the island, possibly arrested. What’s more, though it may very well cause problems, I have a feeling they’ll side with me, though they’ll probably just try to stay out of their parents’ way more than they’ll try to argue the issue.”

“I just realized, with Bill and Arthur both getting seats, Dumbledore will have more support for his faction. A lot of the substitutions Lucius managed to get only side with us some of the time, and Dumbledore has been making a point to chat up all the neutrals to try to sway them to his side whenever possible.” Adeline mused.

“Just Arthur. Fleur is taking the other seat. Bill has been off at work most of the time since they got married. She oversaw rehabilitating the village, getting it set up and getting extra tenants to make up the numbers, as well as a number of shops and a coffee house and art gallery set up within it. She’s the one that registered the village, and she’s the one who’s been reading up on what the Wizengamot has already done. I doubt Bill will be at all pleased when he discovers it, but she’s the rep for their village, not him. She and her sister sat with Tom and I quite a few times during Hogsmeade visits, so we both know her somewhat. She doesn’t feel at all beholden to Dumbledore, and she’s very unlikely to just hand over her vote to be used as he sees fit, regardless of what he may be expecting.” Harry disagreed.

“Well, that’s something at least…there’s still Percy to consider. Arthur’ll probably bully him into voting with him, you realize.” Sirius pointed out.

“Percy was voted in by his fellow employees, he didn’t just get it because he built a village. He feels that responsibility rather keenly, to represent them well and repay their trust in him. He sought me out once last summer to ask how I was voting on whatever it was at the time so he’d know how to vote. I told him he should vote his conscience, and if there was something he had a problem with he should speak up and suggest changes or compromises if he really couldn’t get behind whatever it was. He seemed both relieved and grateful. If his dad and Dumbledore turn around and more or less dismiss him and just expect him to hand over his vote, I have a feeling it will backfire on them rather spectacularly.”

“We’d best get going. Wizengamot meeting. Bother.” Sirius sighed.

“Arguing about taxes till two. That’s just how I wanted to spend my first day of summer vacation.” Harry added sarcastically.

“Will you be coming back here after?” Adeline asked.
“No. I’ll be heading to the keep. I need to go over the books, and lay out plans for the coming year and whatnot. I’ll likely be there the rest of the week at least, and then heading to the summer house after.”

“Alright. We’ll see you then.” Adeline nodded, before handing over Regulus so he could say goodbye.

They ran into Tom, Snape, and Lucius mingling with the crowd on the floor of the Wizengamot chambers. They had barely exchanged greetings when Arthur Weasley’s angry voice rang out.

“YOU! YOU HAVE A LOT OF NERVE SHOWING YOUR FACE AROUND HERE AFTER WHAT YOU JUST DID TO MY DAUGHTER!”

Harry noted the crowd were all watching, whispering and speculating. A bit across the room, Dumbledore was gazing at him with profound disappointment, and those with him, seeing this, began to bristle and glare at him.

Harry did a trick Tom had shown him that would let his voice carry clearly to every corner of the room without him needing to raise it.

Arthur was both taller and older than him. In order to properly hold his own in this crowd he had to be completely in control. Raising his voice, even if only to be heard over the other man’s shouting would have him branded as a hysterical child in no time. No, he had to let Arthur do all the shouting and spittle-flying or he’d lose in the court of public opinion and give Dumbledore the wedge back into power he’d been desperately seeking all this time.

“I beg your pardon? And just what am I supposed to have done to your daughter?”

“YOU KNOW VERY WELL WHAT YOU DID, YOU CAD! YOU RUINED HER FUTURE!”

“Ah. This is about the internship, is it? No, Mister Weasley, I beg to differ. YOU ruined her future. I was protecting myself from further criminal mischief by denying her a place with my company. Frankly I thought you had a lot of nerve trying to dump her on me after what she pulled.”

“What did she pull?” Lucius wondered.

“WE’RE NOT TALKING ABOUT GINNY”

“She dosed me with amortentia she stole and tried to rope me in to be her mealticket when she thought she was pregnant with someone else’s baby.”

“WE’RE TALKING ABOUT YOU AND HOW YOU”

“What! Why wasn’t she arrested?”

“DESTROYED A YOUNG GIRL’S HOPES AND DREAMS!”

“Dumbledore covered it up, just like he does all her criminal behavior.”

“BECAUSE OF YOUR ACTIONS SHE’LL NEVER BE ABLE TO GET HER NEWTS”

“I don’t understand, she acted against you not the other way around, and absolutely nothing happened to her as a consequence. How does that equal ruining her future?” Tom wondered.
“SHE WON’T BE ABLE TO GET A JOB”

“Dumbass here spent all his money and realized he didn’t have enough to pay for her tuition, so he tried dumping her on me to make me do it.”

“SHE’LL END UP HOMELESS AND LIVING ON THE STREET!”

“Wow… so you not only threw away her future, you’re planning on dumping her in the street because of it? Geez. I’m really happy you’re not my dad. Do you believe this guy?”

“Shameful.” Lucius sniffed.
“Criminal.” Snape agreed.

“LOOK AT YOU, STANDING HERE, CONSORTING WITH DARK WIZARDS! YOUR PARENTS WOULD BE ASHAMED.”

Harry glared at the man, and then his magic, which he normally kept pulled in beneath his skin—a trick the ninjas did with their chakra so they could move unseen—began to unfurl and slowly spread out through the room the way Tom’s normally did. Arthur paled just a bit beneath his freckles and started, for the first time, to look like he wished he’d kept his mouth shut.

“I think you have a lot of nerve. You broke into my house when I was eleven, attacked myself and my muggle relatives and left us lying there helplessly while you rummaged around the house and then stole a week of our memories. Your brother and nephews tried to steal my house when I was twelve, harassed and threatened me. Your daughter sent enough cursed hate mail to my ex-girlfriend that she was traumatized and broke up with me over the matter. She then compounded her crimes by trying to usurp my free will and enslave me so she and the baby she thought she was going to have could live the easy life at my expense. After all that, you have the absolute gall to come here, and dare lay your own failings as a man and as a parent at my feet? Go to hell, and take your gold-digger wife and your psycho daughter with you.”

Harry gave him, and Dumbledore, one last scathing glance, before leaving to go find his seat. All the while, the room crackled with heavy magic, and left quite a few people feeling that some feral beast was lying in wait just out of sight, ready to rend and tear should they move too quickly. Arthur sagged just a bit once Harry’s fierce glare was off him.

He glanced around and saw Sirius and Andromeda were both glaring at him, Lucius Malfoy was sneering at him more than usual, and Snape looked just as disgusted. Dumbledore’s tight smile said more than words that he wasn’t pleased with him. The floor was clearing quickly now that the confrontation was over, and all too many people were peering at him disapprovingly and whispering together. He tried to ignore it best he could, and scurried after Dumbledore and the rest to find a seat.

He felt a prickle of angry magic soon after sitting down, which was noticeable even amidst the heavy magic that still hung over the whole room. He glanced over and saw Dumbledore staring across the room looking rather sour. He followed his line of sight to see what he was looking at and saw his son Percy and his new daughter-in-law, Fleur, were both seated across the way, as were a number of Order of the Phoenix members: Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Hestia Jones, Sturgis Podmore, and Severus Snape. Worse yet, the neutrals that had recently joined because they’d taken over for an older relative that he and Dumbledore had spent most of the last year slowly wooing to their way of seeing things all seemed to be over there as well.
His triumphant entrance into the Wizengamot wasn’t going at all like he’d expected.

At two, when they broke for the day after arguing for six hours about taxes of all things, he had already begun to wonder why he’d worked so hard to get there. Dumbledore really should have mentioned how bloody boring the whole thing was!

“I hope they’re not all like this. I’m wiped.” He thought to himself tiredly. “Maybe I’ll take a nap when I get home! There’s a perfect spot beneath the tree on the edge of the yard that’s quite comfy really…”

The idea was sounding better and better.

He apparated off home, looking forward to his nap, only to have his hopes dashed once more. The baby twins were both howling, and Molly was shrieking at Ron and Ginny about not having done their chores while trying to get them settled. He tried to sneak off, but Molly spotted him and froze him in place with a look.

“Arthur, good you’re here. You need to go talk to Mr. Abercrombie. He’s late with the rent again, also Mrs. Pickle is having trouble with her plumbing and needs you to take a look at it, and Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Cole and Mrs. Pennyworth all said they have leaky roofs you need to do something about, Mr. Jones said his floor is warped, and Mr. Diggle said he thinks he has a termite problem. I told them I’d send you right over.” She added pointedly.

Arthur’s shoulders sagged. “Yes dear. I’ll get right on that.”

Rather than taking his well-earned nap, he turned his feet towards their village. It was a rather depressing sight, really. The houses that had been up for a year were looking rather ramshackle these days. Muddy streets wound between the houses, each of them filled with old folks who did nothing but complain.

“Damn Harry Potter and his shoddy merchandise anyway.” he thought to himself irritably. “In fact, I should write to that traitorous little brat and demand a refund. They obviously pawned defective units off on me!”

Having so decided, he turned right back around and got to work on a howler demanding a complete refund. The crotchety old folks could wait. All the problems would be fixed when the new houses got there. He’d make them put them up as well.

*It’s really the least they could do after all the trouble they’ve caused me. Nothing but complaints night and day!*

Arthur’s howler arrived as everyone in the household at Potter Keep was about to sit down to dinner--poor Errol had fallen unconscious twice during the trip. Everyone gaped until the howler destroyed itself, then all turned to Harry to see what he was going to do.

Harry’s eyes were narrowed in fury, and his magic was once again seeping into the room and crouching angrily.

"That’s it. The gloves are off."
"You gonna hex him?" Roland, the steward, asked curiously.
"Punch him in the nose?" Tom wondered.
"No, however tempting that might be. I have something much longer lasting in mind that will keep hurting for months, even years down the road."
"What are you going to do?"
"I'm going to print a brochure." Harry said simply.
"Eh?"
Harry just smiled mysteriously and made a lot of phone calls after dinner, then disappeared for a few hours. When he returned he was smiling contentedly.

In the morning, the residents of Weasleyville, Arthur's village, each received a glossy, colorful brochure. Inside were photos of the various different villages that had sprung up all over, with details of how much rent was, how many openings there were in each, and what amenities were available at each location. There was also an ad for pre-fab houses. Conspicuously listed in the text was the warning that you had to add your own pest control, weather-proofing and climate controls once the house was assembled.

Harry was whistling a merry tune as he sat down to lunch that afternoon.

Tom and the rest of the household all eyed him curiously.

"Roland? Remember you told me we had three vacancies in the village?"

"Yeah, old Jim died back in January, Miss Stevens moved out after she got married, and Mrs. Kenniwick passed about a month ago." Roland nodded.

"We don't have any vacancies anymore. We just got three new tenants, all lately of Weasleyville. They'll be moving in next month. They mentioned in passing that they'd gotten a brochure advertising all the lovely villages in the area, and realized they'd been paying top dollar to live in a ramshackle hovel in a mudhole when they could have been living someplace nice for the same price or less. They mentioned in passing that a few other folks from their old village are moving elsewhere as well. Everyone that can afford to, anyway. It really must have been a terrible place to live. It lost a third of its villagers the moment everyone knew there were other places they could move to. I agreed it was certainly lucky they found out they had other, better options. You know...it just occurred to me that if so many people are leaving...Weasleyville doesn't qualify for a Wizengamot seat anymore. Goodness. Someone really should inform the village registry. In fact, I'll get on that right after lunch." Harry informed everyone, only to squeak in surprise when Tom grabbed him, cackled "You sneaky, underhanded MINX!" and kissed him rather thoroughly, much to the amusement of the rest of them at the table.
Harry glanced up at a tap on the window and smiled broadly when he saw Hedwig hovering outside. He opened the window and she fluttered down to land on his outstretched arm with a tired, but proud, hoot.

"Efficient as always, aren't you, girl? Let's see what you have for me."

He relieved her of the messages tied to her feet and settled her on the perch there in the office with some water and owl treats, before settling back behind the desk to read. He'd gotten word back from everyone that was going to be going on the trip already with the times they would be available to go.

The letters Hedwig had just brought were from Zuko, Sokka and Suki, and Katara. He'd gotten the navigational system for his ship upgraded by the goblins and plotted out how long the trip was likely to take if they hit all the places he wanted to and stayed for a few days at each location. Best estimate was a month if they sailed at top speed, and sailed day and night for the whole trip. It was a good thing they'd put in the propulsion system and he'd obtained a goblin guidance system or the trip wouldn't be feasible.

He checked over the large calendar he'd made of the summer months, which had the obligations of all the travelers blocked out and added information garnered from the new letters. The only time they could conceivably manage all of it would be to leave in two weeks, hit everywhere and immediately return. If he left a week of time as padding, just in case anything happened or the estimates were off--that would still leave them a week to do school shopping, reconnect with families and what not, before heading back to Hogwarts.

He got a stack of parchment and hit it with a duplication spell, before writing out a letter to explain the departure date, where all they'd be going and why, and the estimated schedule for the whole thing, what sort of things they'd need to pack for the expected weather in the different areas and so on. When he was done, he had a stack of identical letters to send out to everyone going. He addressed all of them after personalizing a couple, and left them in the outbox. Hedwig was still tired from her trip--tomorrow was soon enough.

He'd been at Potter Keep for three days now and the summer harvest was finally done being gathered in. He still needed to attend the summer board of directors meeting--he'd schedule the second for the end of summer after they returned. There was also the Wizengamot summer sessions. Happily, those were taking place mostly this week and next, with another bunch at the end of summer to go over things discussed and decided at the Confederation meetings which were taking place over the middle of summer, which worked out quite well for his needs.

He and his steward, Roland, had finished going over the books and laying out a plan for the coming year while he was in school and once again unavailable. He was free to relocate to the summer house in the morning. It would be busy--meetings he had to attend, not to mention getting
the ship ready for everyone before they left, but it was doable.

"Never enough time…"

"Did you say something about time? We could always…"

"No, Tom. We just came back from a time-travel jaunt a few weeks ago. I’d like to limit such excursions to once a year at most, and we’re already over that this year. I was serious when I said I wanted to graduate Hogwarts before I was thirty."

"Fine, fine. You look like you've been busy."

"I have been." Harry agreed after giving him a brief overview.

"So, we're leaving in roughly a week and a half?"

"Yep. I've got letters all written explaining that. Hedwig's still tired from her last trip."

"Blodeuwedd could…" Tom trailed off when Hedwig opened a sleepy eye and barked at him irritably, before settling back down to nap. No way was she letting some other owl carry her mail.

"Or not." he concluded.

Harry snickered in amusement at his owl's antics.

"So, I'm done here for the moment. I'll be heading off to the summer house in the morning after breakfast most likely. Will you be joining us there?"

"If I'm welcome, certainly. You're going to need help getting the boat prepared in the time you have in any case."

"True enough." Harry agreed, just as Itsy popped in to let him know it was dinner time.

"Time flies. I've been busy most of the day."

"Sure you don't want some extra time?" Tom asked as they headed downstairs.

"Do you want me stuck at Hogwarts till I'm thirty?" Harry complained.

Harry settled into place at the center of the table in the great hall with Tom beside him to his right and smiled as the food appeared.

"Nothing better than good food after a hard day's work. Everything looks wonderful, Itsy. Thank you."

Itsy beamed and disappeared as the keep's residents began digging in.

“So, what all have you been doing while we've been here? I was usually gone at least part of each day.” Tom asked curiously.

“Been bringing in the summer harvest mostly.” Joe offered.

"A few more days like today and we should have the orchards cleared in no time." Roland Smethwick, the steward of Potter Keep said thoughtfully. "The crops for fall are all laid in and
proceeding apace."

"Got the sheep all sheared, and had us a good run o' lambs this spring." Abelard nodded.

"Had a good run on most things. Even them alpaca things. We gots thirty-two of 'em now." Jack, one of the herdsmen Roland had hired on explained.

"How are they coming along anyway? Was that guidebook I got on raising them any help?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, it was. We've got them in their own spot high on the mountain there, away from the other animals. They seem to have finally settled in sommat. We got a good bit o' fleece off the lot, the adults anyway. Should have a good turnout for next season when the little uns get done too. We gave the lot to the elves to mess with. Prolly have to hold on to it for a few seasons till we get a good sized herd to make it worthwhile. Prolly not enough to do much with at the moment." Abelard the other herdsmen added.

"Yeah, probably. We can do that. There's no rush. We can certainly wait till we have a good enough amount to make it worthwhile, as we have enough other things in the works already. How's the rest coming?"

"All going as it should. We sent off a goodly amount of wine, cheese, and different spirits already. Once we get the summer fruits gathered up we'll get them ready for shipping as well, once we take our lot. The elves are gonna make stuff for the household. We figured we'd give some of the folks in town a chance to earn a bit of extra. Some of the ladies is gonna make jellies and preserves and the like once we've got everything in, same bunch as been making the cheese and such we've been selling. Between them and the young lads looking for a bit of coin to jangle their pockets, we've got things well in hand."

"Glad to hear it, but then I wasn't worried either. I'd already seen for myself that you knew what you were doing and had things well in hand. I figured the best thing I could do was stay out of the way and let you get on with it." Harry admitted with a grin. Roland and the boys nodded in thanks.

The household had grown a lot. There was not only Roland the steward, there was also Jack, Abelard, Joe and Carl who oversaw the various orchards and crop fields. There was also Iseult, Roland's daughter and Joe's wife, who was the schoolteacher, and Abigail, Carl's wife, who was a mediwitch in training who worked tending the potions' greenhouses, brewed potions for use by the household, and ran the infirmary for the benefit of the household and village when she wasn't at St. Mungo's for training. Last but not least was Roland's wife, Gwen, who helped him oversee everything. It was nice having the place filled again. A place like this was never intended as a single family residence—it was always meant to be the center of administration for a village or city. It was nice to have it serving its proper function once more, not to mention what a relief it was to not have to worry about overseeing all the details by himself.

That said, it still annoyed him that after all these years, it still seemed everyone got to live in his house but him. Oh well. Just a couple more years and he'd be out of Hogwarts.

"Boat all ready?" Sirius asked curiously.

"Yep. We added two more cabins, put fold down bunk beds in each of them, and added a bathroom to each side between the cabins. I'd have done more but one, I was running out of space, and two, I don't think I'm going to have so many people on it regularly enough to really justify the extra
expense."

"I can't believe grandpa and grandmum are going with you."

"I was a little surprised too. It's good they are though, or most of the folks wouldn't have been able to come."

"I'm trying to imagine them sharing bathroom space with a bunch of teenagers. That should be fun."

"They've got their own bathroom, actually. It's very simple, but it's private. They've also got an actual bed rather than a fold-down bunk."

"How'd they manage the special treatment?"

"Arcturus told me if he had to climb up on deck in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, it wouldn't be pretty, and Melania said if she had to share with a bunch of giggly teenage girls that no one would be happy, I agreed it was probably for the best that they get their own, right there in their room. So, the boat now has two private cabins, one in the bow, one in the stern, with a bed and private -- though very small and simple bathroom -- and then four cabins with fold down bunks, and in between those two bathrooms for two people at a time. Everything's a bit cramped, since we could only expand inside of the hull so much and no more, but it's pretty comfy overall. Sadly, with all the inner space used up like that, bringing my tent along will probably always be a necessity -- both for storage space, and for the kitchen. Ah well, I'm pretty pleased with how it turned out even so."

"When's everyone getting here?"

"Probably after dinner. We'll be leaving with the morning tide."

After a grumpy start early that morning, their trip was well underway. They were finally past the tip of the peninsula and heading for the open ocean that separated the Earth Kingdom continent from the Fire Nation.

"How long is it going to take us to get to Fire Nation anyway?"

"The rest of today and tomorrow, actually. Then, once we reach the islands it will take a few more hours to reach the main island where the royal palace is."

"That's a long trip. Couldn't we just have arranged a portkey?"

"Well, no. Fire Nation is a different country, remember, and while they can do all sorts of things with fire, they don't have anything approaching the sort of stuff we can do. The decision was made to try to keep the bulk of our abilities low key outside our own country to keep from arousing the sort of troubles we had in the old world that led to the statute of secrecy in the first place. They have no way of guarding their borders from witches and wizards simply appearing if they feel like it, so we decided it would probably be best for all concerned that we not just use such methods to enter other countries if at all possible. Yeah, it means taking the long way via boat, but we think the long term value of such concessions is worth the slight inconvenience."

"Yeah, what Tom said. We're hoping if we gradually introduce limited improvements to the other nations, such as the railroad that's currently being constructed across the southern Earth Kingdom, that we can eventually reach a place where they won't find us so startling, and therefore
frightening. Sadly, it means we're only completely free to be ourselves within the borders of our own country, but it's still better than how it was in the old world." Neville agreed.

"It would be nice if we could have found a completely empty world that would be just ours…but yeah, it is a lot better than it was." Millicent agreed.

"We just need to learn from how things happened in the old world and try to keep the same from happening here." Susan offered.

"In the meantime, just relax, enjoy the fresh air and the open sea."

To the left of them they could see the length of their own peninsula, far to the right, distant enough that it was but a hazy smear on the horizon, could be seen the large island that lay between them and the Fire Nation. The day was balmy and warm, the air clean and refreshing. Even if it did indeed take a while to travel like this, there was still something to be said about traveling across the ocean. Their little ship, which had seemed so large within the confines of Marauder's Cove, was completely dwarfed by the ocean all around it. It was humbling and exhilarating all at once.

Susan and Hannah, who were each hanging slightly over the sides of the boat and watching the water down below, suddenly pointed to a school of fish that could be seen flitting through the water beneath them, though they were quickly left behind, given the speed they were traveling at.

"I'm starting to get a little hungry. It's too bad we can't really fish while we're traveling. That would be yummy, don't you think? Freshly caught fish while out on the ocean?" Susan mused.

"If you want to try your hands at it, you could try summoning fish. I did that once when I was out with Sokka. We were in a canoe and we were still on the water…but I don't see any reason it couldn't work here. Just be careful. We don't want to be completely overrun with fish." Harry told her.

"We'll need something to hold them in" Theo Nott, who'd come along out of curiosity and boredom, exclaimed. He seemed rather keen to have something to do. Several of the others got into the idea as well and transfigured buckets which they fastened to the deck with sticking charms before scanning the waters for signs of more fish.

"If I may make a suggestion, children? Try going one at a time when you see them. We really don't want the whole ship being buried under a mound of fish." Arcturus spoke up when Vince pointed eagerly into the water.

"Go ahead, Vince. You spotted them." Tom urged.

"Accio…ONE fish!" Vince shouted hurriedly as the school began to disappear behind them.

The others cheered as a large, silvery blue fish shot out of the water and towards the ship, wriggling madly in the air. Vince stared at it intently, willing it to catch up to the ship, and another cheer went up as it finally did and landed with a thunk in the bucket, still flopping and trying to get away so it could breathe again.

While the kids scanned for more signs of fish, Melania carefully scanned the one they'd caught for any signs that it might be unsafe to eat. Happily, it came back clean. Over the next hour four more good sized fish were summoned.

Susan took possession of those already caught, once Melania declared them safe and asked that they try to get at least one more, if not two. With that, she took their booty into the tent to begin preparing them for cooking. Harry went with her, both to help and to show her where everything
About twenty minutes later, a smiling Hannah brought in another bucket with a fish twice the size of those already caught.

"Perfect! We're gonna eat good tonight!" Susan laughed.

"Ah, it feels good to sit down!"

"Ugh, I really need a shower. It's so dry and dusty in these parts. It's much nicer where we're at. I can see why they wanted to set up a train though--it must take forever to move stuff across the continent if you have to rely on horse-drawn carts--though in this world I guess it'd be bird-horses or cat horses or something." Toby grumbled.

"It really gives you a new appreciation for the folks who built the railways back in the old world, doesn't it? We've been at it all day, using magic to speed the process, and even though we can see we've made a lot of progress, it doesn't really seem like much, even after being at it a week. People in the old world didn't have magic to help them. They had to blow apart mountains and try to level out the ground, and pound the individual rails into the ground… so many of them died during the process, all over the world, really. It almost makes you feel kind of petty for feeling tired and sulky when we have it so easy, all things considered." Dan mused.

"It really does." Hermione agreed wryly. "It's so easy to get spoiled with magic--cook your food, clean your house, tend your baby, do your laundry, all with the flick of a wand and a half thought towards the task. Once you're done, apparate miles away in an eyeblink."

"I'll say one thing, this job has really given me new appreciation for the joys of magic. All the different stuff we've done--harvesting food, building shops, now the railroad…at the end of the day we're tired, yeah, but it would have taken so much longer and been so much worse without magic to help us. I'll say this for our muggle ancestors, they were made of stern stuff." Carol, another of the interns, agreed.

"That they were. To our muggle ancestors." Dan said expansively.

"To our muggle ancestors." the rest chorused.

"Come on, you lot. Let's get the tents up and we can get dinner started." the team leader called.

"Ugh." Everyone groaned as they climbed to their feet.

There was a couple of wizarding tents, one for the girls, one for the boys, the last for the team leader. While the kids got the tents set up and took turns getting cleaned up, the team leader got dinner started for everyone, and warded the campsite against dangerous animals, intruders and insects.

It was nice, when everyone gathered around the camp fire in the center of the tents, to eat and tell stories. The night was so dark it had texture--their little camp fire made a ring of light and warmth and beyond was only blackness. The stars overhead blazed with light--so many their heads swum to try to count them all. It was all so different from the other world--you couldn't really see much of
the sky at night—the moon and a handful of stars most nights if you were lucky.

Hermione had never been camping before this—her parents preferred either active vacations like skiing, or 'cultural' vacations to France to visit museums. Camping was something she'd never done before. She could almost imagine she was a long ago frontier settler, braving the unknown—lost in the wilds, the only civilization around the little circle of light made by their fire. It was frightening and exhilarating all at once. All the sounds of the night were magnified, and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face once past the edge of the fire. There could be any sort of unknown danger, creeping around the edges, just out of sight of the light and they would never know it.

She knew she was being silly, but the night had that sort of effect on her. She dug into her fire-roasted meat and potatoes with gusto when her share was handed to her and marveled at how tasty it was. She'd always been a bit of a spoiled girl, in many ways, a child of the city, who had never gone hungry, attended the best schools, had her own room, the latest technology and as many books as she wanted. It was surprising how well she'd adapted to living out of a tent, even a wizarding one, working long hours and idling away the early darkness by the fire. She felt energized and alive, the sounds and smells seemed sharper, the food more delicious, the company more entertaining.

It had been a year now since she'd made the choice along with the others gathered with her to try her luck in the new world. She still missed her parents and wondered over her little sister, but she could say without a doubt that she'd made the right choice. The life her parents had planned out for her would never have made her happy, not really. She smiled and tuned in to the others who were taking turns telling funny stories. She was content.

"There's a big black ship out there. Are they pirates?" Theo wondered.

"No. That's a Fire Nation ship. We're not all that far from the islands, as you can see from the guidance system. The first of the islands is that smudge on the horizon there. They're probably a patrol boat. They seem to be hailing us. We're probably going to need to make contact, assure them of our intentions and all before we can legally proceed onward. I'm sure we'll have to check in a few more places after this as we get closer to the islands."

Harry changed their course slightly to intercept the oncoming ship after signaling back to them. The rest of the kids, Arcturus and Melania gathered near the bow to watch as the ship came closer. Once they were alongside, Neville dropped the anchor, Harry cut the propulsion and Tom loosened the sail so it wouldn't be pulling them.

"Lieutenant Jee! Nice to see you again!"

"Ah, Harry! Tom too. Nice to see you both!"

Harry and Tom both waved to the others of the crew they recognized before turning back to the Lieutenant.

"You know this guy?" Hannah asked curiously.

"Oh sure. This here used to be Zuko's...ahem, that is, Fire Lord Zuko's ship back in the day. We hung out with all of them a bit after the war was over and they were all out of prison. We joined them for music night. It was a lot of fun, actually."
"Yes, it was. It was a nice way to celebrate the end of the war. Hard to believe the little wet behind the ears whelp ended up becoming the new Fire Lord." Jee laughed.

"Yeah, it really is." Harry laughed. "So, you guys are doing patrols now?"

"Yes. There's been word of pirates since the end of the war, and of course there are still quite a few that keep expecting an invasion by the Earth Kingdom at some point. We're out here to make contact with any ships. There's larger ships that patrol a bit closer in, just past where most of our fishing boats go. You need our ok to continue past this point. You're heading off to see the Fire Lord, I take it?"

"Yes. I got a visit from the avatar a few weeks ago and he told me Zuko, that is, the Fire Lord and Lady were expecting. I was planning a trip this summer anyway, so I added in a visit to give them my best wishes. Has the baby been born yet?"

"Not last we've heard, but then we've been out here for a few days. Most babies are born around midsummer, the rest a little before or after."

"I hope the baby will be born before we have to leave. We're on a bit of a tight schedule, I'm afraid. The original plan was to visit the Kyoshi warriors, possibly go pirate hunting. We're still planning to visit there, but we have to go to the South Pole almost immediately after for Katara's wedding. We all have to return to school shortly after that, so we don't have a whole lot of time to spend at any one destination."

"Well, maybe you'll get lucky, though the Fire Sages won't be too pleased if the baby's born too early. It's considered a bad omen for a future Fire Lord."

"Ah, gotcha. Well then, I hope the baby's not born till after we leave. Don't want the poor thing getting branded with bad omens the moment he enters the world. I could always come back another time to visit. Newborn babies are cute, but they're more interesting once they can do more than just eat, sleep and poop."

"I hear you. I had five of my own." Jee chuckled, especially when all the ladies on the boat looked at them both reproachfully.

"Here, you'll need this." Jee handed down a flag. "Stick it atop your mast. It'll let any other patrol boats you pass know you've been cleared to continue on...." Jee explained where they'd need to check in upon making landfall and landmarks to look out for. When he was finished, he eyed the ship they were on and shook his head. "That's some boat you've got. I wouldn't have thought a little thing like that would have crossed the ocean."

"It's a very old design from our old world, a Viking longship. They were really the premier ship builders of their day, though sadly they didn't really understand sails too well. This square sail is fine so long as the wind is with you, but you can't really adjust it too terribly much and can be left floundering when the wind isn't with you. The original boats usually had a full crew of men and long oars and would row when the wind wasn't with them. We've got a motor, so we don't really need the sail, but it's such a small boat we wanted to make sure people saw us coming. It has a very shallow draft, so it can traverse rivers and large lakes with ease, and with a full complement of men it's light enough to be ported over obstacles without too many difficulties. The people who made these ships originally went pretty much everywhere--raiding, settling and exploring--all over the known world at the time. It's actually a very good design, for a simple, basic ship."

"The proof is in the pudding, as they say. You're here, and don't seem to be in any difficulties, so I'll happily take your word for it."
They said their goodbyes and parted ways. Harry programmed the new heading they'd been given into the guidance system and settled back to enjoy the ride.

"The capitol is just ahead. Since we were in hiding most of the time we were here, on Ember Island at the Fire Lord's beach house, and then headed to the capitol right afterwards, we never did get as much of a chance to look around as I would have liked, though I did get to see it and the little islands that make up the other arm of the Fire Nation from overhead when Sokka and I went to Shu Jin to meet Master Piandao."

"I'm going to have to make a stop there at some point and challenge that guy. Your fight with him was incredible." Millicent said eagerly.

"Yeah, it was pretty neat. It was nice to really be able to go all out like that. I'm not sure how he'd react if I brought more people to face him though..."

"I'm sure he's counting on seeing you again." Tom scoffed. "I doubt he took it well that you did as well against him as you did. He's probably been training for your rematch."

"You think so? Huh. Maybe I should go visit him again... Not now though. We're on a tight schedule as it is."

"So tight that we can't chance stopping?"

"It would take long enough to go from island to island that we'd use up most of our allotted time traveling. Don't worry though, the capitol is nice, I think you'll all like it. It's the main island and the largest by far. Outside the Caldera, which just holds the palace and the homes of the highest ranking nobles, there are towns, beaches, all sorts of things. You'll get to see lots of Fire Nation, just not all of it--too many little islands for us to really stop at all of them. If they say it's alright, you could always come back, you know."

"True. Alright, let's get to this check in station already."

Fire Lord Zuko glanced up from his dinner and smiled as a white owl came winging towards him. He hurriedly wiped his mouth and hands so he could take the missive the owl presented to him proudly after landing. She glanced hopefully at his dinner, and he laughed, allowing her to take one of the pieces of fish still left, before calling a servant to lead her to the garden so she could rest up.

Hedwig fluttered to Toph's shoulder and gently nipped at her ear in greeting before flying off again. At Ursa's questioning look, she explained.

"She traveled with all of us. I'm afraid we all spoiled her rotten, but she definitely pulled her weight. She used to help Sokka hunt, and she'd find people for us, show us where there was fish, all sorts of things."

"What a remarkable bird."

"You don't know the half of it. She understands you when you talk to her, and sometimes I swear she was answering back."

"Fire Nation dragon hawks can do as much." Azula pointed out.
"Yeah, but they're part dragon. Hedwig is just a regular owl as best any of us could tell."

"Maybe she's part dragon as well."

"Maybe. So, what's Padfoot have to say?"

"They just passed the great gates of Azulon. They should be here in just a few hours. I'll have to send someone down to meet them…"


"The Raging Valkyries—all but one, a few friends of his and his grandparents." Zuko read. "They'll only be staying a short time though. They're going to continue on to Kyoshi Island to visit Suki and then head to the South Pole for Katara's wedding."

"How useful…maybe I should just travel with them rather than taking the Royal Procession ship." Azula spoke up.

"They're heading home afterwards. They don't have a lot of time before they have to be back at school, apparently." Zuko disagreed.

"What, again? Still? How long do they have to attend?" Mai wondered.

"Seven years, starting at age eleven."

"So long? Goodness."

Azula and Mai both shuddered at the thought of being stuck at the Royal Academy for Girls still. Thank goodness they didn't have such barbaric education restrictions in the Fire Nation.

"I'll have to go down and meet them. Anyone else coming?" Toph asked.

Mai slumped tiredly back in her seat and rubbed her swollen belly.

"Count me out. I'm going to go sit in the garden for a bit and then take a nap. There's no way anyone is stuffing me in a palanquin anytime soon. Not till this baby's out, anyway."

"I only met two of the young men briefly and I don't know any of the rest." Ursa chimed in.

Toph turned to Azula, who crossed her arms, snorted and stuck her nose in the air.

"It's beneath my dignity as a princess of Fire Nation to go traipsing down to the docks to personally meet a shipload of peasants."

Toph snorted and hopped out of her chair. "Makes me glad I'm just a lowly merchant then. Who cares about dignity? They're my friends."

Zuko dithered a moment, but Mai smiled at him and rolled her eyes. He grinned back and stood.

"Hang on a moment, Toph, I'll go with you."

"But…but" Azula began to splutter "You're the Fire Lord!"

"So I am, but like Toph said, these guys are our friends, and we owe them a lot. They helped end the war in a way that didn't spell doom for our nation, and trade with them is pretty much all that's kept our economy going since most of the Earth Kingdom and the Northern Water tribes have both been dragging their feet on opening trade negotiations with us."
"Great, stuck in a palanquin." Toph muttered.

"Nah. I'll just grab a couple of eel hounds or something."

"Hello, blind girl here!"

"Don't worry, they're well trained, and pretty strong. You can ride behind me. All you have to do is hold on. It's not like we'll be climbing walls or anything."

"Yeah, easy for you to say…"

Mai heaved herself from her seat as their voices vanished into the distance. "Anyone care to join me in the garden?"

"I can't believe you encouraged him to do that! Do neither of you have any sense of royal presence?"

"Oh, relax, Azula. What you don't seem to realize is that he's very popular among the people. Most citizens never laid eyes on the Fire Lord as anything but a red dot in the distance. Zuko's different, and they like it."

"The nobles don't!"

"Most of the nobles are grumpy curmudgeons with sticks up their asses, an inflated sense of their own importance in the greater scheme of things, and tend to smile with their mouths while honing knives behind their backs. We've decided we don't much care what they think…and if they choose to make too much of an issue of things, well, they don't have to continue to be nobles, do they?"

"You can't just make them not nobles…"

"Really? Watch me. It was bad enough when it was just Zuko's back I had to watch. In a few more weeks my son will be growing up in this place as well. If you think I won't do anything, dare anything to protect them both to the best of my ability, you don't know me at all."

Ursa smiled at Mai approvingly and told her she'd be along to the garden shortly, and then sat quietly, finishing the last of her tea.

She'd learned to let her daughter come to her. In those first hectic days of their reunion, Azula had walked around shell-shocked and clingy. Once the first ravages of grief and confusion had passed though, she'd started sharply redrawing her personal boundaries and using all the disdain and hauteur her upbringing had left her with to keep everyone at arm's length once more.

Ursa had continued, doggedly, to pursue some renewed connection with her only daughter, but had be rebuffed time and again. She had finally backed off, and simply let it be known to the breakfast table at large that she would be tending the flowers in the south garden, or heading down to the market to look for threads for needlework, or spending the day in the music room.

She had made time to spend with Mai, especially in those first hectic weeks when Zuko first became Fire Lord, helped her arrange quiet time for the two of them, talked to her about her fears about their upcoming nuptials, any children that might come. She'd made similar time for Ty Lee, and for the three of them to practice their katas and keep themselves flexible and ready to strike. She'd reforged a bond with Iroh, spoke to him at length about Lu Ten, about he and Zuko's long journey after his banishment…and of course, she made time whenever she could to be there when
her son had a free moment, just to sit together and feed the turtle ducks, give him a listening ear, or advice when it was asked for.

During this time, she was often aware of Azula lurking around just out of range, likely hiding in a hidden listening post in the walls, or just hidden by convenient tapestries and architecture. It had taken months, but Azula eventually began to seek her out--‘just happening by’ the garden she was ensconced in, suddenly remembering a need for something at the market and being so surprised to find her headed in the same direction, before graciously offering to share her palanquin, wandering by she and Iroh having tea and a nice game of Pai Sho…

She couldn't say their relationship had actually changed much--these moments still came and went at Azula's bidding, and she limited things to the shared activity and nothing more, but it was progress, she knew it. She just needed to keep doing what she was doing and all should be well. She looked down at her tea cup and stifled a sigh. Time to leave, it seemed. Another lost opportunity.

"She's changed a lot."

The words were muttered with quiet petulance, but there was only the two of them in the vastness of the hall, so they were clearly heard even so. Ursa set down her cup and rose gracefully from the table.

"Not changed, really, just grown up. She's about to become a mother. That changes your priorities in life a great deal." she replied, before setting off at a smooth (slow) walk towards the door.

"Not that much!" Azula whined (though she'd never admit it) as she followed after, arms crossed and scowling. "This is gloomy Mai, who sighs a lot, hates everything, and is always bored!"

"Who has always fought fiercely in defense of those she cared about, and always preferred immediate, expedient solutions to problems. See? Not so different at all…but then, that's not the problem, is it? The problem is that the focus of her defense has changed utterly to that of her new family."

The twist to Azula's face said she'd hit the nail on the head, but she kept her silence. If Azula wanted to speak, she would, if she didn't she wouldn't, it was just that simple. She had learned to accept that much, though it pained her to let the silences linger as they did.

No trace of this showed on her face or her walk. She kept her serene countenance and continued her unhurried pace, though she unbent enough to take a roundabout route towards her eventual destination. Her daughter could be surprisingly reticent when the mood took her, and the extra walk would give her extra time to speak should she choose to.

Ursa scented the smell of the ocean just ahead and felt the faint stir of a breeze against her cheek, and realized they were passing right near the high balcony on which the Royal family usually made their appearances to the crowd below. It overlooked a good portion of the square surrounding the palace at the heart of the caldera, and one could see a good portion of the capitol from its lofty heights as well. She turned her steps slightly to go there. It had been awhile since she'd been out there--not since presenting baby Azula to the populace shortly after her birth. She'd forgotten how spectacular the view was--you could see right down to the water from up here…

"What in the world is that thing?" Azula demanded, staring at the small boat that just then seemed to be pulling in to the docks. It was topped by a large, square sail of all things--Ursa was no sailing master, but even she could tell you that sail would be a bad thing to have to depend on.
Azula glared at it a moment longer in suspicion and then ducked off the balcony, returning moments later with a long, brass spyglass, which she held up to her eye for a better look.

"There's a cabinet with them in the alcove. It's been there since before the Great Gates of Azulon were put in, when we still occasionally worried about pirates and foreign ships getting up this far." she explained as she adjusted the magnification "Ah, there we go. It's them! How in the world did they sail all the way here with that thing? They were either truly blessed with the winds, or they had to row at some point….so tiny. What a ridiculous little boat. Undignified…and certainly not appropriate when seeking audience with the Fire Lord! And yet, what does idiot Zuzu do? He goes down and meets them!"

Ursa returned with her own spyglass and peered down at her son's friends in interest. Such an oddly-colored bunch…she'd thought the two boys she'd met before with their so-pale skin were strange enough, but there was a young girl down there with hair so pale a yellow it was nearly white, another with hair the color of wheatgrass in sunlight, another with hair orange-red like the outer corona of a flame. The remaining young girls and the boys were all dark-haired, black or brown, and all pale skinned. The last to disembark were an elderly couple--he with the look of a swordsman long out of practice, she with the mix of gentle airs and steel spine that seemed to characterize many of the ladies of the aristocracy.

They moved as a group to unroll a large carpet-- a trick she'd seen before, so she took in the details of the little ship instead. It was small--just a shallow open deck, with benches, or perhaps long boxes? Running its length, a small cabin took up the center of the ship. There was nothing else there. What on earth had they all done with themselves in the time it must have taken to travel here? Just sat on deck and slept there as well? They were a rather hardy people, for all their lighthearted manner then. They were dressed in light, floaty fabrics, that seemed to work well in their weather, but they were all much more covered up than most of the folks you'd see hereabouts, except among the highest nobility. The ship came to a point at each end and formed into a dragon head--a fanciful one, obviously made by someone who'd never seen a real dragon or a picture of one. It did give the little boat a rather menacing appearance when one really looked at it--it was easy to be distracted by the colorful sail--long stripes of every color she could imagine with two rainbow serpents coiled together in the center, or the line of colorful shields with their fanciful devices that lined the sides of the ship. She tilted her spyglass and saw Zuko hand over the animal he and Toph had ridden down to be returned to the palace, before climbing on the carpet and sitting down with the others. Toph was already in place chattering gaily with everyone and laughing loudly at things the others said. She'd already made herself right at home.

Ursa lowered the spyglass and shut it. "They seem an interesting bunch. It shouldn't take them long to get here. Shall we meet them in the courtyard?"

Azula bit her lip.

"You would be going to meet the Fire Lord, dear, not a group of peasants."

"That's true, isn't it? I suppose it couldn't hurt…"

She still didn't sound quite convinced. She sometimes despaired of her ever learning the difference between dignity and foolish snobbery. She said nothing though, just nodded and they set off at a leisurely walk towards the courtyard where they were likely to land.
visit to see her family, had offered to take back Zuko's animal--and then been charged to a race.

"Those eel-hound things can really run up walls and run across water and everything?"

"Um, well, yeah. I've ridden them before. They go wherever they want, and there's pretty much nothing out there faster on land."

"Do you know a good path straight back to the palace?"

"Yeah…"

"Race you?"

Ty Lee giggled and shrugged before hopping aboard. "You're on! Let's go!"

"On three! One, two…three!"

The wizards, and guests, rose straight up so they'd have a nice straight run to the palace. Ty Lee and the hounds had already vanished into the distance.

"We need to go! We can't let her beat us!" Zuko urged.

"She still needs to cross everything between here and there, we just have to go straight!" Harry assured them as they shot off in pursuit. Everyone crouched down somewhat to lessen the wind resistance and they began slowly closing the gap--Ty Lee was still going full-bore, but the necessity of hopping rooftops, running along canyon walls, and skipping across streams and obstructions in her way slowly began losing her ground. It was a very close race even so---she was right behind them when they shot into the open courtyard and landed.

"Oh, poo!' She complained good-naturedly. "I really wanted to win, too!"

"It was a great race, really. You guys were right, those things are pretty impressive." Greg disagreed.

They gathered to get a better look at the thing and pet it. It seemed pretty unfazed by its mad dash to the palace, and allowed the manhandling with rather stoic grace.

"My son. I see your friends have arrived." A quiet voice called from the edge of the courtyard. They looked around and spotted Ursa and Azula approaching together. They also noted a number of servants and flunkies of various sorts peeking out from different spots around the edges to watch the spectacle. Azula seemed to note them, and seemed ill at ease being part of a group that the servants were gossiping about, though she seemed to be struggling to appear indifferent. She was knocked from her unease when she suddenly had a bouncy arm full of Ty Lee.

"Azula! It's so good to see you again! Lady Ursa! It's nice to see you too. My mom says hi, by the way. Did you both see us racing? I lost" she admitted a bit sadly, before perking right back up "It was really fun! Ooooh! We should have regular races through the city! We could have a party and offer prizes and have music and invite cute boys from all over to compete! Sounds great, huh?"

"We'll talk about it more later, Ty Lee, okay?" Zuko interjected before she could get any more into her new idea.

"I'll hold you to that." she warned. She caught Azula's appalled full-body twitch and fixed smile and hurriedly changed what she was saying. "I mean, thank you for your consideration, oh mighty Fire Lord." she offered along with a little bow, aiming for suitable dignity.
Zuko snorted and yanked on her braid. "Stop it, Ty Lee. You make me feel weird when you try acting like a snob. I don't like it. Just be you."

"I can do that!" she agreed brightly.

Azula looked ready to strangle them both, so Zuko hurriedly began making introductions.

"I think that's another rail team out there."

"Where?"

"Here. See that smudge way out there?"

Hermione took the omniculars and did a slow scan of the horizon.

"I think it is. I thought the other team was on the western coast?"

"There is one out there. Those folks there started from just outside Ba Sing Se and across the river to get to this side of things. From what I've heard we had to fix a bridge that was already there and put up some sea serpent repelling charms so the trains wouldn't be attacked going across. There's another that's starting from the library and will meet up with them. There's a lot of folks at Ba Sing Se University that want to visit the library. We told them we were building a rail system that would take them there pretty easy once they left the city. They're all but chomping at the bit to get started. That's why this end of things got the priority. We've been setting up farms along the coast on that side, and taking the tops off a few of the mountains along there so rain would be able to get to the desert a bit. The oasis is holding for now, but it's going to need help to stay in place. Small villages have sprouted up along the farm trail, each with a station for the trains once they're done. Those folks you see there were probably working from the connection to the library and down to meet up with the start of our line. We're going to need this infrastructure to move goods from Ba Sing Se to the rest of the continent and from the rest of the continent to Ba Sing Se, and the town that's sprung up around the library is really going to need it. There's nothing outside the oasis but rolling sand dunes. It's fine for us. We can just pop off and back whenever we want to. The airbenders can fly their bison out whenever they want to. The earth folks and the fire folks not so much. We don't want to be stuck hauling goods all over creation, we want the rest of the folks hereabouts to do as much of it as we can reasonably unload-- it's good for them too, of course. Means jobs on the trains, moving stuff, supplying the way stations, and for trade." Jack, the team leader, explained.

"Will we be making the trains as well?" Toby wondered.

"Nah. Fire Nation is making those. From what I've heard, they were thrilled to get the contract. Their economy was all wrapped around the war that was going on, and they really needed a job like that to employ some of the folks that was making war machines and such. We'll be magicking them up once we get them, naturally, comfying up the passenger cars, refrigerating some of the cargo cars, making the engines run clean rather than belching black smoke everywhere, but they're actually building them. We were negotiating with them to build a railroad through the continental part of Fire Nation--the colonies and such, but they weren't too keen on that. They like their ships and want some control on who all comes into their territory. They'll be supplying trade goods by ship to the coastal train port on their end and we'll see them shipped elsewhere, so it all works out."

"It's all rather complicated…and all so much bigger than I realized, even knowing the sort of the things we've been doing." Hermione said.
"That it is. We were damned lucky to get in on the ground floor, that's all I can say. Alright, you lot! Back to work! We've a lot more ground to cover before we can call it a night!"

“I feel guilty leaving Mai behind, but she’s really been miserable these last few weeks.” Zuko sighed.

The first night in Fire Nation they’d all spent what remained of the day in the palace, all of them eager to be back on dry land and have a chance at a proper bath after two and a half days on the ship.

“At that stage of pregnancy, any movement is awkward. However little you look forward to the birth, you’re still eager to get on with things already. Believe me, she’s probably quite happy to stay cool in the shade and try to find a comfortable seat and get off her feet for a bit.” Melania assured him.

“Oh! What’s going on over there?” Su asked when she spotted a long plume of fire shooting into the sky.

“Looks like a show.” Luna noted.

“It is. There’s a carnival in town. We can go over and see if you’d like.” Zuko offered.

The fellows up on the stage, who were all doing tricks with fire—juggling it till it formed a circle for acrobats to leap through, forming the shape of a dragon and roaring over the crowd—all seemed rather startled when they realized the Fire Lord, the crown princess, the Dowager Fire Lady, and the former crown prince were all standing in the crowd alongside a group of odd, colorful, very pale foreigners watching their show, but they managed to keep it together.

Once the show was over, they passed a band playing in the square. They listened for a while, then Luna smiled impishly and drug Tom out to dance with her. Melania and Arcturus followed, and soon after Millie and Vince, Neville and Hannah, Susan and Greg and Theo and Su followed.

Harry glanced at Azula and Ty Lee. Azula, he could tell, really wanted to join everyone, but never would as she was too afraid to fail and look foolish. He didn’t hold it against her: in her life failure meant swift painful death. Ty Lee on the other hand eagerly joined him when he offered. She was both graceful and light on her feet, and picked the waltz up rather quickly after a few blunders, which she cheerfully laughed off. He saw several people in the crowd paying close attention as he taught Ty Lee.

Before they left to look around elsewhere there were several couples in the crowd trying it out themselves. They were all a bit awkward, but they all seemed to be having fun.

Vince and Greg seemed to be making it their life’s mission to try every kind of food Fire Nation had to offer. Hannah and Susan questioned people about what different things were called and what was in them, likely with an eye to trying to recreate the recipes they liked at home. The rest of them happily prowled through the stands looking for souvenirs for everyone at home.

Their third day in town saw them roaming the capital city, visiting a tea house, a restaurant, the temple of the Fire Sages, and a few museums. The fourth day was a stuffy state dinner with the Fire Lord and his family and the local nobles. Alas, all good things must eventually come to an end. Very early the next day it was time for them to leave.
The group watched as their longboat finally disappeared into the bowels of the royal Fire Nation ship, then all but Tom and Harry began boarding after saying their goodbyes.

"Is it going to be alright in there?" Tom wondered.

"Yeah, don't worry. They'll secure it down so it doesn't shift around too much and prop it up so it doesn't end up on its side or anything. It will be fine." Zuko assured him.

"It's really sad how dinky it looked compared to your ship." Tom added with a sigh.

Zuko laughed and nodded. "We were all a bit surprised when we saw it, and wondered how you got anywhere with that stupid sail. It having a propulsion system makes much more sense."

The hold was closed up and the crew began making preparations to get underway.

"I wish we were coming with you, but the heir has to be born on Fire Nation soil" Zuko sighed, putting his arm around Mai.

"And I'm uncomfortable enough without adding sea travel to the mix." Mai added.

"That too. Still…it would have been nice to see everyone. It's going to be quiet around here with all of you, uncle, Azula, Toph and Ty Lee all going."

"Yeah, it's bad timing for you two, I guess. This was literally the only time we could get away though. It'll be easier once I'm out of school. These days I have a few weeks each summer and that's it. It's infuriating. Too much to do, too little time. Well, it will get easier as time goes on." Harry nodded.

"For us as well. Things were a bit hectic right after the war ended. They're getting better, slowly but surely." Mai agreed, rubbing her belly "Though I imagine things will get somewhat hectic around here again once this little guy finally makes his appearance."

Zuko laughed and rubbed her belly as well.

"Once your railway is ready on the western coast of earth kingdom things should improve even further. We're in the middle of trade talks with Omashu. King Bumi apparently likes me or something" he added with a wry grin. "The rest of earth kingdom seems to want nothing to do with us, but we can get around that by selling to you and letting you deal with them. Making your trains should keep a number of displaced soldiers at work for the foreseeable future…and by the time the order has been filled, the first trains may need new cars or maintenance, so there's that."

"It'll work out." Tom reassured him.

"I know it will, it will just take time and effort. It's already improving all around. I'm not as worried about things these days."

"We need to get underway soon." Iroh interrupted.

"Time flies. I wish we could have stayed longer, though I shouldn't complain since we got to stay a bit longer than we originally planned for since we'll be hitching a ride for the next leg of the journey. It would have taken us longer to go the same distance. Even so, maybe next time." Harry said with some regret.

Goodbyes were said all around, and the group began boarding the procession ship which would be taking them to Kyoshi Island for a short layover and then onward to the South Pole, at which point
Azula and Iroh would return to Fire Nation once the festivities were over and they would take their own boat and head back towards home.

As the ship got underway, they lined the deck to wave goodbye until the Fire Lord, his wife and mother were but small black and red specks in the distance.

The interns gathered in the upper storey of the train station, which had been made into a temporary shelter for them while they were working on fixing up the train--the Wan Shi Tong express, the first part of the rail line that was being rolled out. The second train wasn't due for a few weeks yet. If they were lucky they'd get to work on that one as well, though it all depended on whether or not it arrived before they all had to head back to Hogwarts. The second train was going to be the Chameleon Bay Express--offering a scenic trip along the river southwards. One of the stops would be to board ferry service to the resort once they started selling it to the earth kingdom folks, but that was for the future.

"Those folks are all going to a library? That many? It's like a whole country of Hermiones. Mad, that." Toby laughed, slanting a teasing look Hermione's way.
"Ha, ha" Hermione said dryly, shoving him playfully in the arm.

"They're scholars from Ba Sing Se university, mostly, along with some of their students, scribes, servants and what have you. They're going to be staying there most of the summer, and some of them might stay longer. What does it matter? All those people are paying us very well for the privilege of transporting them there and back…and some of the inns, shops and restaurants around the library are ours or partly ours too…though some other folks have been getting in on things as well. Still, even if only half those folks buy stuff from us, we'll still be making money from them.” Jack, their team leader explained.

The folks gathered down below seemed pretty impressed with the train--hard not to be, really. It was a huge metal behemoth. It had been black when they'd first gotten it, but part of what they'd done was make the whole thing purple and put a rainbow down the sides of all the cars. The engines didn't have the rainbow, but they did have their parts each a different color.

They'd expanded the insides of each of the cars, though not as much as they could have--they didn't want to alarm the muggles, or make them too jealous. Just enough that the seats, beds and what have you were a bit more roomy and more comfortable, and the aisles wide enough to wander down without bumping into anything.

There was an engine on either end--they hadn't put in anyplace to turn the train around, just get there and back. There was passenger cars, sleeper cars, baggage cars and a couple with cargo that was going to be dropped off at stops along the way. It was pretty impressive, actually.

It took a while for everyone to get loaded up, their stuff stowed away and the cargo cars hooked up, but once everyone was settled the engine revved up and they were on their way. A big billow of steam wafted over all of them as it began to disappear into the distance.

"Alrighty, kids. Our baby is on its way. Time to go to our next stop."

The interns gathered around the portkey, and in a flash of rainbow light, they all disappeared.
Harry and co. continue their trip and head for the Southern Water Tribe for Katara's wedding. Azula finds a new passion.

"General Iroh, we were just about to have some tea. Would you care to join us?" Melania offered.

"I would indeed, my good woman. I never say no to tea. Ah, a most unusual fragrance. I do not believe I am familiar with this! Surprises do not come along so often once you reach our age, and are always to be savored."

"It is some sort of berry that grows at the Western Air Temple. It was described as a happy accident. One fell in to the pot as the leaves were being steeped." Arcturus explained.

"Indeed? I visited that temple briefly, but I did not pick any berries while we were there."

All three inhaled the steam and sighed happily. The bright, citrusy smell was like sunshine—it seemed to brighten everything it touched. Iroh blew on his a bit to cool it and eventually took a sip, rolling it around on his tongue.

"Ah, a most delightful accident, this! When next I see the Avatar I shall have to see about acquiring some of these remarkable berries for myself."

He glanced down at the game that was set up between the two in interest.

"Chess. We're just about done if you'd like to try." Melania offered.

"I am not familiar with it." Iroh said with interest.

"Once you learn how each of the pieces move it isn't too difficult. It's a simulated battle, if you will. The nobles, and the common soldiers, facing one another on the field of war." Arcturus explained, setting the board back up piece by piece, describing what each represented and how they were allowed to move.

"How interesting. The queen would be like our Fire Lady? They took the field of battle in your world? While we have always had women among our soldiers, the Fire Lady did not usually join the war."

"Well, that's a somewhat complicated question, as it might change somewhat depending on what country you were in and what time period. I always figured it to be somewhat metaphorical. Queens didn't usually don armor and ride out to battle no, but a strong, savvy queen could have quite a long reach if she used her power discerningly. The queen goes more or less were she pleases across the field, and is able to destroy anyone high or low, sometimes from quite far away. Few queens ever actually wielded such power, but it was certainly possible. The poor king, by contrast is terribly hemmed in, and a single wrong move ends the game…and the regime." Melania explained with a laugh.

"And all the while, the poor small common folk plod ever forward, driven by those behind them. Ah, such is the world."
The board was reset, and Iroh took the black.

"When we have finished, I should introduce you to Pai Sho."

"I quite look forward to it."

"So... you really all have to go to school so long? What in the world do you do all that time? I mean, you're there for so many years, and you live there almost the whole time, right?" Ty Lee asked the girls curiously.

"Yes, nine, almost ten months out of every year. As for what we learn, well, all sorts of things really." Susan agreed.

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Well, we learn to make potions--all sorts really. Stuff that's good for healing, different poisons for pests, that sort of thing." Hannah offered.

"Astronomy, though that'll probably be weird for the next few years while we're learning about the stars here." Susan sighed.

"Herbology. That's learning about plants--what they are, what they're good for, how to take care of them, and in the case of some dangerous ones, how to fight them." Su nodded.

"Charms, that's adding properties to things that they don't normally have. That's how the carpet can fly, for example." Millicent added.

"Then there's also our clubs after classes are over. We have people practicing art, learning to make glass, pottery, smithing, the puppets of course." Luna continued.

"That's right, neither of you came to the end of year fair with the others." Hannah realized.

"End of year fair?" Ty Lee asked in interest.

"It was sort of like the carnival we went to. There was a show with people singing, a boat you could get a ride on, grilled meat and frozen fruit juice, all kinds of stuff. It was a lot of fun." Toph agreed cheerfully.

"It still seems an excessive time to be stuck in school. What do you really need to know about plants? They're green, they grow in the ground, they burn when you set them on fire." Azula remarked.

"Some of them are good to eat, some are poisonous, some can be used as medicines for different ailments, some grow best in shade, some in direct sunlight. Some crops deplete the soil of important nutrients, and the crops will fail if you always grow the same thing in one spot year after year for too long. You need to rotate them periodically, and plant other crops that replace the nutrients the other stuff leached away or you'll eventually make the soil barren and you won't have any food come harvest time." Su explained. Some plants will only grow in certain temperatures, or need certain conditions to flourish."

"Wow. I never had a garden. I didn't realize it was so complicated. I thought stuff just grew. That's what it seems to do back home." Ty Lee said in interest.
"What sort of things did you learn while you were in school?" Luna asked curiously.

"Calligraphy, music, history, poetry, basic sums and estate management--that sort of thing." Azula replied.

"Etiquette too." Ty Lee nodded.

"That sounds a lot like what I was supposed to learn. I didn't get the reading or calligraphy, but I did learn to play an instrument, sing, dance and conduct myself like a proper young lady of good breeding." Toph added, putting on a snooty voice.

"What about you?" Su asked Suki curiously.

"Basic reading and writing, sums. A bit of local history, battle training… Oh, and a whole lot of ways to cook fish." Suki laughed.

"I wish we could have stayed on Kyoshi island longer. We only got to battle one band of pirates." Luna remarked sadly.

"Another probably won't show up for a while. They know we'll be more vigilant for the next few weeks. Honestly I'm surprised there was even one attack. We really don't have much, and our ships are full of fish, mostly. They could easily catch their own." Suki grumbled. "But hey, after the mess we made of them, chances are we won't be bothered again any time soon."

"I was just as happy not to fight another band. They didn't even have anything good on their ship to make it worthwhile." Millicent sighed.

"Yes, that really was quite inconsiderate of them." Azula agreed.

"There it is… and wow, it's changed a lot…again." Sokka muttered as the ship pulled in towards the giant iceberg that marked the lands of the southern water tribe. "Every time I come home, it gets fancier. Geez. All these northerners, that's the problem. First it was a giant wall, then it was a maze city, now there's a giant ice palace. What next? I mean, yeah, our little village was looking pretty grim and tiny for a while, but it was home, ya know? I thought things would be simpler once the war was over."

"There's more people to be accommodated this time around, half of whom are used to living in a city, even if it's a city of ice. It's still home, just bigger." Tom shrugged.

"Yeah. Home."

"Sokka?" Harry said with some concern.

Sokka sighed and looked out over the glittering city of ice and shook his head. "I've been living on Kyoshi island for six months. Suki and I were down here before that. All the ice started to get to her after a while. I have an easier time living on Kyoshi than she did living here…"

"I'm guessing that's not everything."

"It's that jerk Hahn. He was a jerk to Yue, he was conceited and not nearly as impressive as he thought he was. He made fun of the southern tribe several times…but then Yue died, so the only 'princess' left is Katara… and now all of a sudden he's down here making eyes at her and she's eating it up… and the last time I saw them, he was still a big jerk, and he's now acting like he's
going to be the chief next. Once he marries Katara, I'm sort of stuck with him... and for all that our tribe and our city have expanded by leaps and bounds... I'm not sure this place is big enough to hold the both of us."

"It's been six months since you've been home, right? Maybe he's changed for the better? I always got the impression that life was a bit harder down here than up north." Harry offered.

"It is...though that might not be the case anymore with all the changes that have been made."

"He can't be too bad... I mean, I can't really see Katara putting up with it if he's as big a jerk as you say he is." Tom remarked.

"That's the weird part. I can't see it either. Katara's never been shy about complaining, that's for sure. But, at the same time, she seems to be able to overlook a lot for a pretty face. I mean, no one hated fire nation more than her...and yet, had Zuko not already had someone, I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd jumped him once the war was over."

"I think she was planning to. Seeing him kissing Mai seems to have put a damper on her plans." Harry agreed, trying not to snicker.

"Ah geez. I didn't need to know that. I kind of thought she'd end up with Aang, to be honest. They had a sort of thing there for a little while right after the war ended, after we all went home. He stuck around on and off for a few months and then next thing I know she's marrying jerkass Hahn."

"From what Aang told me, he wanted to live at the air temples, and she wanted to live here. I take it they broke up not long before we arrived in this world?"

"Yeah, a few months before then."

"He also thinks Hahn's a jerk." Tom offered.

"See? Aang likes everybody. If he also thinks he's a jerk, he's a jerk."

"I guess we'll see. She might just have been getting desperate or something... I mean, Zuko's already married and expecting a baby, I'm not sure what became of Haru. Jet's in a fire nation prison. Your dad was right. He was off in the fire nation colonies killing people."

"Ah, man. That's really... Man."

"Yeah. It really is too bad he didn't get all of it out of his system and move on with his life... though I don't know if he'd have been able to live here any better than Suki. You figure, there's no earth around here at all, not really. Even if neither of them are benders, it probably makes a difference. There's still water in and around Kyoshi island though."

"Yeah. Even the avatar couldn't live here, and he's actually a water bender."

"He has other responsibilities. He's trying to make the air nomads a viable nation on their own terms once more. There's not many of them, but they're trying, and they've begun making strides towards making themselves self-sufficient. They all needed training. Unlike here, he was the only one who could do it. Katara didn't need to stay here--master Pakku was here to train all the new water benders. If she wanted to be with him that should have factored into the decision."

"I think she liked the idea of marrying the avatar...and while she's fond of Aang, I don't think he was really the guy she pictured in her fantasies."
"I guess Hahn is. It's a pity, really. If she wasn't so gung-ho to do it now… In a few years I think Aang will actually make a good husband. I hope Katara didn't make a mistake because she's in a rush and only looking at the surface. What are your people's attitude towards divorce?"

"It happens. It's a small community, and sometimes people just can't get along…but it's rare. Really, really rare. From what I understand, the north doesn't have it at all."

"Let's hope she knows what she's doing then." Tom sighed.

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Suki and I have been together for a while now…and she really did try to live here. It just didn't work. After six months she was getting depressed and sort of stir crazy, and it never really got better. I think she was getting sick from the lack of vegetables too. Depending on how things go while we're here… I might end up just moving to Kyoshi island permanently. I just don't know. All during the war, all I really wanted was to go home and now…"

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Come on, you three. We're ready to disembark." Ty Lee called to them cheerfully. The ship, because it was so large, was parked out in the deep water off the coast. Harry, Tom and Sokka followed the rest of them down and hopped into one of the smaller river craft that were down in the hold to make the trip to shore.

Azula and Iroh had gotten themselves red cloaks with black fur lining and edging. Ty Lee was in pink with white trim on hers. Toph had a green cloak with yellowish fur on the trim, and was sulking in her seat because of the boots that had been stuffed on her feet.

"My bracelet only does so much. I'm going to be mostly blind till we leave. I don't like this stupid place… no offense, Sokka."

"None taken." Sokka sighed. He looked around at the wizards and shook his head. They were a colorful bunch underneath, but at the moment they all seemed to be wearing black, grey or brown fur lined cloaks, most with matching fur-lined boots as well.

"Give me your feet. I don't know how much it will help." Tom offered to Toph as they got underway. He tapped the bottom of each of her boots with his wand and put it away.

"What did you do?" Suki asked curiously.

"The same thing, more or less, that's on her bracelet. It won't last as long. It will have to be reapplied, unlike the bracelet that has runes on it to hold the power in it. It still should help a bit."

"As long as I can get around and don't have to be led around by the hand. Thanks, giggles. You're a pal!"

"You're welcome. I know how independent you are."

By the time they'd all climbed out of the river trawler, there was a small crowd waiting on the dock for them.
"Looks like it's showtime."

It was a merry reunion. Sokka seemed much happier at being home when he was pounced on by not only his father, his gran, and patted on the back by Pakku, but by Katara as well.

"Sokka!" they all chimed together.

"Wow. Quite the welcome. It's good to see you!"

"Suki!"

Suki was given her own warm welcome before the rest of the introductions were made. Harry, Tom and Iroh were given equally warm welcome--all there had gotten to know them during the war. The rest were introduced and welcomed in. They were taken into the ice palace, and then through it to the mountain that stood behind it.

"A cave? This is new." Tom said in interest.

"It occurred to us that, with so many of us having friends in other nations, that we might be getting visitors now and again that don't find being surrounded by ice all the time to be to their liking." Hakoda explained. He didn't look at Suki, but she still had the feeling he was talking about her. "We put the visitor's quarters in here. Aang was a great help in setting it all up."

"Sunlight…and trees! How…!" Suki said in shock.

"Ice windows and ice mirrors to direct the sunlight down here. Like I said, Aang was a great help."

"We can grow some of our own vegetables now, and herbs to help with healing. We even have a few trees with fruit on them. Neat, huh?" Katara said with pride.

"This is just the central courtyard. As you can see there are doorways around it. The visitor's rooms are out there." Hakoda pointed out.

"This is amazing." Suki said, overcome.

"It really is." Toph agreed with a smile. "I'm gonna pound that Twinkletoes when we see him again. He never mentioned this at all!"

"Not to us either. It made a nice surprise though." Harry agreed.

"Let me show all of you your rooms so you can get settled in. The wedding isn't until tonight."

"You have your weddings at night?" Azula asked, wrinkling her nose.

"When the moon is high." Katara remarked with some asperity. She bent water from the flask at her hip to all the plants as they passed through the garden into the stone hallway beyond. There was a line of stone doorways on the far wall that seemed to form a half-circle around the garden courtyard.

"When you get settled in, just come back out to the palace and we can all catch up!"

There were just enough rooms to hold everyone, though everyone but Iroh was either doubled or tripled up. The rooms were fairly simple--fur bedding on platforms, a small fireplace at one end with a floo leading out of the mountain, a wash stand with a bowl and an ice mirror. There was an
ice window high on the back wall that let in sunlight, though there were small oil lamps scattered about the room for when it was dark. The bathroom was a simple stone seat with a hole in it in a stone room with a door in the center of the array.

Azula looked at the accommodations with something akin to horror.

"Zuko sent me down here to punish me, didn't he?"

"Hey. I don't go around knocking your volcano, missy. We happen to like it here." Sokka said with some asperity.

"I think it's beautiful, actually. Very impressive, in fact. I never knew you could do so much with ice." Harry agreed.

"Ha! See!"

"Don't be like that. I though Fire Nation was beautiful too, as was Kyoshi Island. It's just a different kind of beauty, that's all."

"Well said, young one. There is beauty and knowledge to be found in all the nations." Iroh agreed. "Now come, we must not keep our hosts waiting."

As they drew closer to the ice palace they could hear voices up ahead.

"Welcome, Avatar. It's good to see you."

"It's good to see all of you as well. I hope you don't mind that I brought guests? You remember Longshot, Smellerbee and the Duke?"

"Of course I do. Welcome…and congratulations, I see."

"When are you due, dearie?"

"In autumn. That's what Aang says, anyway."

"Have you been giving her regular checkups?"

"Um…was I supposed to?"

"It probably isn't necessary if she's been getting plenty to eat, or unless it seemed something was wrong. Would you like one of our midwives to take a look at you, dear?"

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, not so far as I can see dear, but it could put your mind at ease."

"It was at ease until you made me think something was wrong."

They peeked in and saw Kana leading Smellerbee away and patting her hand, while a worried looking Longshot and the Duke hurried after them. Aang looked spooked.

"Don't worry lad. She just has to interfere in things. I'm sure the young lady is fine." Pakku assured him. Aang mustered up a sickly smile in response.

"Dad? Did I just see a couple of airbenders leaving with gran-gran?"
Katara came into view. She had been busy while they were settling in. She was now wearing a long fur dress with fancy beading and her hair was done up rather elaborately and studded with carved beads. Her mother's necklace had been replaced by a similar one with a new carving at the center—her betrothal necklace. It wasn't the fashion in the south, but it was in the north. Her mother's necklace had actually been her grandmother's betrothal necklace, carved by Pakku when they were young; before she had run off to the south to get away from him. Aang froze and swallowed hard at the sight of her. Any of their thoughts of him being over her were lost in that moment.

"Oh! Aang! You came…uh, welcome!"

She came closer and halted in confusion when she realized she now had to look up at him.

"You're taller than me." she said with some surprise. "Aang…are you growing a beard?"

"Maybe?" Aang said uncertainly. "I can if I want to. I'm the senior air bender now. It's kind of a thing with us." he added with more assurance.

"You've grown up."

Behind her, Hakoda's eyebrows rose slightly and he glanced at Pakku, who watched them a moment and shook his head, pointing at his throat. Hakoda scowled and rolled his shoulders like he was throwing off something unpleasant.

"Huh." Sokka said quietly. "Dad doesn't like Hahn either."

"I can't listen to this anymore. Sugarqueen is getting married today. She doesn't get to keep jerking him around like this." Toph muttered as she pushed her way to the front of the crowd. "She's doing the husky thing. She's still a wanton woman!"

Toph stomped into the room and the rest were quick to follow her, not wanting to get caught eavesdropping.

"Twinkletoes! Long time no see! HA! No see! I crack myself up sometimes!"

Aang tore his eyes away from Katara and a wide, genuine smile broke across his face. "Toph! Wow, look at you! You're all dressed up! I see Harry was playing with your hair again too."

Toph patted her hair and swiped at her dress self-consciously.

"I was gonna wear my usual gear, but everyone convinced me it would be rude. You know me. Miss Manners."

Aang snorted and then the two of them started laughing as they embraced.

"You got taller!"

"So did you, wow. So, Zuko's not with you guys, huh?"

"He wanted to be. His kid has to be born on Fire Nation soil. Poor knife-girl looks ready to pop."

"I'll have to make a point to swing by sometime soon to see them."

He kept his arm companionably around Toph's shoulders as they headed towards the rest of the group. Behind them, Katara scowled unhappily, only to jump at the voice addressing her from behind.
"Who are all those yahoos?"
"Oh! Hahn! They're wedding guests."
"Fire Nation."
"Well, yes, some of them."

Hahn's lip curled and he turned his attention back to Katara and looked her up and down.
"Huh, you finally almost look like a princess. Good. I was beginning to wonder."
Katara scowled at him angrily. "Just what is that supposed to mean?"
"Geez. Lower your voice." he hissed. "You need to work on your social graces. I'll not have you embarrassing me when I'm king."
"EXCUSE ME?"
Hahn huffed and scowled at her. "There you go again. Damn. At least Yue knew her place."

BOOM!
"AH!"
"WHAT?"
"EEK!"

The group straightened from where they had all ducked down when the explosion rocked the palace, only to see Katara standing there, hands clenched, face furious, huffing and puffing amidst a cloud of ice particles. Half the front of the ice palace was now missing. Outside in the square there was now a pile of snow and ice chunks. They could see the rest of the tribe out there, eyeing Katara warily. One of the children prodded Hahn's backside with his spear--that was all that was sticking out of the snow pile. His legs twitched once and went still.

Toph grinned into the appalled silence and patted Sokka cheerfully on the arm.

"Congrats, Snookums. Looks like you won't be stuck with him for a brother in law after all. After that, I'm guessing the wedding's off."

Katara stomped around to face Sokka and growled at him.

"Yeah, thanks a lot, Toph."

"You're welcome."

Katara growled again.

"Hey! Dad didn't like him either. Yell at him!"

Sokka grabbed Suki's hand and tugged till they were running out of the new doorway. The rest of them traded glances and took off after them.

"Sokka! Suki! Wait up!"

"DAAAD?"

"Oh, listen to that. I think I hear gran-gran calling me." Hakoda laughed as he began edging from the room.

"She's calling me." Pakku disagreed as he hurried past him.
Happily, because the water tribes mostly built with ice, the damage to their fabulous ice palace was easily fixed. When the sun began to drop down and the temperatures drop beyond what most of them were comfortable with, the visitors headed back inside.

They were left mostly to their own devices--the kids, anyway. Iroh, Arcturus and Melania were invited by Pakku and Kana to hang out with them for a bit while the children did their own thing. They gathered in a circle on the furs provided in one of the large gathering rooms. Katara had vanished to her own room after calming down somewhat and had yet to reappear. Parts of the food intended for the wedding feast was served to all of them.

"Poor Katara. She really does have unfortunate taste in men."

Aang glared at Sokka irritably.

"I didn't mean you, Aang. I meant all the other jerks she's tried to run off with. I feel bad her wedding got ruined…but at the same time I'm really, really happy we're not stuck with that jerk. I don't know what she was thinking."

"I would imagine she was thinking that at last she'd be counted as an adult and was looking forward to it." Tom interjected. "She's had a lot of adult responsibilities from a young age, but now the war is over and there are a bunch of actual adults around, not to mention a lot of other water benders. She's once again just some unmarried kid, rather than an adult member of the tribe and a leader. I'd lay odds that's why she's been in such a rush."

"And now it's all ruined. Ah well, it's just as well, really. Better she found out he's a jerk now rather than after the wedding was over." Hannah said philosophically.

"I can't believe she didn't already notice." Millicent snorted.

"He was probably on his best behavior, but the wedding was supposed to be tonight. He probably figured it was a done deal already and didn't think she'd be willing to lose face by backing out last minute. He didn't count on her temper." Harry mused.

"Which just goes to show he doesn't know her at all!" Sokka snorted in return.

"I wonder what she's going to do now? It'll probably be awkward around here for a while." Theo realized.

"I'll say. Word's probably gone around by now that Hahn thought he was going to be our king and rule us with an iron fist while putting all the womenfolk 'in their place'. Maybe those northern girls put up with that kind of stuff, but I can guarantee Katara wasn't the only one unimpressed with his plans. Heck. The Southern tribe mostly formed from different girls running away to get away from that attitude!" Sokka scoffed.

"Hey, Blue Fire, you've been kind of quiet. What do you think of all this?" Toph asked.

Azula shrugged and poked disconsolately at her sea prunes, before wrinkling her nose and setting it aside.

"I think she was perhaps too hasty. She wanted to be counted as an adult member of the tribe, that fellow offered her the pathway to do that…though why such a thing is dependent on her being married rather than simply her age or accomplishments I cannot imagine. He had ideas above his station, perhaps, but at least he had goals and ambitions. She could have broken him to her will
"Once they were wed."

"I suppose that's one way to look at it." Suki remarked dryly.

"Azula! He didn't appreciate or respect her, and if he just wanted to be a king, he probably didn't love her either! I say she did the right thing!" Ty Lee objected.

"He was a big, stupid jerk. He had Yue and he had Katara and didn't appreciate either one of them. Yue was really pretty and she was kind and gentle and very sweet. Katara is amazing, and he was lucky to get her and he just threw it away." Aang grumbled.

Longshot, Smellerbee and the Duke all looked at Aang sharply and their shoulders sagged in unison.

"Hey, you know, maybe she should come with us for a while…"

"No." Smellerbee said sharply.

"But…it would get her away from all the awkward and…"

"No." the Duke agreed.

Longshot nodded, and put a hand on Aang's shoulder.

"She wouldn't…"

Smellerbee and the Duke snorted.

"Wouldn't be the first time. No. The last thing you need is having her around on the rebound again"

Longshot shook his head, patted Aang on the shoulder and went back to his food.

Aang sagged in place and nodded.

"You're probably right."

"How about Wan Shi Tong's library? There's a whole archive of lost, or at least ancient, waterbender knowledge. I recall her saying she'd like to come back and take a look at it when we all were there last." Tom suggested.

"Hey, that's true. That would be an adult responsibility, and no one else is really free to just run off and do that--they've all either got kids or are needed to hunt and stuff. That's perfect!" Sokka agreed.

"You can't go with her. We want it to stay in the world. There's a town around it and we just built a railway to take people there." Harry reminded him.

"That wasn't my fault! There was a war on! What was I supposed to do?"

"Tell everyone about your great idea after you left the library?" Greg asked.

"Well…okay…it was a little my fault, but come on, he was being unreasonable!"

"Not really. He was trying to help people, not hurt them. He wanted everyone using his knowledge archive to respect that." Luna said with a shrug.

"It didn't even work!"

"And we ended up using that knowledge to help people instead. That's actually part of the reason he agreed to come back. He thought the human race was finally learning." Tom pointed out.

"You know, I'm gonna go tell dad our idea. This might be just the thing."

"Hang on. I'll come with you." Aang offered. "I'd like to stretch my legs a bit."
After they'd gone, the rest just chatted idly until Azula suddenly asked "Why are all of you wearing a key around your necks? I had wondered before, but I kept forgetting to ask."

"It's to do with our corporation." Greg answered.

"Corporation?"

"Yeah. We, and some others that aren't here, all pooled our money to form a company so we could do stuff." Neville explained.

"What kind of stuff?" Azula asked.

"All kinds of things. We're building a railroad right now to facilitate trade across the earth kingdom continent. We have a resort. We have a bunch of farms and we preserve the food and sell it during the winter and early spring when most folks don't have access to vegetables and fruit. We just started a movie production company" Harry explained.

"What's a movie?"

"Well, it's like a play, but it gets recorded and copied. The actors only have to do the play once, but it can be shown again and again all over the place for people to see. So far we only have a couple. We have Nightfall, which is based on a book one of our friends wrote, and Dark Moon, based on the second book in the series should be out about now. We have another called the Marauders, which is based on an adventure story Harry, Neville and some others wrote a few years ago, and a few others. Right now 'Love among the dragons' is getting a screenplay written… you know, you two could possibly be a great help on the production. We really need someone from Fire Nation to help out with the costume and set designs and such. We did research of course. The team that brought back the legend as a possibility for a new movie did some looking around in the Fire Nation archive at the library to get some ideas, but it probably would be helpful to have a live consultant." Susan explained.

"That's actually a really good idea, Susan. We could give you a tour of the production lot and let you take a peek at some of the set designs and whatnot. If you like, we'll take you to see one of the movies that's already out so you can see what the finished product is supposed to look like." Harry offered.

"Can we come too?" Duke asked curiously.

"Sure, if you want, though when we get around to doing an airbender story, Aang would probably be our go-to guy for consulting purposes, since he actually remembers the original airbenders."

"Are you doing anything with earth legends? I could do some awesome earthbending for you."

"Well…we were sort of tossing the idea around of doing "Blind girl and Burnt boy" to capture the preteen giggly romantic earth kingdom market, but we reconsidered because well, the burnt boy is actually Zuko and he's married now. We might do that bit about Oma and Shu at some point if you want us to keep you in mind for that."

"Or you could just do one of your moo-vees about Toph Bei Fong, most awesome earth bender ever."

"We'll keep it in mind."

"We should look into some water tribe legends too. This place is kind of neat…and if we bring along some water benders, it should be really easy to make sets on command for location shots."
Theo mused. "That would be pretty cool. They could like, sail around and battle pirates, and hunt sea monsters and stuff. That would brilliant, wouldn't it?" Vince said with some enthusiasm.

"So…this is where you live?" Azula asked curiously.

"Well, it's where my summer home is, and the resort, and the headquarters of our corporation." Harry explained as he steered the boat towards Marauder's Cove. "I have a home on the mainland as well. It's called 'Blessed Valley'. We can go see it later if you want. Since we hitched a ride with you we have a lot more time than I was expecting us to."

"What is it with all you non-water tribe folks needing so many houses?" Sokka complained.

"I wanted to be near the water so I could have a boat, and swim and hang out on the beach. The valley is beautiful, but I can't do all that there…well, I could swim in the lake, but the rest not so much. Well…I probably could take the boat on the river for a little ways, but we wouldn't be able to get very far."

"Who lives there?" Katara pointed.

"What the big place? That's headquarters for our company. That's where the interns live and the offices of the department heads are, along with some of the research spaces."

"What's that big place at the top of the cliff?" Ty Lee wondered.

"That would be my summer home…and it looks like my godfather is having a party."

Remus hurried to the dock to help them tie up the boat when he spotted them.

"Ah, for all that it was a lovely trip, it is good to be home." Melania said cheerfully as she and Arcturus climbed out of the boat.

"That it is." Arcturus agreed.

"Hello everyone. I see you brought friends."

"Yeah, this is Katara and Sokka of the Southern water tribe."

"Katara…you're the one who just got married? This is your husband then?"

"Brother actually."

"Oh, then…"

"The, uh, wedding got cancelled." Katara explained.

"Oh. I am sorry to hear that…but if there were irreconcilable differences, better to find out before rather than after."

"This is prince Iroh, Princess Azula and Lady Ty Lee of Fire Nation."
"Oh, well, goodness. Welcome." Remus stuttered, bowing slightly in their general direction.

"Long Shot, Smellerbee and the Duke, lately of the air nomads."

"Pleased to meet you... A duke? That's some company you're keeping these days."

"Suki, leader of the Kyoshi Warriors. Toph Bei Fong, current Earth Rumble champion. And you of course remember Avatar Aang."

"Yes, of course. Welcome everyone. We're having a little celebration. Sirius and Adeline are expecting."

"What, again? Geez. Reg is like, a year old!"

"I'm sure they'll be thrilled by how thrilled you are."

"Yes, do hush. This is marvelous news!" Melania scolded before hurrying to where everyone was on the beach.

"So, pretty exciting. You're going to be a big brother for the second time."

"Third."
"Who's the third?" Aang asked curiously.

Harry sighed, got him in a headlock and noogied his head. The rest of them just laughed.

The gang stuck around for a week and saw the sights, but Harry and Tom were each called away for other matters more and more as the days wore on.

"We don't want to overstay our welcome. Iroh offered us a ride home, so I think we're gonna take him up on it." Sokka explained.

"I'm sorry to see you go, but it was nice to see you all again."

"Same here. It's a shame we all live so far away from each other." Suki agreed.

"Can't be helped, I guess. So, who all is going where anyway?"

"Suki and I are headed back home. We'll have to stop by Kyoshi to get our stuff. That garden my dad surprised us with made all the difference"

"As long as there's someplace green I can go when all the ice gets to be too much, I really think I'll be fine."

"Katara is still going to the library?" Tom asked curiously.

"Yeah. Aang offered to swing her by there on his way back to the northern temple. The Duke said he'd come get her in a week or so. She said something about you taking her to school with you?"

"Yeah, we're just going to take her with us when we head back. Millie asked Smellerbee if they had anyone to act as a midwife for when all the airbender babies are born. Katara heard them talking and offered her services. They're staying at the Western temple for the birth, so I offered to just bring Katara with me to Hogwarts so they could just pick her up there rather than having to come
all the way out here. School starts in the fall, so it should be just in time for the first births. I imagine one of them will take her home once all the babies are born."

"I'm surprised Smellerbee agreed. She and the others don't seem too keen on her and Aang…" Suki noted.

"I have a feeling she's not going to mention that she'll be there, and they'll likely make sure Aang is busy elsewhere while she is." Tom offered.

"That makes sense. Toph is going with her. I think she wants to travel again. She's been hanging out in Fire Nation for quite a while now." Sokka agreed.

"There's rooms for visiting scholars in the lowest level of the library. I'm sure all the earth kingdom ones will be used up, but she can just borrow one of the water tribe ones, or even one of the wizard ones. Whatever is available. I'll have to make sure to send some food with them though. There's also a town out there around the library, so they should be fine." Harry nodded.

"Good to know. All that's left is Crazy Blue Fire and Acrobat girl. They're staying here?" Sokka wondered.

"Yeah. Azula was really taken by the movies, and she seems pretty excited about working on 'love among the dragons'. Ty Lee is sticking around for moral support, I guess. It should be fine. They'll be staying here until she's done."

"Your funeral, I guess."

"No. I think this will be good for her. I've gotten the impression she's been at loose ends and not sure what to do with herself since her brother became the Fire Lord. Once Mai's baby is born, she's not even heir to the throne anymore, she gets knocked down to second in line. There's no war anymore, so she can't prove herself in battle. There probably isn't an actual job for an extra princess to do. If this movie gives her some focus and something to devote her energy to, that's all to the good to my mind."

"Yeah. I guess I can see that."

"What the hell was I thinking?" Azula sighed. In the distance they could see the ship slowly making its way from the bay, leaving them behind.

"Um…that you wanted to do something different, meet new people, hang out on the beach?" Ty Lee offered as they began following the others and making their way back to the house.

"Well, yes… but I could have done all that back in Fire Nation."

"They don't have movies in Fire Nation. I thought you wanted to work on one?"

Azula remembered the thrill she'd gotten as the curtains had opened--the music filled the available space and seemed to make her insides vibrate in time, and then the show started--the actors looked ten foot tall, up there on the screen. The story had been rather odd, but it had been fascinating all the same. She had gotten sucked into the strange world that was presented in spite of her efforts not to…and she'd found herself hoping that the dread warlord's son had been able to find a role that suited him better…

The whole operation had been impressive--the lights, the cameras, the sets, the costumes… and it
all came together under the leadership of the director and made their vision a reality—well, on the screen anyway. All her life she had wanted to change the world, remake it to her own vision. The war and its strange and sudden end had shown her that for all her father's grandiose talk, it wasn't as easily or as neatly done as he'd always said. Movies gave her a chance to actually do it, and then do it again and again and again if she wanted. She could try out a lot of visions, all sorts of changes one after another, show others the path to a different reality.

"I do" she realized "I do want to work on their movie… In fact… I want to direct that movie. It really only makes sense. None of them are Fire Nation. They'd just get it all wrong. I already have so many ideas…"

"Well then, that's what you should do!"

Azula glanced up and saw Tom playfully grab at Harry, who laughed and smacked his hands away, though he allowed himself to be caught. They embraced briefly before heading inside.

"Do the dragon spirits seem…close…to you?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, apparently they're a couple. They'll probably be getting married in a few years."

"But they're both male."

"Yeah. Apparently that's normal here. It doesn't happen a lot, but it does happen. Two girls too sometimes. When it does they just make an arrangement with a girl couple if they want to have kids, but otherwise just get married and live together like anyone else. In fact, those two guys we met during the tour, remember them? Graham and Alex? They worked on those weird talking box things that everyone seems to have? They're like that. That girl that was with them is their daughter. They found a girl whose parents wanted grandkids but who didn't want to be a mom who was willing to have a baby for them."

Ty Lee halted her happy chatter and glanced back when she realized Azula wasn't keeping pace with her. She was a few feet back looking stunned.

"Um, Azula?"

"You can do that?" Azula demanded.

"Well…yeah. This isn't the first time I've heard of it. When I was still in the circus I heard some gossip that the ringmaster had something going on with one of the animal handlers who was also a guy. They were both married. To girls, I mean. Their families wouldn't let them do otherwise. I think the spirits' way is better. I mean, if you get married, your husband is supposed to be yours… but if they're like that, then they never really are, are they? They end up sneaking off behind your back all the time, or maybe you both just end up miserable!"

"It happens in Earth Kingdom too? Not just with spirits?" Azula demanded.

"Fire Nation too, it turns out. You know how I had just gone to visit my family right before we all left? There was a tea house on the upper floor of a shop. It was new. I suggested we go try it, but my mom said it wasn't for people like us. Looking back, I think it was for people like them" she gestured towards where Tom and Harry had disappeared earlier. "Everyone I saw going in or going out were either two men or two women who all seemed close" she nodded sagely. "Apparently that sort of thing was just going on all over, we just didn't know it."

"Fire Nation too?" Azula repeated. "No one ever told me about this!"
"Well…why would they?" Ty Lee wondered. "Come on. I'm hungry, and they're probably all wondering where we are."

The gathered airbenders withdrew from the doorway and slipped away without Aang noticing.

"This is ridiculous. Why her? Why can't he find someone more faithful?" Smellerbee grumbled. "He's been sitting out there for an hour, staring at the horizon and sighing."

"Well, he doesn't exactly get a chance to meet many girls. He's always off talking to spirits, chatting with world leaders and training airbenders. From all I know of the end of the war they went through a lot together. I guess it just sort of lingers?" the Duke suggested.

Longshot frowned slightly and shook his head a bit.

"Yeah, you're right about that. It's obvious then. We need to find someone for him!"

"All the unattached girls in the temples are too young." Meifeng reminded her.

"Not all of them."

As one they turned to watch Susan Bones and her mother wander past on the way to the meditation garden.

"She was on that trip though, right? And he's met her before since she lived with us last summer too." Arabella Figg pointed out.

"She was only around part of the time, and he was busy with other stuff and still hung up on that waterbender girl." Smellerbee disagreed.

"Well…she might not be interested." Janna, formerly a "sand bender" reminded her.

"Doesn't hurt to ask."

The group agreed it really didn't, so they went in search of the Bones'.

Susan heard them out and waved her hands to stop them talking once she understood what they wanted.

"Look, he's nice enough, and he's sort of cute, I guess…"

"So you'll do it?"

"I have two more years of school left! I won't be here for most of it!"

"Even better. He'll have something else to moon about, but you won't be here as a distraction!"

"I also don't want to be rebound girl! They always end up getting dumped just as they start getting invested in things"

"I'm sure he wouldn't do that" Mrs. Figg protested.

"He's been hung up on Katara for two years. He thinks she can do no wrong, even though she spent
the majority of that two years sending mixed signals and jerking him around. The next time she sees him, if she hasn't found anyone, all she'll need to do is bat her eyelashes at him to make him come running. Where does that leave me?"

"Look, we're not saying seduce him…but you're the only single girl in these parts who isn't too young. Just, you know, be his friend. Get it into his head that there are other girls out there, girls who would be happy to be with him. He doesn't have to wander around for months again just 'cause water tribe girl is single again." Smellerbee said irritably.

Susan sighed and cursed her soft heart. "Fine. I'll be his friend. I'm not promising anything." she warned.

"That's all we ask." Meifeng assured her.

"Where is he now?"

"Out on the deck being miserable."

Susan nodded and marched towards the kitchen and made up a tray with some tea and a couple of egg custards. Everyone knew they were his favorite, though he tended to whimper 'baby chickens' every time he ate one, and then went and meditated for an hour afterwards whimpering about them being 'so delicious' and 'why?'. He was a bit of an odd duck, the avatar was.

"Wish me luck." she muttered before heading out to the deck.

"Luck!" they all chimed cheerfully.

"Aang?"

"Huh? Oh…um, hi? Uh, what are you…?"

"You looked a little lonely sitting out here by yourself. I thought I'd keep you company. I even brought snacks."

Aang glanced at the tray, brightened at the sight of the egg custard, then cringed and muttered 'baby chickens'.

"Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"The whole baby chickens thing."

"Oh…well. I grew up knowing we were vegetarians and we didn't eat meat of any kind. I thought eggs were some kind of nut, but then someone told me they were surprised we ate eggs since they were baby chickens. Egg custard was always my favorite, but I feel like a murderer any time I eat it anymore."

"Oh, well if that's the problem you can relax. I have heard of extreme vegetarians that were real smug about the no eggs thing, but it's really kind of silly. Eggs can become baby chickens, but only if a rooster is involved. If there's no rooster involved, the eggs are just protein because half of what's needed to make them eventually become baby chickens is missing. No one really wants to eat the other half. You can eat your egg custard and enjoy it without guilt. The hens will still lay
them regardless. No baby chickens harmed."

"Really? Oh, wow. That's such a relief. I was making myself sick worrying about it." Aang chirped while scooping up the custard. He gobbled it down in about three seconds and glanced hopefully at the second one before averting his eyes.

"Go ahead." Susan laughed.

"Really? Thanks!"

"So…why are you sitting out here by yourself anyway?"

"It's nothing really."

"I'm a good listener if you want to talk about it."

"It's…well, it's Katara. She nearly got married, but it didn't work out. We used to date, before. It didn't work out, but I think maybe I was still too young. We're both older now and…"

Aang rambled on at length about her-- how they met, their different adventures, their brief stint while they were dating.

"Why are you in such a rush to get married?"

"Well…I'm not really, it's just…"

"Aren't you like, fifteen?"

"Yeah. Plenty old enough!"

"I don't know how your people do things, but for us at least fifteen is when you start looking, not when you settle down. How many girls have you dated?"

"Well…just Katara, really, but she's the only one I'm interested in!"

"You shouldn't limit yourself like that. Katara seemed nice enough, but she's not the perfect angel you seem to think she is"

"I really wish everyone would stop badmouthing her"

"I'm not! Like I said, she seemed nice enough. All I meant is that she's human, and she has flaws just like anyone else. From what all you said, there might have been more problems than the fact that both of you were really young. You act like she doesn't have any flaws…and that's probably pretty hard to live up to day to day. I'm sure you must know what it's like, having people have a very firm idea of who you're supposed to be and how you should behave. I always got the impression you hated it."

"I do. It isn't everyone. It's just a few here and there, but yeah, I always feel really tense and I'm constantly worried about not living up to their expectations."

"If you're getting that, even just a little, from the person you should be most comfortable with and most able to be yourself with…I imagine it feels much the same."

"And you think I did that to her?"

"Well, I don't know for sure…but you tend to rhapsodize about her…a lot. I imagine it made for a
heavy burden trying to live up to all of it. When you add that to how young you both are, I'm really not surprised things went badly."

Aang slumped into a dejected heap.

"Don't be like that. That happens. That's what this time of your life is all about. You should be dating, trying to meet a couple of girls and try out relationships until you find someone that fits. That's what I'm doing. I've had a few brief relationships. None of them worked out. Yeah, it made me sad each time it happened, but well, not everyone finds the right match right away. I'm in no rush. I still have two years of school left. I may not meet my match until after I'm out since I haven't found them yet. And that's okay. Those relationships were brief and they ended, but I learned something about myself each time, and I'm slowly refining what it is I'm looking for. For example-- Someone smart. Oh, they don't have to be a super genius or anything, but someone intelligent, who's interested in things. I dated this one guy and he was... it was like talking to a rock sometimes. I don't want someone condescending. It really bugs me. Someone with manners. Some boys really don't have any, and they act really put upon when you try to call them on it. The few guys I've dated have had one or two of the qualities I'm looking for, but not all of them, and the ones they didn't have were kind of deal breakers for me. You should take the time to try to find out that kind of thing for yourself. Live a little. You've been so busy fighting a war and running around being the avatar you probably haven't really had a chance to just be a teenager. You really should do that before you even think about settling down."

"What on earth is going on down there? Ugh! I should have known that Azula couldn't be trusted!" Katara grumbled.

"I don't think they're fighting for real. It looks like training to me."

The Duke directed his air bison to the top of the cliff so they could avoid the random fire shooting around from Azula, and also not get in the way of Luna and Ty Lee who were fighting on another part of the beach. Those two looked to be having fun, for all they were fighting. Harry and Azula both looked grim and focused and seemed to be doing their best to take each other's heads off, though they both halted shortly after the bison, Duke and Katara landed and bowed ceremoniously to one another at the end of their match, both keeping a wary eye on the other as they did so. They both relaxed as they straightened and chatted idly as they approached the cliff. The Duke directed his bison down to meet them.

"Heya Duke, Katara...and who is this?" Harry asked, scratching the bison behind one ear.

"It's called Appa, right?" Azula asked.

"This isn't Appa, her name is Pema. She was part of the wild bison herd that Aang found. We made friends with them."

"Lovely. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, actually." Katara agreed cheerfully as the two of them slid down to the ground.

"I was actually talking to Pema, but don't worry, we'll feed you up soon enough." Harry laughed just as a house elf popped up with some hay, alfalfa and fruit, and a large dish of water.

"Say, where's is Toph anyway?" Azula asked.
"She stayed behind at the library. There was a bandit attack and she subdued everyone because she was bored. They asked if she wanted a job as a peacekeeper. She accepted."

"Huh. Sort of ironic that she'd end up as law enforcement when she's always been such a rebel." Harry laughed.

Azula crossed her arms. "Well… Zuzu will be so terribly disappointed. I think he'd gotten used to having her underfoot." she said with a frown.

"Who?" Ty Lee asked curiously as she and Luna approached.

"The earthbender girl. She's gotten a job as a policewoman at Wan Shi Tong's library. It seems she won't be returning and I was just saying how upset Zuzu…"

" Didn't she spend most of her time with you? That's what Mai…" Ty Lee began, but Azula cut her off.

"Did you say something about food?" Azula asked brightly.

"Sure did" Harry agreed wryly "Right this way."

They had a light meal and Katara told them about her time at the library. They moved to the porch after eating to enjoy the afternoon breeze.

"Hey, wow, I just realized, we've already been here for two weeks. Time sure does fly." Ty Lee suddenly spoke up.

"Why are you both still here? I thought you were just going to look over something and then go home." Katara wondered.

"I'm going to be directing the next movie. Since we've been here we've been finalizing the screen play, the storyboards and put out a casting call for actors. We're going to do some of it at the studio--they're building the sets and making the costumes as we speak. Some of it will be filmed on location in Fire Nation. We're going to need firebenders if we're going to do things right. My ship should be here sometime in the next few days to take us back. I'm going to bring some of the film crew along to do the location scenes and then we'll be returning to film the rest."

"You sound really excited about it." Katara realized.

"Well… I suppose I am. I can already see the finished product in my mind. I'm looking forward to seeing it up on the screen."

"And we're all looking forward to seeing it too." Luna agreed.

"I'm getting a bit impatient, truth to tell. I want to get started… in fact. It's really good that you're here. I was just going to do it, but it is a dark water spirit before being revealed as the dragon empress. I thought blue fire would be close enough, but you know, a water versus fire battle might be even better. All the steam created could be sort of atmospheric, actually. Yes. It's perfect! You need to come to Fire Nation with us and the film crews. I need to alert the costume department. You're a bit taller than I am and you have much wider hips. They'll have to make alterations…. There's no time to waste. We're on a schedule here. Come along."

"Wait…what? Hey!"

Katara found herself drug off by the hand and onto a small carpet. "Where the heck are we going?"
"The costume department. Do try to keep up."

"Hey!"

"Uh…" the Duke said as he watched the three girls take off into the distance.

"It looks like Katara is going to be in the movie. How nice for her." Luna commented.

"Hopefully. Azula didn't really give her much choice in the matter." Harry chuckled.

"She's very driven, isn't she?"

"Yeah. That she is. Hey, Duke? When you head back, tell Smellerbee Katara will be coming by Fire Nation ship rather than going with us to Hogwarts, okay?"

"Uh, sure thing. I'll tell everyone to keep an eye out."

Prince Iroh of Fire Nation wandered into the garden where his sister-in-law, nephew and niece-by-marriage, along with their new baby sat, taking their ease. He was tapping a message scroll against his chin and looked quite perplexed.

"Uncle? Something wrong?" Zuko asked curiously.

"Of that I am not sure."

"How can you not be sure?" Ursa asked when he didn't elaborate.

"I have just received a message from Ember Island. It seems princess Azula is back in Fire Nation."

"She is? Oh good. But…why did she stop at Ember Island rather than come home?"

"That is what puzzles me. The message said she brought a group of odd foreigners with strange equipment who have been running all over the island, clearing people away from different areas for a time and doing mysterious things with their odd equipment and then leaving again. She also seems to have a water tribe girl with her… and the water tribe girl keeps trying to drown one of the foreigners while the rest of them watch… at least, that's what the soldiers seem to think is going on. She also gathered up a squadron of imperial firebenders, a few fire eaters, dancing girls and a bunch of acrobats for some reason."

"Huh. That's odd even for Azula." Mai observed, her voice dry.

Zuko, Fire Lord, glanced up in surprise as the door to his office was thrown open and his sister strode inside carrying a pile of folded up clothing.

"Az? You're back, huh? What were you…"

"Zuzu, there you are. Good! I suppose that, whatever you're doing, can wait for a bit? Excellent. Put this on and meet me down in the courtyard."

"Wha… you… Huh?"
"Honestly, Zuzu. Just do it, would you?"

"What is it? And why?"

"It's a costume. I need you to fight an Agni kai…"

"Agni… Huh? If you pissed someone off you can fight your own"

"It's not for me, silly. If someone had challenged me…not that anyone would dare…I would have fought myself and we certainly wouldn't be having this conversation. Now, come along. Chop chop."

Azula breezed out as quickly as she had arrived.

Zuko sighed and unfolded the clothing she'd left behind. There was a robe with long fluttering sleeves and a mask.

"The dragon emperor? I don't get it… we haven't done this since we were kids… and Azula always wanted to play the emperor. Weird."

He stood there for a long moment, torn. Had it been just a few years ago he would have been certain whatever she was planning was some sort of weird plot to humiliate him, hurt him or even get him killed. Did she want to battle him for the throne? He just didn't know. They had done a lot to repair their relationship over the last couple of years. He supposed the question was did he trust in that?

He sighed in irritation and began putting on the costume.

He found Azula, as well as the 'odd foreigners with weird equipment' down in the courtyard… which was now surrounded on several sides with big vats of water. He also saw

"Katara?"

"Hi Zuko. Wow. You got roped into this too?"

"What exactly is this?"

"Didn't she explain? Wait, what am I saying. Of course she didn't. She's making a movie. We're going to do a scene for it. We're supposed to fight across the courtyard."

"Okay… What's a movie?"

"It's like a recorded play. It gets filmed once, then it can be played over and over."

"I see? Why does she need me though?"

"Because she's going to be directing."

"Zuzu! Good, you're here. See that fellow over there? When he finishes and exits the scene you'll take his place and battle Katara. Make a spectacle of it. Show us your best stuff. If I say 'CUT', you're to stop…" she gave them both a very brief rundown of what she expected and waited for their nod. "Excellent. Just stay here until you're called for. Katara, you're up."

"Wish me luck."

"Lu…"
"Zuzu! No. You must tell her to break her leg, or terrible calamities will befall not only her but the whole production!"

"Break your leg, Katara."

"You too."

Zuko watched idly as Katara speechified and pointed dramatically at another guy dressed as the dragon emperor, who then threw back his head and roared before getting into a beginning firebending stance.

"And CUT!"

Katara and the other guy both froze in place. One of the wizards hurried towards the guy and pointed his stick at him, then nodded. The guy relaxed and backed away, leaving a ghostly image of himself still in stance, then started heading towards where Zuko himself waited.

"Zuzu! You're up. Get into position."

Zuko wandered out towards where the ghostly image waited.

"Just step into it and try to match it. It won't hurt you."

Zuko bemusedly complied.

"Agni Kai Take 1"

"Get ready to battle. ACTION!"

Zuko instinctively dodged as water from the tubs located around the square came hurtling towards him, using flame called to his hands to deflect it as it followed him. Just like that, the battle was indeed on.
Summer's end

Chapter Summary

Harry and co. head back to Hogwarts, Katara and Azula go their separate ways

"GREEN DRAGON INN!"

Molly watched her eldest daughter vanish into the floo, without so much as a goodbye or a look back and her shoulders sagged in defeat. She could feel her eyes filling with tears--again; it had happened quite a lot this summer.

Ron glanced between the two of them, then looked at Molly apologetically. "See you at Christmas, mum." he said before following his sister.

"Oh, Molly, don't get so distraught. She's being a brat. She'll get over herself eventually." Arthur reassured her. "I don't know what her problem is. She's going to Hogwarts!"

"No thanks to you or Albus!" Molly reminded him pointedly. "Percy got the rest of the boys organized to scrape together what they all could, and they were able to finagle a supplement to cover the rest! If it had been left to you and the headmaster she snarled with surprising venom "she would have just been out of luck, wouldn’t she! No NEWTS! Poor job prospects! You would have ruined her life!"

"Oh come now Molly, she could have taken the tests at the ministry…" Arthur yelped when she threw a cup at him.

"You yourself told me that anyone who didn't graduate from Hogwarts was automatically put to the bottom of the list of applicants! She would only have been able to get a job that no one who finished Hogwarts actually wanted! And why? Because you couldn't wait another year or two to get the right number of houses!"

A plate quickly followed the cup and Arthur yelped and jumped aside so it missed him.

"And what good has it done us? Those damned houses are mostly empty, you were on the Wizengamot for a few weeks and lost it! I couldn't understand why, until I actually trekked over to see the village. It's a wreck! Didn't any of you read the directions? It's no wonder everyone is running as fast as they can to get away!"

"Well no, but…who sells a house without the proper charms already put in!"

"Someone selling a house that isn’t ALREADY BUILT!" Molly screamed, throwing a cup with each hand this time.

"That damned village of yours is tearing our family apart! And for what? All this trouble, all this expense, Ginny's not speaking to either one of us… and all for a Wizengamot seat you weren't planning to use to benefit us! Albus has been egging you on for a year now, always pushing, always wanting to know if you had enough for a seat yet… so he could get another
vote FOR HIMSELF! You, Percy, Fleur...he expected all of you to vote how he voted, no matter what! No discussion, no disagreement, those votes were meant to be for HIM. He didn't give us a tip to benefit us at all! And now, after we've beggared ourselves, all but lost our daughter... not that our sons are any more pleased with us than she is-- What do we have to show for it? A field full of disintegrating houses, no wizengamot seat... and the one who was pushing us so hard couldn't be bothered to help us with Ginny's tuition! Damn it, Arthur, I was as excited as you when you first told me, but I never, never would have pursued it at the expense of our children! It isn't worth it! What's the point if it destroys our family?"

She threw a final plate and broke down sobbing, burying her face in her apron.

"Alright, Gin?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"What do you think, genius?"

"You're not winning a lot of sympathy with that attitude, Gin."

"Dad forgot about me and nearly ruined my whole life!"

"In case you've forgotten, he did the same to me! I just happened to be lucky enough to have a trust fund waiting to cover my ass when he did so--something he'd forgotten about, meaning I would have been in the same situation if not for Harry. He invested the original trust fund for me and didn't tell me. It's doubled since then. I actually have enough to cover the year, and will still have a little bit left afterwards. I was counting on that trust fund to see me to my own place once I was done with Hogwarts. Now, because of dad it's all almost gone because I'm having to use it to pay my way through school. I'm going in to my sixth year! I don't have a lot of time left for it to fill back up, meaning I'm probably going to be stuck for a while at home, scrambling for a job and trying to save up enough to leave, that's if mum actually lets me keep my pay while I'm still living with them. It might be years before I have enough!"

Ron glowered at Ginny when he saw she didn't seem to be listening; instead she was frowning at something outside. Ron moved to stand beside her and peer out the window, and saw Harry, Sirius, and baby Regulus, who Harry had perched on his shoulders. The baby seemed thrilled to be up so high...and also had a firm grip on Harry's hair to judge by how he kept wincing.

"What's with the frown?"

"What's Potter's deal, anyway? He just threw me to the wolves!"

"He thinks you're nuts, didn't want you going on a rampage and ruining the company. Besides, the internship thing was set up for orphaned muggleborn...though I did hear a few halfbloods got spots too if they were orphaned as well. Purebloods usually had at least one relative willing to take them in. The point is, it's for orphans, not folks with parents that accidentally spend all their money instead of setting enough aside for their kids' future." Ron grumbled. "You're not still hung up on him, are you? 'Cause, I gotta tell ya, after the whole love potion thing it's never gonna happen. He's already seeing someone anyway."

"Yeah. His older woman." Ginny scoffed bitterly.

"Older man, actually. That's what Neville and Luna seem to think, anyway." Ron shrugged a bit uncomfortably.
He'd been a bit surprised about it; he thought he liked girls. What else was that whole thing with Cho? More than that, he didn't want him lusting after him; he didn't swing that way. It couldn't be helped, of course. Who wouldn't want a piece of Ron Weasley, quidditch hero? Ah well, he was just gonna have to let him down gently when he eventually confessed his burning attraction. He'd get over it. Eventually.

"I don't even know if I was ever actually hung up on him. It was just in my head from the time I was really little that we were supposed to get married. All because Dumbledore brainwashed me as a little kid."

"What are you talking about?"

"I got into a big fight with mum. I accused her of training me up to be a man trap for a little orphan boy that wasn't supposed to have anyone. She used to read me those Harry Potter books all the time and put my name in. She said I asked her to do that, that I got mad the first time she read it to me and told her the girl in the story wasn't named Megan, it was Ginny. She just thought I wanted to be in the story and it seemed harmless, so she put my name in. I went up to the attic to find those books. I haven't read them in years, but I can remember clearly that when I read it to myself, the little girl in the story had red hair and her name was Ginny. When I found them, they weren't the books I remember reading to myself. There was a girl named Megan in the story, and she had blonde hair. She also didn't find out she was a secret princess and marry Harry at the end of the story either. Mum said she started tacking that part on at the end because I was so insistent that was how the story was supposed to go--and it did, when I read it to myself!" she explained, voice flat.

"Dumbledore gave us those books for Christmas one year. Mum said it was unusual; he'd never sent us presents before...or since. She asked him about it, and he said he normally didn't leave Hogwarts, but he had that year and passed a marvelous toy store, and he thought of us and decided on a whim to get something for all of us. My present was the Harry Potter books. I read them a couple of times a day, every day from the time I was three till I was about seven, or mum read them to me, and then I suddenly lost interest in them, so mum packed them away."

"You think Dumbledore did something the books to make you obsessed with Harry? That's completely barmy!"

"Of course it is! What kind of person does something like that?!" Ginny snarled

"And it might not be just me either. Hermione thinks something was done to her too, but it went away during the move. That's why he's willing to be friends with her now--because she's not obsessed with him anymore. She said she told Harry about it and he said it was probably Dumbledore. I wondered why whatever it was didn't just disappear off me too when the move happened like it did to her, and she thinks it's because something wasn't really put on me, but on the books to make me constantly re-read them. She said muggles discovered that one's personality is more or less set by age seven, so most of the time my core personality was forming, I was reading those books over and over and making marrying Harry Potter the center of who I am. She thinks the charms wore off at that point, and without them pulling me to them I lost interest because they're actually pretty stupid books."

She glanced at the time and cursed. "Shit! We're going to miss the train if we don't hurry!"

The two Weasleys grabbed their trunks and made a mad dash across the square to the train station, and just managed to scramble aboard as the train was pulling out. Once they were aboard and had caught their breath, Ron picked their earlier conversation back up.

"Personally, I think you and Hermione are both just barmy and imagining things. Why would
Dumbledore do anything like that? He's the greatest wizard of the age!"

"Your greatest wizard of the age is most of the reason we nearly didn't get to go to school this year! Mum mentioned he's been making a nuisance of himself to make sure dad kept buying houses. It's his fault... dad's too for listening to him... but it was him. If you and I had been forced to drop out and it ruined our lives, it wouldn't matter to him. He would already have gotten what he wanted out of us." she concluded bitterly.

"Cho!"

"Oh, Harry, hi!"

The two hugged and grinned at each other when they separated.

"You look good. How's married life treating you?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Have you been in touch with your family?"

"Yeah. I was getting a bit worried about it. I didn't hear from any of them until nearly the end of July. Everything isn't quite fine yet, but I'm hopeful for the future. They said no daughter of theirs was going to be a school dropout and wanted to know if Cedric paid for my tuition. I had to tell them that, no, he hadn't because he hadn't made enough just over the summer to afford it yet, and I used a lot of my trust to set up our household. I was helping out around the camp, I didn't really have a paying job as such so I wasn't able to afford it either. They paid my tuition, so I'll be able to sit my NEWTs this year. They called me their daughter, so I haven't been disowned... things are still tense though."

"Still better than you feared, so that's something. How's Chuanli?"

"He's doing good, actually. He's dating Su's older sister. Last I heard they'll be getting married in the winter so Ced and I can both come to the wedding."

"That's great. I'm glad to hear everything is working out. Hey, did you hear professor Snape got married this summer?"

"He did?!"

"Yeah. Small private ceremony and reception with their closest friends. I didn't even hear about it until after it was already over. So Madame Maxime is Madame Snape now."

"Well... good for him."

"Good for all of us, I think. You have to admit, he certainly has been a lot less grumpy since he's been seeing her."

Cho giggled and nodded. "That's true. The woman's a miracle worker."

"Ah, the power of love." Harry agreed wryly.

"Yeah. There's really something to that, isn't there?"
"So… I got a gallery show coming up." Dean offered casually.

"A gallery show? You mean an art gallery?" Lavender asked.

"Yep. You remember that French girl? The Beauxbatons champion? She married Bill Weasley and a bunch of us went and fixed up their village?"

"Yeah, I remember her."

"Well, her village has become like an arts and culture center now that all the tenants are moved in. There's a couple of art galleries there. She was telling the owner of one about how I designed the concept for the village, and designed the protest angels and did some of the fancy crap for Harry's house and all, so he contacted me and asked if I wanted to do a show there. Anything that gets sold he gets a commission for the sale and I get the rest, plus it could open the way to more offers if people like what they see."

"That's great, mate." Ron nodded.

"Yeah, good job there." Neville added. "When's the show going to be?"

"During the winter hols. I've got three more months to put together a few pieces to fill out the show. I've got some stuff I was already working on this summer, plus some stuff still in storage at the art club."

"We're all invited, I hope?" Parvati asked.

"Sure. I'd be mad if you didn't come. I'll let you know as soon as I have a firm date."

"Great. We'll be there."

"What about your comic book though?" Lavender wondered.

"Ah, no worries about that. They already have issues for the next six months, and the last of those is the finale. We were sort of running out of ideas for it, so it's time for something new anyway." Seamus explained.

"Are you going to be doing something different?" Hermione wondered.

"I was thinking about trying to write a regular book. You know, one without any pictures. I dunno. I'll see. I don't really have any ideas at the moment…and besides, if classes are as hard as they were last year, I might not really have time until the summer anyway." Seamus shrugged.

"I'm wrote a book." Hermione admitted.

"Yeah? What about?" Parvati asked a bit warily.

"It's about the formation of N.W.E., actually… well, that's what it was supposed to be, but it ended up being more about my experience as an intern after we all moved here. It does still have some history of the formation and a bit about that whole mad business with M.O.D.E.R.N. , but mostly it's about the interns. I sent a copy off to some publishers after Barty gave me the ok. I had to clear it with the company first since I'm still under contract and all. Now I just have to wait and see if anyone will buy it."

"Huh. Good luck with that. Keep us posted." Parvati said in interest.
Ginny sauntered up to the table then, looking like she was on cloud nine.

"Uh, hey, Ginny." Dean greeted him after sharing a look with Seamus and Neville. "You're looking surprisingly chipper."

They had all heard about how she'd nearly not been able to come back to school, not to mention seen what a bad mood she was in through most of the ride out here.

"I am. I just got made quidditch captain! Katie didn't want it. I'm going to have to fill a lot of spots-a chaser, two beaters and a new seeker, but no matter. I'm the captain!" she crowed.

Ron scowled at the table.

"A new seeker?" Lavender questioned.

"I wanted to play chaser. Now that I'm captain and Angelina and Alicia are gone I can do that. Katie's still here, so I only have to fill one other chaser spot and find a new seeker."

"Oh. Good luck with that."

"You want to try out? You've played seeker before."

"No thanks. I'm just as happy to leave it for someone else."

"Harry?"

"Still too busy. Find someone else."

"Anyone else have news to share?" Dean wondered.

"Well... You remember those calendars we made? One of the Beauxbatons girls has a cousin who owns a boutique. She's interested in us designing a line of clothing for her. We'd get a commission on every one of our designs that sell. We're still working out the details, but we may have our own fashion line soon." Lavender squealed.

"Good for you. What about you, Nev?"

"Oh, well, remember how I was at one of the air nomad places last summer? I took cuttings of a lot of the plants I found there and did a couple of papers on them with Professor Sprout's help. They should be coming out this year in Herbology Today."

"Yeah? Good for you, Nev." Dean congratulated him.

"Yeah, I had no idea."

"You went to Fire Nation for a bit this summer. Did you get cuttings from there too?" Hermione wondered.

"Yeah, I did. We'll be studying them this year, so any papers will probably not be till either next summer or next year sometime."

"Still in school and already making a name for yourself, huh?"

"Well, that can be said for a lot of us."

Ron scowled and slumped down in his seat. He looked ready to launch into a litany of complaints,
but at that moment Harry hurried over and took his seat and the new first years were brought in.

"Blimey, look at them all. We're going to be here forever!" he whined instead.

"Looks like about eighty overall. We might have to expand the Melting Pot again."

"Yeah, we probably will. It was sort of crowded last year, and the seventh year class was even smaller than ours."

"We're completely overrun with midgets!"

The sorting did indeed take a very long time. At the end there were 18 new Gryffindors, 19 new Slytherins, 18 new Ravenclaws and twenty-five new Hufflepuffs.

"So…we have any big plans for this year?" Seamus asked curiously.

Everyone looked at Harry who just shrugged. They all frowned at him.

"What? I started the Melting Pot, I started the corporation, and I helped move everyone to a new world. Give me a break. How about the rest of you come up with something."

"Well, it's just…you're always full of ideas and wanting to make changes and all. We're just surprised, I guess." Hermione offered.

"I had ideas and wanted to make changes because there were things I didn't like. Look around. Inter-house rivalries are at an all-time low, there's arts and culture and pastimes aplenty, the educational system has been updated and overhauled, business is good, people are prosperous, and I'm, truthfully, quite content right now. When something else pops up to irk me, that'll be different. Isn't there anything that bugs any of you?" Harry wondered.

The rest all exchanged glances and shook their heads.

"Not really. Things are good."

"Yeah."

"Wow."

"I know, right?"

"See? So, I guess just relax, enjoy the peace and prosperity while it lasts. Sooner or later something will come along that'll ruin it, or at least make things less pleasant."

"I just realized something. I'll be coming of age in just a few weeks. Shame for the rest of you… especially you, Harry. You're the youngest of us, aren't you?" Hermione teased.

"I used to be. Remember, I experienced an extra year when I was here setting up for the move. I'm actually older than you now."

"That's why you had that huge party at the beach house? You came of age." she realized.

"Yup."

"Hey, you know something? I've got an idea." Neville suddenly spoke up. "Remember how you were saying we weren't making movies fast enough to fill up the theatres? How about we record all the puppet shows we've done? None of them is real long. The usually run about an hour."
"That's actually not a bad idea. We could also do a documentary on the puppet club, behind the scenes in the workshop, do some candid shots of the rehearsals and all." Dean nodded.

"If I could make a suggestion? The idea was to eventually export the movies to the other countries once we built interest in it as an art form and had more movies in stock to fill the theatres with right? When we record them we should have all the puppeteers dress all in black rather than be invisible. Being able to see that there's a person operating the puppet will probably make them more palatable for the other nations. Like the Japanese bunraku theatre." Hermione spoke up.

"That's actually a good point. We'll have to do a run through with everyone in black before we record though so we can get the kinks out. The idea is for them to be noticeably present and yet not take away from the visuals of the puppets. We don't want them being too conspicuous and blocking the scenery."

"It's a go then? Great. I'll tell the puppeteer brigade and we'll dust off the old puppets and get practicing." Neville said cheerfully.

"You know, for the documentary, it would be really cute to show the new first years learning the craft." Lavender mused.

"We'll have to get the film crew together and have a meeting. I'll have to remember to send word to Griphook too about all this. I'm sure he'll be behind the idea, but he'll want to negotiate with Hogwarts for rights to the recordings. He knows full well Dumbledore will make a stink about us using Hogwarts property and resources otherwise." Harry realized.

"Have any other production companies started up?" Ron wondered.

"Not that I've heard. I figure as more of the Melting Pot folks start graduating there should be some. Who knows, Princess Azula might open one. She's really run with the whole movie thing. She even took the film crew to do shoots on location in Fire Nation. If her movie does well I could see her wanting to do more and maybe open it up as a new job market in her home country. That would be nice if she did. I guess we'll have to see."

"She's…. Rather intense," Hermione said diplomatically. "Always marching around, giving orders and then just flitting off, expecting everyone will just scramble around doing whatever she said."

"Hmph. Sounds lovely." Seamus said sarcastically.

"Thinks she's queen of the world." Ginny muttered. She had run into the girl while at the resort to see Ron defend his junior chess title.

Harry glowered at her. He'd had to apologize to Azula because of Ginny.

"She can be a little intense." Harry agreed "Her and Zuko's dad was the former Fire Lord. He was bound and determined to conquer the whole world and burn it then rule it as the phoenix king or something. He was a bit of a nutter, that one. He tried to kill Azula. He accused her of plotting against him. Nothing could be further from the truth. She was absolutely loyal to him. Frankly, I think she was honestly too terrified of him to be otherwise. Her uncle saved her life. She just froze. She couldn't believe her dad was trying to kill her. When she didn't die, her dad had her, Mai, Ty Lee and her uncle Iroh--the Fire Lord's brother--all thrown in prison. Zuko had been getting a bad feeling for a while that something was wrong, so he sent Hedwig with a message and found out they were all in prison. We snuck in during an eclipse and rescued them all. I know she seems kind of focused and intense, and it can be a bit off-putting if you don't know her well. Underneath it she's actually socially awkward and I think a bit shy, though you don't normally notice it. Their dad
messed them both up a lot. They survived though and they came out the other side the stronger for it, I think."

"Goody for her. She stills prances around like she's bloody queen of the world." Ginny scoffed.

Harry glared at her again.

"I don't think you quite appreciate who she is. Until her brother ascended to the throne, she was the crown princess of Fire Nation. What that means is that for several years of her life she expected to one day be the highest authority and absolute monarch over a population of several million people. You would never consider just hexing the Minister, even if he said or did something that annoyed you. She expected to one day be the equivalent of Minister of the whole wizarding world, but more. The Minister can't just point at someone and say 'off with their head' and expect it to actually happen. Her father could, and did, which is part of why she was so afraid of him. She is used to being a respected person of great importance and she expects to be listened to when she speaks. I've heard her side of the story too, you know. She thought you were one of the employees and asked you to get something and you took offense, but rather than just explain that you weren't an employee, you tried to hex her. Frankly, you're really damn lucky Ty Lee took you out quickly before Azula felt she needed to defend herself. She's a very skilled, very dangerous firebender. You would have been in a world of hurt, that's if you weren't just killed. What's more, it would have been an international incident. Beyond that, Azula is a friend of mine. Frankly, you are damned lucky she simply forgot the incident once you were put down. It would have caused no end of trouble with Fire Nation if you had actually succeeded in hexing her. She's since concluded that people with "weird blotchy skin"--freckles, that is--have something seriously wrong with them. In fact, the only reason she didn't decide it was all people with red hair is because she met Susan Bones before she met you."

"So…what you're saying is, at one point in time, she thought it was actually possible that she would one day be queen of the whole bloody world?" Seamus concluded.

"Pretty much."

"And Ginny tried to hex her? Man." Dean laughed.

"Say, Hermione, how's that cute boyfriend of yours?" Parvati wondered.

"Boy… oh, Mickey you mean? He started seeing someone while filming the last movie he was in. I was gone all summer in the Earth Kingdom building railways and stuff. They're both already out of school and both actors." she shrugged.

"Oh, that's too bad."

"We hadn't seen each other all that much. We were never officially dating or anything."

"I'm sure you'll find someone." Lavender consoled her.

"Here we are. The Western Air temple. Are you sure you don't want to return with us?" Azula announced.

"I would sort of like to, I think, but I promised the air benders I'd help deliver their babies. It's nearly fall, so they should start being born any day now. It will be nice to see the place again. We all stayed here for a while towards the end of the war. We were actually here when we made plans to break all of you out of prison." Katara explained.
"Really? It would have been abandoned for a hundred years. It was probably derelict." Azula wrinkled her nose.

"No, the Dai Li of Ba Sing Se went to all the temples and fixed them up by order of King Kuei. He had just discovered his favorite concubine and two of his daughters were airbenders and wanted them to have a nice place to live when they went for training. So, the Dai Li fixed up the place and we added a hot tub. Oooh, I wonder if it's still running? That will be nice if it is. I'm going to be really busy for the coming weeks, and it'll be nice to be able to take a hot soak to unwind. I wonder if they have any of the bison here? There's an air bison obstacle course inside the mountain, but the only bison we had with us was Appa, and he doesn't like being inside. That could be fun. Oh…we must have been spotted. There's Aang now."

"I highly doubt it's the Avatar coming to get you. Unless I've missed my guess the airbenders made some excuse to send him away once they knew you were on your way out here." Azula disagreed.

"Don't be silly. Why would they do that? They know Aang and I are friends."

"Um, well, I think they're all kind of tired of your on again off again relationship. He gets so sad and depressed, poor guy." Ty Lee said apologetically.

"Exactly. Chances are, unless he shows up unexpectedly while you're still around, you won't be seeing him again until they've found him someone else and he's got two or three kids on the way." Azula agreed.

"What? But…"

"Hi Katara! Hi Ty Lee! Hi princess!" The Duke called merrily as he pulled Pema in for a landing. "I'm really glad you're here! Everyone's really cranky. In fact, once I drop you off I think I might go to the Northern temple and see how Longshot and the others are doing with their mastery tests. I think the rest of the guys will probably come with me…unless you need us to stick around?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine. There won't really be much for any of you to do. It's really up to the moms to be. Even I'll just be there to help." Katara replied.

"Oh good… No offense or anything. It just seems, you know, kinda ooky. I don't really wanna think about Smellerbee pushing a baby out of her you-know. I was happier not knowing she had a you-know."

"I'm sure you'll feel differently in a few more years…well, not about Smellerbee's, since she's sort of your mother figure and all, but other… heh. Nevermind. Say, where's Aang? I guess I was just sort of surprised he didn't come get me himself." Katara asked.

The Duke couldn't quite meet her eyes as he waved his hand vaguely.

"Oh, you know, he's off doing Avatar-y stuff…and there's the masters tests…and um, he'll probably go check out the Eastern temple too at some point. It's also bison calving season, so he'll want to see how the baby bison are getting on, and look in on the acolytes that showed up wanting to get enlightened and all. Busy guy, the avatar."

"I see."

Azula arched an eyebrow at her as though to say 'see? I told you so.' Ty Lee shrugged and gave her a sympathetic smile. Katara smiled back stiffly at both of them.

"Thank you for the ride. I guess I'll see you around."
"I'll send word about when the movie is likely to premier. You should come see it when it's finished."

"I'd like that."

She climbed up into the saddle on Pema's back and they were away. The girls' waved till they were out of sight and then Azula strode off to begin giving orders to head to their next destination, the Confederacy of Magic. The sets should be ready for all the indoor scenes by the time they got back. She had a lot of work ahead of her.

"Things sure have changed, huh?" Parvati mused as the common room emptied out.

"Yeah. We made all those clubs so we could stay out of the common room, and look at us now." Neville snorted.

The sixth years and some of the seventh years were sprawled out around the common room doing homework. In the month since school started again they'd found themselves either there or in the library till all hours more times than they could count.

"I think I've only been to the Melting Pot like three times this year. It's just too noisy there to get anything done." Lavender sighed.

"Yeah, which is why we're all here, not just you." Dean agreed.

The portrait hole opened and the Gryffindor quidditch team trudged in looking mud-spattered and ruddy-cheeked. Ginny had managed to fill the open positions and had been training them every free moment like a madman ever since. Katie had confessed that she thought she'd actually passed Oliver Wood at his worst, even though it had only been a month, which was really saying something.

Ron came in last looking disgruntled. He'd been in a bad mood since Ginny had been made captain. The rest had reminded him she'd been on the team longer and as Katie didn't want it was next in line, but it didn't make much difference to him. He flopped onto the couch and sat there looking vaguely pissed off at the world.

"Aren't you going to do your homework?" Seamus questioned once everyone realized Hermione wasn't going to. She was in fact busily doing her homework and ignoring the redhead in their midst. They were beginning to realize they must have argued or something over the summer, as she'd been keeping her distance and not keeping watch on him the way she used to.

"Yeah, I guess." he grumbled. He joined the rest of them around the coffee table and glumly opened his books.

"Psst. Azula, look!" Ty Lee whispered in her friend's ear so her voice wouldn't be picked up by the microphones.

"Just a moment" the princess answered absently. "CUT" The actors froze mid-scene and Azula stomped over to them.

"Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! You're smiling too much! You are a spoiled despot! You feel nothing but contempt for everyone around you! They're not even people to you. They are things, there to serve
you, to live and die at your whim. Don't smile at the serving girls. Don't acknowledge them at all. If someone tries to hand you something you don't want, you are a man who will strike it from their hands and then punish them for making a mess! You're bored and jaded and hate everything around you!"

She turned to the dragon empress who shrunk down under her regard.

"You are a strong woman, and a queen, but for some reason you love this awful king of yours. You've seen him become cruel and cold and heartless, take joy in the suffering of others. You remember a time when he was different. You are angry, and you're afraid, and you're sorrowful. You're trying to steel yourself to cast him down so he'll learn valuable life lessons and become a better person! The audience needs to identify with you and root for the actions that you'll be taking to fix things. Become the characters! All of you are in fear of your lives. At any moment you could die and you all know it. Be meek! Be fearful! Hunch in on yourselves, keep your eyes cast down. Keep your movements small and tight and try not to attract notice!"

She swept her gaze across all the actors in the scene, who, upon meeting her fierce, hawk-like gaze, realized that, gosh, they might actually be facing instant death if they didn't make her happy.

"Places everyone!"
"From the top!"
"Love Among the Dragons Act 2, Scene 3."

"And….ACTION!"

Ty Lee made herself comfy on Azula's chair. She looked like she was going to be awhile. The scene played out a lot better the second time around. In fact, it gave her a weird chill watching it. It kind of gave her Fire Lord Ozai flashbacks, come to think of it. The servants in the royal palace of Fire Nation didn't cringe like that anymore. They used to though, now that she thought about it. And Fire Lady Ursa used to just sit there looking sort of worried all the time, much like the dragon lady on the stage did. Creepy.

A glance at Azula's stiff back told her she was probably having similar flashbacks. Poor Azula. He might have been scary and murderous and a creep and all…but he was still her dad and she had loved him. This probably wasn't easy for her.

"Cut!"

The actors on the sound stage relaxed and looked more like regular people again. Say what you would about Azula, she had a gift for bringing stuff out of you that you never knew was there. It seemed like it worked on people outside of Fire Nation as well.

"That's a wrap. Tomorrow we'll be doing the dragon empress and the sea witch, and the transformation of the dragon emperor. Have a good evening, everyone."

Azula made her way back to where Ty Lee sat and then stopped in confusion.

"What are you wearing?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you earlier! I was getting bored…not that your movie is boring! I just didn't really have anything to do, so I went down to the beach. They were having a beauty contest and I won! See?"

She stood and did a little spin, showing off her new sash and sparkly crown.
"I had to do a couple of commercial spots, which were sort of strange…I had to run down the beach and play volleyball and ride around on one of those wave scooters and then make a speech about how great this place is. They're going to play it before the movies to get people to want to come here. After that they took me through these weird flames and we were suddenly somewhere else, which was really weird, and I had to cut a ribbon and make another speech and people took pictures of me. They said I might have to do it again in a few weeks, but it was sort of fun and it didn't take too long, so that's probably alright. Oh, and I only get to keep the sash and the crown until next summer. The winner of the next contest gets it and then she'll do commercials and cut ribbons. For now though it's me. I'm the face of Paradise Island. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Fabulous. Congratulations." Azula offered.

Inside she was a bit weirded out to realize that Ty Lee had apparently wandered off for a few hours and she hadn't noticed. On the one hand… it was nice, she supposed, that her friends no longer felt the need to keep her contained and that Ty Lee actually felt free to just wander off like that. On the other hand, it was worrying that she had been so involved in her work that she hadn't noticed.

"Let me know next time you plan to wander off. What if another violent lackey had tried to attack me? It would be a shame to burn this place to the ground. Not to mention my movie would be ruined."

"Gosh, you're right. No problem! I'll be sure to let you know next time. I don't need to do anything else right now anyway, so I'm all yours!"

"As you should be. Let's go. The lunch buffet should be ready at headquarters. I'm hungry."

"Me too. I hope they have more of those noodles with the red sauce and the little balls of meat. That was really good. You should try it next time."

"Perhaps I will. I am getting a bit tired of just eating the same three Fire Nation dishes at every meal."

"That's the spirit! Live a little!"

"Well, look at us"

"businessmen, homeowners"

"Can't forget devastatingly handsome"

The twins turned to look at each other and grinned

"Right you are, brother mine. Brilliant as well"

"That goes without saying"

"Still nice to hear."

"So it is."

"No more babies underfoot when we're trying to work"

"Definitely a plus. On the other hand, we'll have to make our own meals"
"And do our own laundry."

They sighed in unison.

"But still… our own homes."

The twins had saved up enough to get spots in the employee village for N.W.E., and then saved a bit more to purchase an extra room extension which they’d put in place to connect their two houses and use as a workroom that was accessible to them both. Their house was now a weird 'U' shape, but all in all they were quite pleased with the finished product.

"Who'd have thought we'd willingly move into Percy's neighborhood?"

"I know, right? Still…he hasn't been so bad lately."

"Penny's been really good for him."

"A goddess, that one."

"Far too good for him though"

"Again, that goes without saying."

"We're going to need furniture and other…house stuff"

"We can transfigure stuff for the short run."

"We should have some real stuff. What if we're too tired to make a table?"

"Eat on the floor?"

"Fine for us, I'm not so sure the girls would agree."

"Yeah. I guess we should go shopping?"

"Think mum will let us take our beds?"

"She can't object if we don't ask…and they are our beds."

"True. We need to get the rest of our stuff anyway."

The twins exited their new house through their own half and locked their respective front doors. They then stood back to admire the place for a bit, pride of new ownership a palpable feeling in their blood. Their new house was quite plain--two prefab houses that hadn't been lived in for long previously, and the former owners hadn't made any changes to them, now connected by a prefab room extension. There were still a few like theirs that were still in their original condition. The rest of the neighborhood showed signs of occupancy though--the houses had been painted, a few had windowboxes with flowers or herbs, some had colorful shutters or gardens surrounding the house, toys in the yard, or patio chairs for sitting outside of an evening.

"We definitely need to personalize the place."

"Yeah. Plain brown wood is so boring."
"We should head out before the shops close. I'd like to move in tonight"

"But morning is soon enough. We do still need to pack up our room."

They turned as one to the authorized apparation zone and popped off towards Diagon Alley once clear.
Four dates

Chapter Summary

Ginny leads the Gryffindor team in her first foray as captain. Four couples have four very different dates in Hogsmeade.

"Hey, look. Airbenders!" Neville pointed.

"Aang! Over here!" Harry called, before waving his arms overhead to draw their attention.

Aang, Longshot, Meifeng and her two daughters, the Duke, Argus Filch, Susan Bones' and the Creevey brothers' dads wandered over to join them.

"Hey, you've all got arrows! Congratulations!" Harry said cheerfully. Longshot, Meifeng and the two girls, who'd been training the longest, were all now sporting blue arrow tattoos same as Aang, though on Meifeng and the girls only the point could be seen as they still had their hair.

"What do the arrows mean?" Luna asked curiously.

"It means they're all master airbenders now." Aang answered with some pride for his students.

"Oh. Good show." Neville congratulated them.

"We were just heading off to a quidditch match if you all want to join us." Harry offered.

"Do any of you mind?" Aang asked.

"..." Longshot said nothing, but his longing glance in the direction of the Western Air Temple said enough.

"Yeah. I'd like to know how Smellerbee is doing too." the Duke agreed.

"And Sharon"

"And Arabella." Mister Bones and Filch nodded.

"I'd like to stay. One of my boys will be playing." Mr. Creevey decided.

"They kind of asked that we stay away till all the babies were born. It's still autumn. They might not all have been born yet." the Duke realized.

"A short break won't hurt, I guess." Filch sighed, though he sounded deeply unhappy about it. Longshot sighed and nodded his head.

"Anyone want to place any bets?" Seamus asked the crowd around him.

"No money."

"Damn."

They all made their way into the Gryffindor stands and found seats. Harry spotted Tom across the way in the teachers' stand and gave him a 'what the hell?' gesture. Tom rolled his eyes and gestured
with his thumb to Dumbledore. He was dressed in green and silver to support Slytherin, so it was probably just as well that he hadn't been allowed to sit with Harry.

"They should be starting soon."

Ron paced and Katie fidgeted as they waited for game time, both of them side-eyeing the rookies as they did so. The new players were all looking a bit ill now that the prospect of playing before an audience was in front of them.

"We worked hard, we've done all we could to prepare." Ginny announced.

They could hear the whistle and the announcer calling for them.

"We've done our best, now it's time to show everyone what we're capable of! LET'S WIN THIS THING!"

"YAAAAAAAAH!"

They marched out onto the field with their heads held high, though the new players still cringed a bit under all the eyes watching them. Ginny and Adrien Pucey, the Slytherin captain, glared at each other as they shook hands.

"On your brooms! I want a nice, clean game!" Madame Hooch ordered before blowing the whistle to start the game.

"Ron looks confident. Let's hope he can keep up his end of season competence and not go back to falling apart through the whole game." Seamus said nervously.

"Yeah, we don't have Angelina and Alicia anymore to keep the pressure on Slytherin if he chokes, and Ginny is new to chaser. She was always seeker before." Dean agreed, just as nervous.

"We've still got Katie, and we know Ginny is decent on her broom. I'm sure it'll be fine." Neville consoled them.

"How are the beaters?" Parvati wondered.

"Kirk and Sloper? Solid but uninspired. They'll be hard pressed by Vince and Greg, their teamwork is almost as good as the twins was." Harry replied.

"How about Dennis?" Lavender wanted to know.

"The boy can fly, but sadly he's no Ginny. She had a killer instinct he seems to lack. If he can get enough of a lead towards the snitch it's doable, but otherwise…" Dean shook his head.

"They're starting. I guess we'll see how it goes." Neville fretted.

"Ha! Katie's still got it. A goal right off the bat!" Harry crowed. "The other two aren't having as much luck. Vince and Greg do have good teamwork don't they?"

"Alright! Ron is holding it together!" Seamus cheered.

"What's Dennis doing? He's just hovering up there! Malfoy's all over the damn field." Dean agonized.
"Oh, nice save by Sloper." Lavender noted.

"Another goal. What's her name?" Seamus wondered.

"Demelza Robins. Damn, she nearly just nearly got knocked off her broom...oh! Nice recovery! Damn, missed the goal though...YES! Ginny to the rescue! Oho, Demelza ain't bad! She got another goal right off!" Lavender replied.

"The beaters look like they're playing tennis." Harry snorted.

"Yeah, they just keep lobbing the bludgers back and forth between them." Neville agreed.

"Crabbe and Goyle are better than they are. You saw how many near misses we've already had. They probably figured keeping them occupied was the best they could do for the team." Seamus sighed, shaking his head.

"Another save by Weasley! And one got through...oh well. He's blocked all the rest. Let's hope that one goal isn't a precursor." Dean muttered.

"He's still in the zone! He blocked that one." Seamus cheered.

"Come on, girls! Get the quaffle back!" Lavender shouted.

"It's to be expected. They're pretty good for having only been together for such a short time. Slytherin's chasers have been together longer. That little bit makes a difference." Harry sighed.

"Ron's being pressed hard, but he's still keeping it together." Seamus said with relief.

"Or was. Damn." Dean winced.

"Gryffindor's got the quaffle again! Go Katie!" Parvati shouted.

"Dennis seriously needs to find the snitch. The score is too close. The snitch will decide it." Neville worried.

The pace was fast and hard through the whole game, but Ginny's mostly-rookie team managed to hold it together. The score tied and all the players tried to shift to a new gear.

"Dennis just went into a dive! Has he seen the snitch?" Dean shouted.

"Malfoy must think so he's headed right for him. Where is it though..." Seamus' gaze searched the area frantically.

"He just broke off the dive to go to the announcer's stand. What's he.... He already had the snitch! WE WON!" Neville laughed, before cheering loudly.

"Oh, I get it. He lacks the killer instinct, but he made it work for him." Harry realized.

"What do you mean?" Neville wondered.

"The snitch works harder to keep away the harder you look for it." Lavender realized. "He didn't look for it at all. It probably went right to him trying to get him to chase it."

"I hope this isn't going to be a recurring theme. The seeker chase was always my favorite part." Parvati grumbled.
"Who cares? We won!" Seamus cackled.  "WOO HOO!"  "GRYFFINDOR!" Dean and Neville cheered.  

"I guess we should go congratulate Ron." Neville noted.  "Yeah. He did good." Seamus nodded.  "He's going to be insufferable, you realize." Harry laughed.  "Yeah. That goes without saying." Dean agreed, laughing as well.  

As they got to the stairs, Neville glanced back when he realized not everyone had come with them. He nuded Harry, who glanced back as well.  

"Huh. I really did not see that coming… though perhaps I should have. I even said Katara reminded me of her." Harry chuckled.  

"Hmm? Oho. Lav, look!" Parvati hissed.  

The two girls peered around their shoulders and giggled at the avatar and Hermione, who were still chatting earnestly and seemed to not have noticed that the game was over and everyone else had left.  

"Well, he's sort of cute, even if he is bald." Lavender giggled.  

"Yeah, he is. We'll have to grill her later." Parvati agreed.  

"I guess this means Ron really is free and clear, huh?"  

"I suppose." Parvati agreed glumly. "Though really Lav, him?"  

"What can I say? He grows on you."  

"Like fungus, maybe."  

"In fact, I'm going to go congratulate him right now."  

Lavender waved them all a cheery goodbye and began hurrying down the stairs to the ground.  

"Lavender has a thing for Ron?" Harry said in surprise.  

"I know, right?" Parvati sighed.  

"Huh. Didn't see that coming either."  

Down below, Ron was drinking in his accolades, strutting around and posing so everyone could admire him more easily. Though he tried not to think on it too hard, he was looking for one particular admiring face in the crowd. It would be just like his dream last night: *Gryffindor won the game, the crowds cheered...and then there she was, smiling at him in pride. She'd run to him and say 'Oh Ron! You're single, and so am I! I gave that berk with the stupid name the heave ho, because I realized was you all along!' Then there was kissing...and then they were naked, but they weren't on the quidditch field anymore, which was a relief because that would have been embarrassing. He'd been real interested in the being naked...but then his alarm had gone off and it had all disappeared.  

While scanning the crowd he noted some people were still in the stands. It was Hermione and that
creepy bald kid that kept coming by to visit Harry. By the look of it, she hadn't even been watching the game and hadn't noticed it had ended.

"Oh, Ron! You were wonderful! Congratulations!"

Ron tore his eyes away from Hermione to focus on Lavender, who was beaming at him like he was ten foot tall and had just won every quidditch cup imaginable.

"Oh, uh, thanks. Yeah, I was pretty awesome, wasn't I?"

Hermione would have snorted and made some crack about him getting a big head and reminded him there was more to life than quidditch. Lavender though… Lavender looked like she agreed with him and she was smiling and batting her eyes at him.

"You heading to Hogsmeade?"

Lavender's smile widened for a moment before growing demure. "I supposed I would for a bit. I didn't really have any particular plans or anything."

"Yeah? You wanna maybe head to the Three Broomsticks later? Or Madame Puddifoots? Both?"

Lavender smiled some more and snuggled up against his arm, which was pretty brilliant. "I'd love to."

Ron thanked all his lucky stars he actually had a bit of money to spend, even with having to pay his own way this year.

"Yeah? Brilliant. Let me just get cleaned up and I'll meet you."

"Sounds good."

"Oh, goodness…the game's over and we're still sitting here." Hermione said sheepishly. "We should probably get going."

"Oh, uh, okay." Aang agreed easily, following her towards the stairs.

As they were walking, she scanned the area, looking for Ron. She spotted red hair in the distance and started to smile, only to stop when she realized Lavender was there to meet him, apparently, and they were standing very close together.

"So…um…do you want to head down to Hogsmeade? It's a free weekend. All the students third year and up will be heading down there. I could show you around if you'd like? I do have some shopping to do while we're there, but otherwise…”

"Sure! Sounds like fun. I've flown over the village a few times, but I haven't actually visited it yet. Appa, my bison, is down below if you want a ride down."

"Oh, I'd love to! I've kind of wanted to since the first time I saw all of you fly in here." Hermione agreed.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and started towards the hairy white bison who was taking its ease in the field there. Appa wasn't alone though.

"Oh, Harry…Tom. Hello. What are you both doing here?" Hermione said with some surprise as
she and Aang approached.

"Just saying hi to Appa." Harry replied.

"We go way back." Tom added dryly, scratching Appa behind one ear and chuckling when he rumbled in pleasure and his eyelids fluttered a bit.

"Oh." Hermione nodded, before hesitantly patting the bison as well.

"Headed to Hogsmeade?" Tom asked, looking between the two of them curiously.

"Um, yeah. Her-my-nee said you were all going there. You guys want a ride?"

"Sure. It'll be like old times." Harry agreed cheerfully as the rest of the airbenders approached.

"Hey, Aang? We're all going to head to the temple to see how the ladies are. Liam is going to stick around for a bit so he can visit with his boys, so he'll still need a ride," the Duke told him. Pema and Appa were the only bison they actually had with them.

"It was nice to see all of you again. Please to give our best to the ladies and any new additions that have already come along. I sent presents ahead already." Harry offered.

"That was right kind of you." Mr. Bones nodded.

"Well, it's a special occasion isn't it?"

"Never thought I'd be a da at my age." Filch admitted. "Still, I'm sort of keen. Should be an adventure."

"It is." Meifeng agreed with a smile, as she ran a gentle hand over each of her daughters' heads.

"I'm sure it will be. Best of luck to all of you." Tom offered.

"Where is Liam anyway?" Aang wondered, looking for Mr. Creevey.

"He and one o' the boys is waiting fer the other to get changed. He said he'd just head down with them when they're ready." Filch answered.

"Okay. I'll see you all back at the temple later, I guess. For now, looks like it's just us." he added to Harry, Tom and Hermione.

Aang floated up to sit on Appa's head. Tom climbed up into the saddle. Harry gave Hermione a boost and then hopped in himself.

"Yip, yip."

Appa rose into the air and turned towards the village at the base of the mountain. Hermione was smiling in excitement, but then her face went slack in shock.

"What?"

Hermione didn't say anything, just resolutely turned her face to look elsewhere. Tom and Harry both peered in the direction she'd been looking. Ron and Lavender Brown were making out like the world was about to end against the side of the quidditch locker room. They seemed fairly oblivious to the stares and catcalls of the crowd as they passed by on their way down to the village.
"Ah." Harry said, enlightened.

"If you ask me, you're better off. He looks like he's trying to gnaw her face off." Tom offered helpfully.

"That doesn't really help, but thank you." Hermione replied.

"Padma? What are you doing?"

Parvati and Pansy were both a bit bemused to find Padma, after looking for her all over, crouched behind a couple of trash bins in an alley while busily scribbling into her notebook.

"Shh! I'm getting all sorts of wonderful inspiration here." Padma hissed back.
Parvati and Pansy exchanged a bewildered look and then peeked out themselves.

"Merlin! Has Lav come up for air at all?" Parvati cringed.

"Not that I've seen. It must have made getting down here from the quidditch field difficult, to say the least." Padma snickered.

"Ugh. It makes me nauseous watching it…and yet I can't quite look away. It's like a mid-air broom collision." Pansy added, sounding ill.

"Please tell me you have not been crouched her just watching that travesty." Parvati sighed, waving her hand to indicate Ron and Lavender, who were now making out against the side of the bookstore.

"Of course not. I don't know whether or not Lav realizes, but Ron positioned them very carefully. Oh goody. Maybe there'll be some fireworks." Padma suddenly smiled.

Pansy and Parvati peered out again and saw Hermione and Aang coming out of the bookstore. They were laughing together and Aang was carrying the books she'd just purchased. Aang blanched when he caught sight of the amorous couple and his face flushed pink in embarrassment.

"Um…is that a common thing in these parts?" he asked.

"Hardly." Hermione sniffed disdainfully. "Only people with little class choose to make such a spectacle of themselves in public." she took Aang's arm and smiled at him. "Have you ever had hot chocolate?"

"No?"

"Would you like to try some? I know a nice little place nearby."

"Sure."

The two wandered off arm in arm, seemingly unaware of Ron and Lavender glaring at them as they passed.

Once they were gone, Lavender turned her glare on Ron, though it had taken on a decidedly sulky cast. She grabbed him by the arm and drug him off in the opposite direction that Hermione and Aang had just gone.
"Oooh. This should be good." Padma cackled, before disillusioning herself to creep after them.

Parvati threw up her hands in despair then looked at Pansy, who grinned and shrugged before disillusioning herself as well. Parvati sighed and figured she might as well join them.

Aang peered in interest at the little shop Hermione led them too and wondered at the steamed up windows. He was pretty sure hot chocolate was supposed to be a drink of some kind…was it so hot it caused the windows to fog up? A little bell tinkled when the door was opened and he stepped in to the…fluffiest place he'd ever been to. He looked around and saw couples seated at all the tables… many of them kissing like their lives depended on it, much like the boy and girl they'd just passed earlier. All the tables and booths were intended for couples. Kissing couples. Was Hermione expecting him to kiss her? Is that why the boy and girl in the street were doing wrong? They were supposed to come here to do it? Panic began to claw at his gut. He didn't want to do something wrong and embarrass them both, or get Hermione mad at him. He was so distressed he was beginning to see spots before his eyes. That's when he saw his salvation.

"Harry! Tom! Hi!"

"Oh, hi again. We were just leaving." Harry greeted.

Aang's eyes widened in panic as he saw his safety net about to flee. Something of that must have come across because Harry raised an eyebrow at him and then turned to Hermione with a smile. "Mind if I borrow Aang for just a tick? We won't be long, promise."

"Oh, I…"

"Great. Be right back!"

Harry shot a look at Tom over his shoulder and gestured with his head for him to keep Hermione occupied as he and Aang disappeared out the door.

"What on earth was that all about?" Hermione huffed.

"Probably something to do with his company's trade with the air nomads. It's nothing, I'm sure." Tom said indifferently.

"Oh. So…having fun?" Hermione asked.

"Can't complain. I've a bellyful of chocolate. That tends to put me in a good mood." Tom agreed.

"Oh. Good. That's good." She looked around at the tea shop distractedly. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought him here." she realized.

"You and Aang, huh? I never saw that coming."

"What? No… he's just interesting to talk to. He's been all over."

"Does he know that?" Tom asked.

"Of course… You know, I'm not sure."

"You should probably make it clear one way or another."

"He's a bit young for me."
"Your Weasley is older, but I can assure you Aang is mostly more mature than he is. Just be honest. I'm sure he'll appreciate that. His last girlfriend jerked him around a lot."

"He's not my Weasley." Hermione sighed, just a bit irked.
She peered out the window to see what the other two were doing. They were in deep discussion about something, then Harry laughed and grabbed Aang to noogie his bald head.

"He acts like he's his little brother."

"He is. Ask either of them. He seems to like gathering strays. It's his thing." Tom snorted.

"Yeah, it is isn't it?" she agreed, thinking of her fellow interns.

"Orphan solidarity or something. He should have been a Hufflepuff." Tom huffed, though it sounded strangely affectionate.

Aang came back in then, smiling and looking considerably calmer than he had the first time.

"Sorry about that. So…we were having hot chocolate, right?"

"Well, I'll leave you two to your outing. You should try the custard crème puffs or the fruit tarts too. I think you'll like them." Tom added, before heading outside to join Harry.

"Sounds good."

Madame Puddifoot smiled and came out with menus to lead them to the table Tom and Harry had emptied not long before—the only empty seat in the house as the place was a popular first date hangout.

"Menus won't be necessary. Can we have two hot chocolates and some crème puffs and fruit tarts for two?" Hermione ordered.

"Sure thing, dearies. It'll be just a moment."

"Thanks."

Hermione took a deep breath and looked Aang in the eyes.

"I realized after we got here that maybe there might be some confusion. This isn't a date…at least not a romantic one. I've really only just met you…well, I mean, I've met you before but I've never really talked to you before, so it's sort of like we've just met. You're very interesting to talk to. I'm not really much of a quidditch fan. I really only go to the games because it's expected. Also, there's someone else I kind of like, but we seem to keep missing each other…"

"Hermione? It's okay. Truthfully I'm kind of in the same situation. There was this girl…"

"Katara, right? Sorry to interrupt. I know sort of vague details." Hermione apologized.

"Everyone keeps telling me to forget about her. It's hard though. I was frozen beneath the ocean for a hundred years. When I woke up the first thing I saw was her face. I got captured by Fire Nation and she, Sokka and Harry came to rescue me. We trained together, fought together… She was there every step of the way, right beside me…"

The hours slipped by as they talked, each relating their history with their individual love interests—people they had each once daydreamed about possibly sharing their lives with only for things to go wrong. From there the conversation meandered to their lives in general, places they'd been and
things they'd seen. Aang told her about pranks he had played. Hermione told him about taking part in a food fight first year to defend Harry's honor from lying bullies. With the pressure of a date off the table they each felt free to relax and get to know one another. Hermione picked up the tab. Aang gave her a ride back to the castle at the end of the day.

"I had a lot of fun today. We should do this again." Aang told her as they got ready to part ways.

"Well…we usually have another Hogsmeade weekend in early December. I could write to you if you'd like to stop by again. I think I'd enjoy that." Hermione replied.

"I would too." Aang agreed with a smile. Hermione smiled back shyly, gave him a wave and headed back into the castle.

Luna giggled as she made a snow angel. Theo lounged nearby and giggled as well.

"Those berries we found were really awesome. I feel all floaty…and sparkly…also, I think my hands are made of rubber." Theo said with the air of one imparting a great secret.

"Really? Let me see." Luna demanded, sounding amazed.

Luna rolled to her hands and knees and crawled over towards Theo in slow motion. "You know…I think I'm made of rubber too. My arms and legs don't seem to want to hold me up."

"Yeah? Can you do this?" Theo pulled on the ends of his fingers and then wiggled them. Luna watched entranced. To their addled senses, Theo's fingers now seemed to be a foot long and floppy.

"Whoa." Luna breathed in astonishment.

"I know, right?"

They were both feeling fine.

Luna carefully climbed to her feet and started laughing at how they wriggled and twisted beneath her. "Whee! This is fun."

Theo carefully stood as well and laughed as his legs wriggled and twisted as well. They wandered slowly out of the little clearing just outside Hogsmeade where they'd found the wonderful berries and started wandering. As they rounded the bend they could see Hogwarts in the distance. They both stopped dead and stared at the place, entranced.

"Whoa." they murmured in unison. The whole castle seemed limned in rainbow fire.

"I want to touch it." Theo decided. Luna beside him nodded solemnly. She did as well.

They began to drift up the mountain, stopping to giggle or play with their stretched out, rubbery limbs along the way, but eventually, as night was falling, they made it to the fiery castle. They amused themselves for some time in running their hands through the colors and twirling around in them. Quite a few people passed them and stopped to stare, but neither of them noticed or cared.

Eventually, they realized they were really hungry, and what's more, they could smell food.

They drifted in through the gates and followed the few stragglers from Hogsmeade that preceded them into the castle proper.
They stopped dead when they reached the entrance hall, both too entranced by watching the portraits and staircases moving to remember they had been heading in to dinner.

"Luna? What's with you?" Ginny asked curiously as she was passing by on her way to dinner.

Luna blinked slowly and with an effort, wrenched her gaze away from the interesting staircases. She'd never noticed how very, very fascinating they were before. With difficulty, she focused on the girl standing in front of her.

"Wow. Your hair is so pretty." she cooed as she reached out to pet it.

"Uh…thanks?" Ginny said uncertainly.

Theo stumbled over and leaned heavily on Luna's shoulder. "It really is. It's so… red." he agreed, sounding stunned.

"What's wrong with you two?"

"Nothing. I feel wonderful." Luna assured her.

"Yeah, it's all good." Theo nodded.

"Okaaay…" Ginny said uncertainly.

"I'm hungry." Luna realized.

"Me too. I hope they have pork chops." Theo agreed. "Pork chops are the food of the gods."

"I like pork chops too."

"We have so much in common." Theo said, sounding like he was having an epiphany.

"We really do. We're completely in sync." Luna agreed, sounding similarly enlightened.

"Like kismet and stuff."

"Yeah."

Ginny started backing away when they turned to stare at each other with creepy intensity, then grinned at each other and started making out.

"Yeah, I am so out of here." Ginny muttered before fleeing for the great hall.

As Harry and Tom reached Hogwarts on their way back from their date, Tom suddenly grinned. "Is the headboy or headgirl this year a Slytherin?"

"No, why?"

"Excellent."

"Why do you want to know?" Harry asked curiously.

"Patience. It's a good quality to cultivate." Tom teased before leading them inside and taking Harry's hand, giving him a tug towards the back stairs that led down towards the dungeons.
"Huh. Theo and Luna seem to be a thing now." Harry noted in passing.

They were making out with rather single-minded intensity in the middle of the entryway, and seemed to be oblivious to professor McGongall demanding they cease and desist at once. She was so focused on them, she didn't notice he and Tom sneaking by to head to the dungeons.

Tom led them to a stretch of blank wall that was further towards the center of the castle than the Slytherin dorms or Snape's office was and hissed 'open'.

There was a bedroom revealed, about half the size of the Gryffindor boys dorms. It held a bed, wardrobe, a desk and chair, as well as a small table with four chairs near the fire, and its own bathroom that could be seen through a door on the far end.

"What is this?" Harry asked as he peeled off his cloak, scarf and gloves and tossed them on one of the chairs.

"The Slytherin head boy or girl's room."

"You get a special bedroom for that?"

"Of course."

"Gryffindor doesn't."

"Of course they do. There's one near each of the dormitories."

"There's been a Gryffindor head girl and a Gryffindor head boy in the time I've been here. They both got a badge but that was it. They stayed in the dorms with everyone else." Harry disagreed.

"They should have had their own room regardless as they were seventh years."

"Every year first through seventh has a dormitory shared by at least five boys. It's the same on the girls side of things."

"You don't even get your own room then? Makes me glad I was Slytherin." Tom scoffed.

"I don't think they get their own rooms anymore." Harry disagreed.

"Of course they do."

"Nope. Here, look."

Harry dug out the map and peered at it for a bit before pointing.

"See? Those two are both seventh years…and you can clearly see they're in a dorm room not a single. I hope they remembered to lock the door. They seem to be having sex."

"I'm going to hazard a guess that you didn't get a single room for your OWL year either?"

"Nope. Dorms for everyone, and until we started the Melting Pot you weren't really allowed anywhere. Everyone was either in the common room or the library when not in classes or meals, right on top of each other and making a lot of noise."

"Tell me you at least had a desk… but no, you didn't, did you? I've been in your dorm before. All you had was a bedside table with a single drawer. You didn't even have a wardrobe to hang your clothing in." Tom realized.
"Neither does Slytherin. I remember Draco complaining about it. His mother bought him a new trunk that can double as one on the go so his clothes wouldn't get wrinkled."

"Dumbledore really did everything to strip this place down to the bare essentials, didn't he? How did he expect anyone to get their homework or their projects done if there was nowhere for them to work, and no quiet space for them to study during their test years?"

"I think he didn't, and that was kind of the point. The curriculum got stripped down and everyone was stuffed in to be on top of each other carrying on all day. I think he wanted everyone to barely be capable of magic. It makes people easier to control and more sheep-like."

"I'll have to drop a word to Lucius to have that remedied." Tom huffed.

"I suppose it would be nice to have my own room next year. We'll have to make the most of my dorm room this year though." Harry added with a grin.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Lock the curtains, put a silencing spell up. The bed's a bit narrow, but I'm sure we could make do."

"You're an exhibitionist, aren't you?"

"What? No I'm not!"

"You are. It would be very like being at the summer house. All those thin paper walls and open screens. You can hear everything going on in the whole house when we're in our room. The bed is right next to an open screen. Anyone could walk by and see us. I always wondered why you always got especially hot and bothered while we were there. That's it, isn't it? The silencing ward only goes one way. You can hear everyone walking around, talking. It sounds like they're right in the room with us, but they can't hear us. If you close your eyes you'd swear there was an audience…" Tom ran his hand slowly down the front of Harry's body. "Looks like someone's all excited just thinking about it."

Harry flushed and glared at him. "Yeah. I'm a freak, I get it."

Tom frowned back. "I never said that. Just that you have a particular fetish. I brought you here. I never had anyone in here when I actually was head boy. It's too bad you're not wearing your uniform."

"I can wing it…so long as you are too. I have plans for your Slytherin tie."

Tom's eyebrows rose in astonishment. "You seem to have been thinking about this."

"Maybe once or twice." Harry muttered, his flush getting a bit darker.

"How long until you're missed?"

"Not long, but I can fix that."

"Oh?"

"You remember that trick I showed you to make an illusionary copy of yourself to act as a distraction?"

"Yeeesss."
"If you pump more power into it you can make a solid copy. It can be dispelled with a solid blow, but unless someone looks to see if it's fake it's pretty convincing." Harry explained.

"Really? I have to see this."

Harry's hands flickered through hand signs and there was a puff of mist. Suddenly there were two Harry's standing there.

Tom reached out to touch the copy, who grinned back and oozed into Tom's personal space.

"This raises so many intriguing possibilities." He gasped as copy-Harry palmed him through his trousers and began nuzzling at his neck then jumped as the copy Harry in his arms disappeared in another poof of mist. He suddenly had an armful of irate original Harry.

"Harry?"

"No one gets to touch you but me…even if they're me too."

Tom pushed down on his disappointment and kissed him till he went warm and pliant once more, then pointed his wand at an open space in the room and made a solid copy of his own.

An intrigued light lit Harry's eyes upon seeing it. Copy-Tom leered at Harry and then he too exploded into mist. Original Tom tightened his hold on Harry and scowled at the empty space where his copy had stood and Harry started giggling as he snuggled up against him. He was glad to see he wasn't the only one who'd gotten territorial after they'd each been whammied and seduced by the naga clan they'd visited while on their inter-dimensional vacation.

"We're both ridiculous, aren't we?" Harry snickered.

"Perhaps just a bit." Tom agreed wryly.

Harry stepped back away from Tom after a moment and centered himself before trying again. This time his copy just nodded to them both and headed for the door, disappearing outside.

"He'll wander around, let himself be seen, and turn in early. No one should miss me now."

Tom's gaze grew heated once more.

"Good."

Katara woke from a restless sleep and frowned at the darkened room around her, wondering what had woken her. She was exhausted. She was glad the last of the babies had been born. That meant she could go home soon. Maybe someone would give her a ride in the morning. She snuggled deeper into her bed and then frowned as the sound of voices reached her.

Curious that anyone was still awake, she crept to the door and opened it slightly to peer out into the common room.

"Now that that's out of the way, what's this about you having a date, Aang?"

"Oh? Do tell! We want to hear everything!"

Katara stiffened as the babble of excited voices rose, questioning Aang about the woman he'd spent the day with rather than coming home. She slipped away back to her room, lay down and tried to get back to sleep, but it was a long time coming in spite of her exhaustion.
Azula entered the studio she'd been sent to, and found a man about her father's age waiting with a film crew. The set was a simple one: two chairs facing one another, a simple background with the words "Newsreel with Ted Tonks" across it.

"Princess Azula? Nice to meet you. I'm Ted Tonks, I'll be conducting the interview." the man greeted, holding out a hand for her to shake, then dropping it with a wry grin when she just stared at the offered hand bewildered.

"Well met. So, this is going to be playing like a movie in the theaters?" she asked curiously as she made her way further into the studio.

"Yes. It's part of our marketing strategy. We'll be playing the interview and the behind the scenes and making of footage for the next month before whatever movie is currently playing to generate interest in your movie, and we'll be playing it before your movie as well when it goes to the theaters, so that anyone who hasn't seen the ads has some idea of what they're about to see. These pieces seem to be popular with the audience." Ted explained as he gestured her to the second seat.

"Well, alright then. Ask away." Azula nodded, sitting stiffly in the chair.

"Just relax and be yourself. The audience is curious about the people behind the movie, and want to know more about the process, what you were hoping to bring out, that sort of thing. We'll be doing short segments with the cast and crew too and then editing it together to be quick moving and interesting, so don't worry if you stutter or misspeak or anything. That will all be taken out in editing." he reassured her. Bit by bit she relaxed and nodded her head to show she was ready.

"Okay."

"Roll tape!"

"Welcome! This is Newsreel! I'll be your host, Ted Tonks. Today we're talking to Azula, Princess of Fire Nation, who is making her directorial debut with 'Love among the dragons', a legend from the Fire Nation that has also been a popular, long-running play for many years." Ted said, looking at the camera. He turned to Azula and smiled, hoping to keep her at ease.

"Welcome, Princess Azula."

"Thank you for having me."

"So, tell me how you got involved in this project."
"Well, some friends and I were in the south pole for a wedding, and one of them mentioned they were doing a screenplay for "Love among the dragons" so they could make a movie, and one of them suggested I come along to be a consultant on the costumes and set design… I had never heard of movies before and so I asked some questions about them….

Katara wandered through the production studio, looking for Azula and Ty Lee.

The Duke had come and gotten her early this morning while the rest of the airbenders kept Aang occupied with cooing at their new babies. She’d asked him to drop her off here rather than back home. She didn't want to go back yet, and have everyone looking at her with pity, especially not now when she felt so wretched. She heard voices up ahead peeked in the window and saw filming in progress so she backed away quietly. She found Ty Lee in another room and settled down beside her.

"Oh! Katara, you're back!" Ty Lee chirped, straightening up from her bored sprawl across the loveseat.

"Hi." Katara sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything."

"That's helpful." Ty Lee huffed.

"You two were right about the airbenders. They sent Aang away so he wouldn't be around me while the babies were being born. He showed up after the last finally was, but he'd been on a date with one of Harry's friends from school. They hustled me out of there while they kept him distracted."

"Oh? Which one?"

Katara glared at her, just a bit irked that she was more interested in Aang's new girlfriend than her tragedy, but she answered nonetheless. "Her-mee-nee? It was something odd like that."

"Oh. She was probably a good choice." Ty Lee nodded cheerfully.

"What? Why?" Katara demanded, now becoming a bit alarmed.

"She's a bit of a pacifist, and she believes in social justice, freedom and equality. She's also really smart. She works here during the summers." Ty Lee explained.

"Is she pretty?" Katara asked with dread.

"Yeah. She's about Azula's height, though she's got bigger boobs. She has curly hair, more so than yours even, and brown eyes."

"Marvelous." Katara sighed despondently.

"I don't get it. You already tried with him and it didn't work out, right? Why are you even worried about it?" Ty Lee wondered.

"If he had been older it might have worked out fine. He was twelve when we met and he was such a little kid in so many ways. I knew he liked me and I liked him too, a lot actually, but he was so
young and it just made me feel weird...and then I would meet someone older, more mature, more like what I'd always pictured my future husband being. It wouldn't work out...and there Aang would be, looking at me like I was the greatest thing in the world. Everyone keeps saying I jerked him around, but I didn't really...except for that one time in Ba Sing Se. That I'll admit was kind of jerkish of me." she sighed. "We weren't like that when I met Haru or when I met Jet. I was sort of with Jet when I kissed Aang in Ba Sing Se...but it was a really creepy place and he was right there and I hadn't known Jet for long or very well and at the time it just seemed..."

She trailed off and waved a hand vaguely as she tried to explain, before sighing again.

"Things with Jet didn't work out anyway. My dad said no to him becoming part of the tribe and then he killed a bunch of people after the war ended. When we finally got back to my home I figured maybe I should give Aang a chance, but every time I looked at him I still saw a little kid for all that he'd done amazing things and I guess I felt weird... but on top of that he kept leaving and I had just gotten home and I didn't want to just up and leave again immediately. I told him I didn't think things would work out and so he left to go train airbenders. That's when I met Hahn. He seemed perfect. He was always there, and he was already part of the water tribe and he was older and I thought I'd finally found someone I could snuggle with at night without feeling like a weirdo. But then Hahn turned out to be a creep...and Aang was suddenly all grown up and starting to look like a man I could snuggle with... and no one will let us try again. They won't even let us be in the same room alone together until he's found someone else." she concluded, sinking into a ball of misery.

"He does look very snuggable, doesn't he?" Ty Lee giggled.

She'd been sitting for a while and was getting stiff. She hopped to her feet and went into a back bend, pushed her feet off and went into a handstand and did a split.

"I might have gone after him myself. I tried talking to him a few times when he'd come by to visit, but it never really went anywhere. He kept acting weird and twitchy and said something about an arrow, and then he'd just disappear!" she said, sounding bewildered.

She flipped back to her feet and did a full-body stretch that drew attention to her long legs, flat, toned stomach and well-endowed perky bosom.

"I don't understand it at all." she concluded sadly.

Katara eyed her with some aspersion for trying to run off with Aang, but as it hadn't worked, she was willing to ignore it.

"We always got along well, and could always talk to each other and work together and laugh together. The only real problem was his age and now it's not...but it's too late now." she said sadly.

"Well! That's a quitter's attitude if I ever heard it!" Azula drawled from the doorway.

"Azula! Is your interview done?" Ty Lee asked.

"Done and filmed, and the last editing on the movie is done as well."

"So we can go home now?" she asked hopefully.

"Well, you can if you really want to when the ship comes in a few days to pick us up."

"But where will you be?" Ty Lee wondered.
"I'm going to ask the avatar if I can travel with him for a while to scout out good locations for my next movie…as will Katara, of course, as she's part of the crew."

"I am?" Katara demanded.

"You are," Azula agreed with a sniff. "Come now, you're not really going to let some upstart steal your man before you're sure you're done with him, are you? Where is your pride? Your fighting spirit?"

"I thought you were going to visit your nephew though! You promised Zuko you would when we were there last!" Ty Lee huffed.

"So we'll make a stop and say hi and…bounce the child, or whatever it is one does in such situations…and then we'll continue our mission!"

"We should see if we can grab Toph too. We can say we're ambassadors from the different nations or something." Katara suggested with a grin.

"That's the spirit!"

"Wait, you said for your next movie. You're doing another one?" Ty Lee asked suddenly.

"Yes. As soon as I get a good idea for the next one. I've seen the finished product of 'Love Among the Dragons'. It's even more magnificent than I imagined! I've obviously found my niche… and besides, I was getting bored at home what with all the stifling domesticity. It will be fun."

"The last time you said that we headed off to conquer Ba Sing Se."

"Ty Lee! Would you stop being such a downer?"

"When do we start?" Katara asked cheerfully.

Azula smirked and brandished the phone she'd recently acquired. "Right now."

She dialed and put it to her ear.

"Avatar, good. Princess Azula of the Fire Nation here. I, Toph and Katara will be joining you for a bit to help you with your avatar work and also scout locations for my next movie. You will come and meet Katara and I in Fire Nation in two weeks' time with Toph. You'll have to fetch her from Wan Shi Tong's library. See you then!"

She disconnected the call and tucked the phone away. "There. Done."

"What are you looking at, my son?" Ursa asked curiously when she came upon Zuko on the balcony looking out over the island.

"Tourists." Zuko gestured down to the quay. "They're actually mostly scholars and naturalists rather than vacationers. There's a few from the Confederacy of Magic and the rest are from Ba Sing Se University. They want to study the local flora and fauna."

Ursa took the telescope Zuko offered her and peered down in interest. It was another of the strange dragon ships with its colorful sail and shields, though a different ship than had visited them before. A mixed group of wizards in their robes of many colors with their odd hair colors, and a group of obvious Earth Kingdom folk were disembarking and peering around in interest.
"How long will they be here?" Ursa wondered.

"A few months, most likely. I asked a few of the junior faculty from Sozin college to act as their escorts while they're in the country. Uncle Iroh will be going with them as well, and Master Piandao and Jeong Jeong the deserter have both offered to host them while on their respective islands." Zuko explained. "We'll be having a dinner tonight to welcome them. We'll be hosting them here for a day or two and then they'll be heading out to look around."

"It's a fairly sizeable group."

"It would have been much larger if they'd had their way. Apparently so many people wanted to be part of this trip that each country held a lottery so they could fairly choose a small number to be part of the group." he added, sounding somewhat disbelieving. "It really just brings home to me all over again how stupid, wasteful and wrongheaded the whole war was. We isolated ourselves from everyone for a hundred years…and there was a whole world of people out there that were curious about us, and wanted to get to know our home and our people." He glanced down at the quay again and shook his head. "I'm mostly just relieved that they still are after the war."

"I think by and large people as a whole prefer peace to war. Those years were hard on all of us in different ways. I doubt we are the only people who want to put it all behind us and move on towards a better future."

Her attention was caught by a black dot in the distance.

"I believe that is the royal ship approaching."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah it probably is. It went to fetch Azula a few days ago."

"She's returning home then?"

"I guess, though for how long is anyone's guess. I'm not even exactly sure what she's been doing all this time, beyond making a movie, which is apparently a play that can be recorded and then shown over and over again."

"It's so strange, isn't it? I tried more than once to interest her in the arts, but she never could be bothered." Ursa admitted with no little frustration.

"From what I saw, she was in charge of the production, and ordering everyone around. She has no interest in being one of those dancing or singing, but let her have a reason to boss everyone around? Suddenly she's all for the arts." Zuko agreed wryly. "She's your daughter as well, but we both know she takes after dad."

"You needn't tell me. It is something I have despaired of all my life."

"Mom, don't give up on her." Zuko told her seriously. "Dad messed her up quite a bit, it can't be denied…but looking back, I realize it was you leaving that almost destroyed her. She was a monstrous child." he admitted "and even now that she's grown she's often prickly and hard to deal with--but she became that in order to survive. She needs you. She needs you so much more than you probably realize. She's grown and changed a lot just in the last few years, but she's still very much a work in progress. I sometimes think she gets so prickly pushes us away because she needs us to prove that we'll still love her even if she's not perfect. She's spent most of her life terrified of making a misstep, and she still doesn't quite believe that things have changed."

Ursa sighed tiredly and nodded. "I had come to many of the same conclusions, my son. That doesn't make it any easier."
"No, it doesn't... but she wouldn't be Azula if she made things easy, would she?" Zuko laughed.
"Should we go meet her and welcome her home?"

Ursa nodded. "We should."

"Ugh. I can't believe it's already December. I'm rather looking forward to the holiday break." Hermione admitted.

"You are? I'm surprised. You love doing schoolwork." Neville said in surprise.

"I enjoy learning, which isn't quite the same thing. I need a break though. I'm doing so much homework my poor hand is going to end up permanently disfigured at this rate. I'll still be working over the break, of course, but I'll be doing different things."

"It won't be all work. We're having another holiday party at New Years, and you'll all be getting the first screening of Azula's movie too." Harry reminded her.

"Plus there'll be the intern party to look forward to. I can't wait." Hermione agreed.

"What will the rest of you be doing?" Parvati wondered.

"I'll be having Christmas dinner at Won-Won's house!" Lavender squealed before clamping on to Ron's arm adoringly. Hermione stiffened slightly but made no other reaction. "Right, Won-Won?" Lavender cooed in a cutesy voice.

"Right you are, baby."

The rest of them sighed, or grimaced, as their personalities dictated when Ron and Lavender began making out. It was an all too common sight for all of them these days. It seemed to be all they did--make out and call each other cutsey names.

"Thank goodness tomorrow is Hogsmeade. I really need to get out of the castle." Hermione sighed.

"Is Aang coming by again?" Harry asked curiously.

Ron's eyes snapped open for a moment before closing again.

"He's supposed to be."

Ron and Lavender began groaning and making slurping sounds.

"Okay. I'm going outside." Parvati announced.

"I'll come with you." Hermione was quick to agree with a shudder. The boys jumped to their feet and hurried after them. "Don't leave us here with them!"

It took Ron and Lavender awhile to realize they were now alone. They both looked around at the empty common room and then at each other for an explanation.

"I guess our love was too overwhelming. I didn't even hear them go." Lavender giggled.

"Yeah..." Ron muttered. His eyes fell on the stairs leading up to the boys' dorms and he grinned.
"You know, baby, we're all alone…what do you say we take things to the next level?"

"You mean you want to…"

"Shag like rabbits, yeah."

"I was going to say make love."

"Yeah that."

"Well, I don't know…I mean, it's a big decision"

"Come on, baby, I'll take real good care of you."

"Well…I am going to meet your parents in just a few weeks. We're practically married, aren't we?"

Ron's grin froze on his face for an instant. "Uh, yeah" he croaked.

"Oh, Won-Won! I love you too!"

"Yeah, baby, that."

Ron agreed as he tried to get her moving towards his dorm room, and more importantly his bed.

It was slow going up the stairs since they were all over each other. They hadn't even gotten halfway up when something Ron had overlooked bit them in the ass.

"AAAAAH!"

The stairs turned to a slide and a loud klaxon alarm sounded through the room, deafening them both. They landed in a heap at the bottom of the staircase still wrapped around each other.

"RON! Get your hand out of my shirt! McGonagall's gonna be here any minute!"

"Get your hand out of my pants first! Bloody Ginny! She's not even here and she's in the way of me getting laid! I'm gonna kill her when I see her again!"

"MR. WEASLEY! MISS BROWN! GET UP OFF THE FLOOR AND MAKE YOURSELVES PRESENTABLE AT ONCE! WHY IN ALL MY YEARS…!"

Ron and Lavender both froze and stared up at McGonagall in horror.

"I'll help you get him back." Parvati told Hermione once they were out on the grounds.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ron. I'll help you get him back."

"I don't want him back."

"Please. You think I haven't seen how hard you've been working to seem unaffected, or how you've been silencing your bed each night so you don't have to hear Lav nattering on about him for hours?"

"I'll admit there's still… I thought Ron was going to be the one, but that's all over now. Why are
you trying to break them up anyway? Lavender is your best friend."

"And that isn't Lav. It's some horny pod person that's taken her place. I've pretty much lost my best friend because she's so tied up in that doofus she has no time for or interest in anything else. We barely talk anymore, and when we do it's two hours of "Won-Won is so awesome" before bedtime. We're supposed to be designing for that boutique and making our own clothing line. She hasn't done any of it because she's too busy cleaning doofus' tonsils! She wasn't like this with Seamus. They'd do their thing and then we'd hang out and he'd hang out with Dean and sometimes the four of us would hang out together. This... this is terrible and I want it to go away so I can have my friend back, but I can't see it working if you won't steal him back. It's for her sake too. He's just using her, albeit with her willing cooperation. The minute he gets what he wants from her he's probably going to drop her like a hot potato... and then where will she be? She'll be devastated. I want them broken up before she goes too far."

"You're really worried about this." Hermione realized.

"Of course I am! She's completely besotted and she's not thinking clearly. She's already gone further with some than I think entirely proper, but she's always been careful to draw a line before. Wizarding Britain in the times we grew up in wasn't as strict as India, but there is still a certain expectation of purity before marriage. My family is very traditional, and a lot of that rubbed off on my sister and I even with having grown up there. We've both been very careful to set very firm boundaries in our time here so that no stain of dishonor would touch ourselves or our families. Lavender has had much looser boundaries than I would have ever considered, but she has still had some. I worry that she won't think of consequences and she'll find herself cast aside, dishonored, and used. As it stands, after the spectacle she's made of herself so far this year a lot of people will already be looking at her like a toy rather than a future bride should she and Ron break up. That can be salvaged and rectified so long as she's still mostly pure. If she's not though... Do you think I want to see her drop out of school trying to raise a child she's not ready for, stuck with a marriage of necessity to a man who doesn't truly care about her or respect her? Of course I'm worried about it!"

"When you put it like that... now I'm worried too. It doesn't mean I'll try to steal Ron back though."

"I shouldn't have asked it of you."

Both girls sighed as they continued walking.

"Hi everyone!"

"Hi Aang! Oh, hey! Katara, Toph and Azula are here too! Welcome!" Neville replied cheerfully. Beside him Hannah waved her own greetings.

As the girls were climbing down from Appa, Aang spotted Hermione and waved, then flitted over to land next to her. She greeted him cheerfully and they were soon chattering away like old friends. Katara glanced around to see where he'd gone, spotted him happily chattering with another girl and blanched.

"Doesn't feel so good from this end, eh, Sugarqueen?" Toph sighed.
"I explained all that! I wasn't jerking him around." Katara said sadly.

"The war isn't over until it's been won. Knock it off with the quitter's attitude." Azula ordered, before marching over to where Hermione and Aang were chatting.

"Avatar, I see you have another friend. I believe we've met before, you're Hermy-knee. You're one of the lackeys from the island."

"Hermione, and yes, I'm an intern, not a lackey as such. I'm in training while I'm still in school to one day take a permanent job with the company, though I don't know yet which division I'll be part of. I understand your movie should be premiering soon. We interns usually get an early screening. I've heard good things so far. I'm quite looking forward to seeing the finished product."

"It is quite magnificent, if I do say so myself." Azula agreed without a trace of embarrassment.

"Will you be making more movies? I know Harry was hoping you'd maybe open your own production company in Fire Nation at some point."

Azula blinked. Up until now she'd still had tentative plans to conquer and rule the movie division here…but her own? For some reason that had honestly never occurred to her.

"My own production company?" she repeated.

"It would be wonderful if you did decide to. Then, both our studios could make movies, and we could buy yours to show at our theaters here, and your country could buy ours and show them there, along with your own of course. It would not only mean new job markets for Fire nation, but it would effectively double the amount of available movies once both studios are in action."

"My own production company." she said again, her mind already racing and making lists and tentative plans. "Yes… that could be just the thing." Azula wandered off, lost in thought. She had quite forgotten that she'd come over to disrupt Aang's date.

Aang and Hermione watched her go and traded an amused grin. Aang waved to Katara and Toph.

"We'll see you in a bit, okay?" he called. He and Hermione wandered off, still chatting. Toph winced as Katara's whole body seemed to flinch.

"Come on, Sugarqueen. I see Giggles and Padfoot over there chatting with Blue."

"I've lost him for good this time, haven't I?"

"I don't know Sugarqueen. I really don't. It's not over till one of you actually gets married…so there's still hope."

"I might have to set it up in the colonies, rather than Fire Nation proper. There really isn't a lot of space for new construction." Azula mused.

The five of them had relocated to the Three Broomsticks and ordered food, while Aang and Hermione had wandered off elsewhere.

"Are there any factory complexes that used to be used for the war effort that aren't in use now? With some work to convert the spaces for new use, something like that might be an ideal starting point." Tom pointed out. "What's more, it would mean new jobs in the area to take the place of
whatever war related jobs used to be there, which would be a boon for your economy."

"That's true, isn't it? I'll have to ask Zuzu if he knows of any such places." Azula nodded.

"So, you're really gonna do this thing, huh? Open your own movie studio?" Toph asked curiously.

"Yes. I think I am…though now I wonder how much I can get Zuzu to front me for start-up costs. He always seems to be fretting about the budget…"

"If he doesn't think he can swing it, I'm sure we could work out something." Harry offered.

"Like what?"

"New World Enterprises could help fund the studio to start with, and then you could buy out our share in time when you start making a profit. Also, don't forget you'll be making a commission on the movie you've already made when it opens. Since we started the one theater to show movies, it's proven popular enough that we've been able to set up a few more in the other provinces, and even one near Wan Shi Tong's library. Love among the Dragons will be opening to a very large audience, so I'm sure we'll all make a nice bit on it. You can take your profits from that to help defray some of the start-up costs as well."

"Yes… that could work. How much money are we talking about?"

"We won't know till it's finished its run and we see how much we've made, but I'm expecting it to be a nice little sum."

"That's what I'll do then. Once we've seen the premier, I'll head back to Fire Nation with Zuzu and the others and start scouting locations for the studio and get some cost projections. I've gotten plenty of ideas for further movies during my travels this last month with the avatar."

"Really? If you want to continue making movies with us until your own studio is ready to open its door, you would be quite welcome. I've gotten nothing but good reports of your time with us. Everyone was quite impressed with your professionalism and work ethic. Personally, I think the film crew is hoping for another chance for a location shoot as well. I believe all we have on the agenda at the moment is the last part of the Nightfall trilogy now that we've finished filming all the puppet shows our school has done to date."

"I will certainly consider it." Azula said graciously.

"Toph? Katara? You've both been rather quiet. What have you been up to lately?" Tom wondered.

"Just traveling around with Twinkles, being a national ambassador for world peace…or whatever it was we were doing." Toph shrugged. "It's been nice, traveling again. I've missed it. I mean, don't get me wrong, I actually had a lot of fun living with the airbenders and then later in Fire Nation, but I like going new places too. I'll probably just stick with Twinkles for a while longer."

"Katara?"

Katara looked up, startled, when her name was called and realized everyone was looking at her. She'd barely eaten or spoken since they'd sat down. She'd been too lost in thought. "Oh, sorry. You said something?"

"I asked what you've been up to lately."

"Oh. Traveling with Aang, helping Toph fight occasional bandits and Azula to scout good locations
for her next movie. It's been nice. As much as I enjoyed being home, I have to admit part of me kind of missed traveling around. It's been fun, really…well, except when we stopped at the air temples." she admitted glumly.

"Airbenders still holding a grudge, huh?" Tom asked wryly.

Katara grimaced. Apparently everyone had known they were holding a grudge but her.

"Yeah, you could say that." she agreed, sighing.

"What are you doing, Katara?" Harry asked quietly. "If you're going to make another play for Aang, you'd better be really certain it's what you want."

Katara started to get angry. "Does everyone think I'm just some horrible, two-timing monster that gets some sort of joy from playing with Aang's heart?" she demanded.

Harry sighed, reached across and grabbed her hand which was clenched in a fist on the table.

"I don't think you're a monster, geez. I think your respective ages and the timing of things were unfortunate. I even told Aang as much when we were all in Gaipan with the freedom fighters."

"Yeah, I remember that. We were talking about the sixth arrow and where baby airbenders came from." Toph agreed.

She and Harry grinned at each other and said in unison "the western air temple" and started laughing, Tom snorted and started laughing as well.

When they'd all calmed down, Harry continued.

"I told him then that you weren't thinking of him like that, because at the time he was still a child and you were already nearly a woman and you were looking for different things. I think, with the exception of Ba Sing Se that you really didn't do anything wrong, the timing of things was just unfortunate, and you two tried a relationship before the time was right. The thing is, Katara, if you're really going to pursue this, you have to really think about what it means. He and Appa can't really live long in the south pole, not without straining all your resources, and he's got a whole fledgling colony of airbenders he's responsible for on top of being the avatar. You're going to have to face the same sort of choice Sokka was facing before you all put in that garden. You're going to have to decide if being with Aang is important enough to you that you can handle leaving the south pole, perhaps for good--barring whatever visits the two of you make. You have to decide if you're certain enough of things this time around to make a real go of it. Last but not least, you're going to have to prove yourself to the airbenders, and frankly to Aang as well. You didn't do anything wrong really, but he was still hurt and he was left a bit bruised by what seemed to him to be an endless on-again off-again love affair. You're going to have to work past that."

"Then there's Hermione to consider." Tom reminded her. "I don't know whether they're actually romantically involved or not or if they're just friends that could become something more. Most of the time you've been searching high and low for someone else, he's been sitting off to the side and quietly pining. You've never actually had to compete for his affections before."

"He's right, you know." Toph nodded. "All this time you always knew he was there in reserve if things didn't work out with Haru, with Jet, with Hahn… He and Curly seem to have really hit it off. He's not just going to be standing around waiting just because you've decided you want to try again."

Katara frowned and stared pensively at the table. At a table a short distance behind them, Susan
Bones and her mother looked at Katara's bent head, then traded a look before gathering their things, as well as Sue's brother and new little sister, to leave.

Azula watched them go and then smirked at Harry and Tom. Operation: win over the airbenders was in motion. Time would tell if it did any good.

"Do you mind if we stop in the bookstore again? It's just...I wrote book, and it should be in the stores now. I wanted to see it there on the shelves." Hermione asked.

"Wow. You wrote a whole book? What's it about?" Aang asked curiously.

"My time as an intern with the company, all the interns, really, not just me. We were all orphaned when we came here." Hermione explained. "All of us had parents that didn't have the same kind of powers we did. Truthfully, I don't know how many of our parents were given the choice to come along like we did. I would think at least some of them might have had the option but chose to stay behind. I know Harry's aunt and cousin were given the choice. Mr. Creevey, and Mrs. Bones, and Mr. Filch, and Mrs. Figg as well. I prefer thinking that they weren't given the option. It hurts less than accepting that they might have been able to come and chose not to." she admitted. "So there we were, newly orphaned, no homes or families to go to. We all owe Harry and the company a lot. They gave us a home, and a purpose and a safety net to hold on to while we found our footing. We've become each other's new family since we've been here, and all living at headquarters."

She gave a watery smile when she spotted her book on a display stand just inside the door of the bookstore and picked one up with a feeling of almost gleeful reverence. She ran her hand across the cover and inhaled the new book smell, letting out a content sigh as she did so.

"We've talked about setting up our own village and all of us adopting a new name and establishing ourselves as a clan in our own right. I'll admit I'm a little torn myself. On the one hand, I like the idea a lot...but there's part of me that wants to hold on to that last bit of my roots. Of course, as a woman I'll be expected to change my name anyway when I marry, unless I hyphenate it...." she trailed off and shook off her extraneous thoughts. "Dan and Toby, they're two of the interns, will be graduating this year. They and a couple of the other boys did a ceremony over the summer while we were building the railway to declare themselves blood brothers. I think they at least will be doing it even if none of the rest of us choose to join them. I had originally just planned to move into one of the vacant houses in the employee village once I graduated...but I'm really considering joining the others. I like the idea of having a family again." she continued.

She flipped through the pages of the book and laughed slightly.

"What's funny?"

"We've been here for a while now, and yet it still catches me by surprise sometimes. Look at this." she held open the book for him to look at.

"Yeah?"

"You can read it, right?"

"Well...sure. I do know how to read." Aang asserted, a bit stung.

"Before we came here you wouldn't have been able to. All of us" she threw out her arm as though to encompass the entirety of the wizarding world "Lived in different countries all over the world, and each of us had our own language and our own writing system. When we came here, all of our
books, everything, changed to the language here, and we all speak the language as though we always have. It was the strangest thing, really. When we were studying for our OWLs after the move, all our textbooks were like this, and it really only phased us for a moment, because we could all read it as easily as our native language. Our teachers write in the script of this world on the board, and when grading our papers, everything we donated to Wan Shi Tong’s library can easily be read by anyone in this world. The only things that still retain the languages of the old world are the lexicons and dictionaries of that language, and they’re half in whatever language of the old world, half in the language of the new world.” she explained.

"Wow. Weird. It does make things simpler though, you must admit." Aang laughed with some disbelief.

"Yes, it's made meetings at the Confederacy Council and trade negotiations much easier with everyone speaking the same language. It still catches me off guard now and then."

She purchased the book and gave it to Aang with a grin as they exited the store.

"For me?"

"Yes. I was given a copy by the publishing house when they bought it, and a copy was set aside for Wan Shi Tong's library as well. I believe all the publishing houses have been leaving a copy of everything new they print in a little building away from the publishing house itself for the kitsune spirits to find and carry off."

"Wow, thanks. I'll be sure to read it."

"Are you hungry?"

"A little…but um…"

"Don't worry. Madame Rosmerta has started adding some vegetarian options to her menu since all of you have been coming by to visit. Just look for the airbender swirl next to the item, and you'll know it's a meatless option." Hermione assured him.

"Really? In that case sure! My treat."

"Oh you don't have to…"

"No, really. You paid for everything last time, and you just bought me a present. It's the least I can do."

"I thought your people really didn't have money though."

"We never valued it the way the other nations did, but we traded and sold stuff and all and so always had a bit on hand. It was useful when you had to travel and deal with other nations. We've been getting an income from those weird ball things you all put on our towers, and from the fruits and stuff you've all been taking from the temples, and from selling all of Arabella's cats, oh! And the bison fur too before we started processing it ourselves. I also found the treasuries were still there at all the temples. There wasn't a huge amount in any of them-- it was just a box on a shelf in the senior monk's room with a mix of coins from all the nations. I don't know if anyone went looking for such a thing, but they didn't find it because it wasn't in a safe or a locked room, it was just a plain, small box on a shelf covered in dust. So really, don't worry about it, I can cover a meal for the two of us without it being a problem."

"In that case, thank you. That would be nice." Hermione smiled.
"Ah. Exams, always such a joy. Glad that's over with." Seamus groaned, stretching.

"I think we all need a break. It'll be good to be home." Neville agreed, digging into his breakfast.

"Don't forget my gallery show." Dean reminded everyone. "I expect to see you all there. Especially you, Harry. I'm hoping you'll mention offhand how you already have a few of my pieces while browsing, and drum up some sales for me."

"I've been doing that. In fact, princess Azula wants to go to your show. She likes my summer house. Her brother and his wife, their mum and their uncle should all be in town for the premier of her movie. I can see if any of the rest of them want to swing by."

"Blimey! That'd be something, have some foreign king and queen at my first gallery show." Dean laughed, somewhat amazed.

"Mornin'" Ron groaned, settling in to his seat and loading up his plate.

"Looking a bit scruffy there, mate." Seamus noted.

Ron flushed when he noted everyone was looking at the array of red hairs decorating his chin, cheeks and upper lip.

"Thought I'd try something different, is all."

"You're growing a beard?" Parvati said thoughtfully. "How interesting."

"Nothing weird about it. Sometimes a bloke just wants to be more manly." Ron muttered. "And some women dig a fellow with a beard."

"I noticed Aang's has come in pretty good since the summer when he started growing it. It's a good look for him. He has such a baby face otherwise." Harry laughed.

Lavender, who was busily applying some lip gloss, frowned and then glanced at Hermione, and then Ron suspiciously.

"I'm just as happy to be clean-shaven myself. I thought about growing a beard, but after a few days I just found it too itchy, so I changed my mind." Neville admitted.

"Mine grows in so sparse it just looks like I have dirt on my face, so I never really bothered trying." Harry complained, sticking his tongue out when the rest of the boys snickered.

"Guess you're just out-manned. Too bad, mate." Ron snickered, running his hand over his bristles tauntingly.

"Don't listen to him. Some women prefer a clean-shaven man anyway. Myself, I've never really cared for beards." Hermione said absently as she finished her breakfast and prepared to go get her things for the trip home.

"I like your beard, Won-Won." Lavender assured him, rubbing her hand across his cheek.

"Yeah, thanks baby." Ron answered back without any real enthusiasm.
Lavender bit her lip and looked at Ron uncertainly as the two of them left to go get their own packing done.

"Damn, man, what the hell happened to you?" Neville said in shock when they were most of the way home. Hannah, Harry, Hermione and Luna glanced up and winced at the sight of Ron's face, half of which was bright red and slightly swollen.

Ron glowered, then winced as his face throbbed and sunk down into the empty seat in the compartment, looking miserable.

"Lavender happened, that's what. Barmy bint."

"What did you do?" Hermione demanded.

"I didn't do nothing. She got mad that I shaved, and next thing I know she's yelling, then she hauls off and belts me, bursts into tears and storms off. Mad, right?"

"Why did you shave? I thought you were all set to grow a beard." Harry asked, though he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

Ron's ears started turning a bit red, and he didn't look at any of them when he replied.

"It's like I told her, I was thinking about it and realized it was a bad time for it. Mum's mental sometimes. She was always following Bill around the house with scissors, trying to cut his hair, even though he told her he liked it like that. I don't want to be dodging mum with a straight razor all holiday is all. Lav said I was lying or something. Like I said, barmy."

He lightly touched at the red mark on his face and winced again.

"Hang on. I may have something for that." Hermione huffed, before levitating her trunk down to dig around in it.

"I guess Lavender won't be visiting your family for Yule then?" Hannah asked.

"Looks that way." Ron shrugged.

"Too bad, man. Bad time for it." Neville said sympathetically.

"Prolly just as well. She was talking about us getting married and stuff."

"You don't need to get married, do you?" Hannah demanded sharply.

"No." Ron muttered, slumping in his seat. "Stupid Ginny."

"Thank goodness for small favors." Neville muttered in relief.

"You cad." Hannah added with a sniff.

Chapter End Notes
We are now at the end of what I already had written. Updates from this point on will be slower, I'm sorry to say, as I actually need to write the chapters, not just edit them.

For everyone who's been with me thus far, Thank you!

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated.
A night at the movies

Chapter Summary

Zuko and Mai come for a visit, Azula's movie premiers, Katara tries to win Aang back.

"We're making our final approach to the Confederacy of Magic, m'Lord."

"Thank you." Zuko nodded to the sailor, who bowed and vanished back out of the dining room where the royal family was currently taking its ease. "Anyone want to come with me to take a look?" Zuko asked as he rose.

"I will" Mai announced. She stood and glanced at her son, Lu Ten--named for Iroh's lost son--but Ursa smiled at her. "Go ahead dear. I'll keep an eye on him. It's a bit chillier than I care for up on deck."

Iroh decided to stay put as well. He had not only recently been to the Confederacy, but he also had a nice cup of hot tea and he was warm and comfortable where he was.

The Fire Lord and Lady made their way to the bow of the ship, wincing a bit at the blustery air dotted with sea spray. Mai shivered and drew her cloak tighter, and glared half-heartedly at Zuko who simply raised his body temperature slightly. Zuko shrugged at his wife sheepishly. "Sorry. Comes with the firebender package."

"Must be nice. On days like this at least." she grumbled, only to gasp in surprise when she glanced at the peninsula. It was night, and large swaths of what she could see was dotted with lights, like someone had scattered a basketful of stars across it. "That whole peninsula used to be empty, didn't it? Are those all houses?"

"Villages." Zuko disagreed.

"Just how many people did they bring with them?" Mai demanded, feeling somewhat faint.

"Fewer than Fire Nation or Earth Kingdom, more than the Water Tribes or Air Nomads. That's what they told me when I asked."

"Left themselves quite a bit of leeway, didn't they?" she huffed. "The islands are all lit up too."

"From what Azula was telling me, there's a village of employees for Harry's company and a fishing village on that one. The one we're headed towards has Harry's company, his summer house and a resort town run by the company. The next island has some plantations run by the company, a fishing village, and the movie studio Azula was working at."

Mai snorted in amusement. "And Azula was getting all bent out of shape that she'd be demeaning herself if she went to greet a 'group of peasants'. One of those peasants at least seems to be doing pretty well for himself."

Zuko snickered as well. "Actually, I think all of them are part owners of the company. Harry just started it and is the main shareholder." he explained. "Even without the company though, most of them are either domain lords or heirs to domains, and a few of them were Harry and Tom's relatives"
to boot. I know they both already sit on their local government council that governs their province, and that council elects representatives for the council that governs the peninsula as a whole."

Mai laughed again. "Poor Azula. I wonder if she's wised up yet?"

"She was living here on and off for several weeks at least. I'm just glad she didn't decide to conquer the place for her own. That would have been awkward."

"Did you forget already that she still is...just not in the way we'd normally expect her to do so?"

Zuko cringed as Mai straightened and crossed her arms and did her best Azula impression.

"When I have found a woman worthy enough to stand beside me, I will wed her in the Confederacy of Magic, as they are sensible about such things and don't go around keeping it a secret. In a few years or so, I will allow Harry and his lover to spawn progeny upon me and my chosen. They will need an heir for the company and their holdings, and I for my globe-spanning movie empire! Together, we and our children will remake the world in our image and it will be glorious! HA HA HA HA HA!"

"Please don't remind me." Zuko groaned. "Right at the dinner table. I thought poor uncle was going to choke."

"Him and Katara." Mai snickered. "I was rather surprised by your mother's reaction. She just sat there and sort of blinked a few times, and then just said 'that's nice dear'" Mai admitted.

"Mother wasn't born to the aristocracy remember. Her parents were herbalists, and she was an actress. Apparently that sort of thing is more common among actors than in the general populace."

"How did that even end up happening? Your father doesn't strike me as the 'fall in love with an actress' sort."

"He wasn't, and he didn't. He and my grandfather went looking for her because she's the granddaughter of avatar Roku. There was a prophecy that great power would arise when Sozin and Roku's lines merged. She wasn't really given any choice in the matter."

"Well...they weren't wrong. Azula has always been a prodigy, and she's still the only firebender I've ever seen that naturally produces blue flames without any powders or tricks or anything. And you, once you got rid of your self-doubts, proved to be just as skilled. Still...poor Ursa."

"You don't know the half of it. She had just gotten engaged the day my father and grandfather showed up and was headed home to tell her parents, and she ended up having to leave with them and never saw the guy again. Once the wedding was over, she wasn't allowed to see or contact her parents again. The night she fled, she said she was headed back to her old village to see her parents and check on them. She ran into someone she knew before she got that far and they told her that her parents had died years before and she never knew. She fled to the Valley of Forgetfulness. The spirit there takes your sorrows away and makes your previous life seem distant and unimportant. There was a lot of folks there who were traumatized by the war who went there to get away from their nightmares."

"Why did she come back? And how?" Mai asked, fascinated.

"I kind of wonder if it was all the dancing. From what she told me, the timing would have been right. She said it was like she woke up one day and felt she had to leave the valley. She was surprised to realize how much time had passed. She started making discreet inquiries from people
she could trust and found out I'd been banished three years prior and Azula, uncle and the rest of you had recently been thrown in prison. Dad promised her if he got what he wanted that Azula and I would be safe and well. When she realized we weren't she started making her way back to the capitol to confront him."

Mai shivered and thought about her infant son back in the ship, her husband and sister-in-law, both still so scarred, her mother-in-law who was so sad beneath her outer serenity, uncle Iroh… So many people all over Fire Nation Ozai had hurt, but his own family most of all.

"I'm glad he's gone. I'm glad Lu Ten will be able to grow up out of the shadow of his madness and we can all breathe again."

"Most days, so am I."

"Only most?"

"There's still a very small part of me that's a little kid wondering why daddy didn't love him. Probably always will be." Zuko admitted very quietly.

Mai wrapped herself around him and held on tightly. After a few minutes they separated.

"Let's go back below. I have a sudden urge to hold my son." Zuko admitted.

"That sounds like a good idea." Mai agreed.

It was rather late by the time they pulled alongside the island, but Aang showed up to ferry them across nonetheless.

"Hi everyone! Glad you could make it! It's always such a bummer when we get together and you two aren't there." he said cheerfully as he floated down off Appa's head and landed in front of Mai, who was holding Lu Ten. He immediately began making faces and beamed when the baby waved his arms and started babbling at him.

"We can head over whenever you're ready. Harry said if you want to give the sailors shore leave or something, rather than just leave them sitting on the ship till you're all ready to leave, that they can go over to the resort if they want. There's a wharf on the other side there with a big archway that says "Welcome to Paradise Island". That's the visitor entrance where the ferries from the mainland come in. If they'd rather visit the mainland, if they just head straight across there's a wharf there where the ferries leave from."

"Did you get all that, captain?" Zuko asked.

"Yes, I'll let the men know. Your luggage is being loaded now and will be along shortly."

"Thank you, captain. Do enjoy your stay. We'll be returning in about a week if you need to move elsewhere."

"Very good m'lord."

Azula met them on the covered walkway surrounding the house. She was dressed in loose-fitting red pajamas and had a black robe with a flame motif on the cuffs and hem. She was barefoot, not
wearing make-up and her hair was down and loose, as well as slightly damp as if she'd just recently returned from the bath.

"Greetings familial type persons. Here, give me your progeny. You need to remove your footwear before entering the domicile." she ordered. She spotted a river trawler making for the dock down below. "Tilly? Could you greet the porters and take everyone's luggage to their rooms?"

"Oh, certainly Missy Princess. Welcome, guests. I is being Tilly. Please make yourselves at home. I will bring food and drinks once I has gotten yous bags." the small green creature that had suddenly appeared told them all in her squeaky voice before vanishing once more.

The new arrivals stared at the now-empty space, traded a look, shrugged, and started taking off their shoes.

Harry showed up a moment later. He was similarly casual and damp, also barefooted, though he was wearing plaid pajama pants and a t-shirt and had a plain grey robe.

"Hello everyone!" Sorry I missed your arrival. I was just getting out of the bath. Oh! Is that the baby!" he greeted them all cheerfully before promptly ignoring all of them in favor of the baby Azula was holding.

"It is not "the baby", this is Lu Ten, crown prince of Fire Nation!" Azula sniffed haughtily.

"And what cute widdle cwown pwince he is! Yes he is!"

"Don't speak to him in that stupid voice! He won't learn proper enunciation!"

"Relax, would you? Look at that sharp, discerning gaze. He'll be just fine."

Azula looked down at the baby doubtfully. He didn't look particularly sharp or discerning to her--just vaguely sleepy and somewhat bemused by his present company.

"No more stupid voices, and use proper diction!" she repeated grumpily. She began to look suspicious when Harry grinned at her and threw a companionable arm across her shoulders.

"Aww…wook how much Auntie Azula wuvs you!" he cooed, then laughed when she elbowed him in the ribs and stalked off into the house with the baby.

Zuko, Mai, Iroh and Ursa just stood there bemused.

"You do like to live dangerously." Zuko sighed, before chuckling as they followed him into the house.

They'd spent a leisurely day wandering headquarters, the resort and the movie studio the next day, then had headed inland towards Charming, Fleur and Bill's village, to go to Dean's show.

Zuko and Mai didn't really seem to be art lovers, though they wandered and looked at everything and let the baby look around as well. Iroh was a lover of the arts, as was Ursa. They both spent a while examining each piece and both spent some time chatting with Dean. Katara seemed rather fascinated, as did Aang. Toph liked the sculptures and bas-reliefs since she could "see" them, but the paintings and such were just squares on the wall to her, so the whole show was a bit of a mixed bag for her.
Harry noted with interest that she'd gotten distracted when a pretty dark-skinned girl with elaborately braided hair had sidled up to Azula soon after their arrival and began chatting her up. Toph had sauntered over soon after and planted herself in their midst until the girl went away, and they spent the remainder of the show together.

"Harry, man, I can't thank you enough. I'd only sold two pieces before you all arrived. When it started making the rounds that a foreign royal family had come to see the show, I suddenly sold a whole bunch." Dean whispered to him gleefully.

"What are friends for?" Harry shrugged, snagging a flute of champagne for them both while Tom snagged his own. They grinned at each other and clinked their glasses.

"You two going to the Ministry ball tomorrow?"

"We will, and we'll be bringing all our guests with us." Tom agreed.

"Yeah. I feel kind of bad. Zuko and Mai were kind of hoping to have a quiet visit with friends, but too many people heard they were coming, so they're expected to hobnob there and at the Confederacy ball at New Years'. I apologized profusely, but they both just sighed and said it came with the territory." Harry added.

"Ah. Yeah, that would kind of suck. Still, the Ministry ball is usually pretty low-key. They'll probably have fun."

"I hope so."

"So…that princess…"

"Is a lesbian, it seems." Tom answered dryly.

"Ah."

"What about Tracy?" Harry wondered. "Did you two end things?"

"Nah, we're fine. Not for me, Blaise. He was asking me what I knew about her earlier. So is the earth girl her girlfriend?"

"I'm beginning to think she will be soon if she has any say in things." Tom noted. Beside him Harry just nodded.

"Is the princess' mom single?"

"She's a widow. Really? Ursa?"

"Blaise was eyeing her up too." Dean nodded, sighing.

"Well…she might feel weird, she might feel flattered… the thing is though, Zuko would probably kill him no matter how she took it."

"I'll give him the heads up. He's such a weird guy, that might just make him more interested."

"Wish him luck." Tom snickered.

"Up ahead is Pleasantville. The big house up over there is my godfather's house. I normally live
here during the breaks from school. We'll be staying here tonight as it's not far from the movie theatre. The premier is tomorrow. It's also fairly close to the ministry, and we'll all be attending a ball there the day after. For the next few days we can do whatever you want until the Confederacy Council ball on New Year's eve. We can just hang out, or go out and look around, whatever. We'll let all of you decide. Sound good?" Harry explained.

"Sounds great!" Aang enthused. He always enjoyed going new places and meeting new people.

"Are these balls going to be fancy? I don't really…" Katara spoke up hesitantly.

"No worries. Anyone who wants or needs to, we can get you something before the ball."

"Put me down too then." Toph grumbled.

"I packed your formal robes."

"Put me down too then." Toph grumbled.

"I packed your formal robes." Ursa told Azula. "And the rest of us have ours as well…though they're back with our luggage…"

"They were sent ahead while we were at the gallery. Everything should be in your rooms, waiting." Tom assured her.

"Oh. Good. One less worry." Azula nodded indifferently.

"Yes, good." Katara agreed cheerfully. She enjoyed dressing up and looking pretty, but more than that, she needed something to help dissolve the wall that seemed to be between her and Aang. They'd traveled together for a few weeks, spent a few days at Harry's house, wandered the art gallery together… He'd been friendly, he'd been cheerful, and in some ways nothing seemed different, but it was. There was a distance between them that never used to be there before and she didn't know how to bridge it. She'd tried on several occasions to bring up maybe trying again in a roundabout manner, but either he was missing her hints or he was being deliberately obtuse. She honestly didn't know which it was. Well, she had a plan now. There were two balls coming up. She was going to dress to impress and knock his socks off. He'd remember that he'd once dreamed only of her and the two of them sharing a life together. They could try again and do it right this time. She sighed to herself happily and got lost in daydreams.

"Let's get a move on! The movie will be starting soon! We still have to get to the theatre!" Harry called up the stairs.

"Just a second!"

"Coming!"

Down below, Azula was pacing and looking tense. She had complete faith in her movie, of course…but other people couldn't always be counted out to recognize excellence and perfection when they saw it.

Toph finally got annoyed by it and snagged the back of her dress and yanked her into the armchair she was already sitting in. The chair though oversized, wasn't quite big enough for them to sit side by side, so Azula ended up half sprawled across Toph's lap.

"Relax, Blue. Padfoot talked to some folks that saw an early screening already and they loved it. You did good work, you know it, just trust in that."

"I wasn't worried." Azula insisted. "The very idea is ludicrous."
"Sure…" Toph said mockingly as she patted her knee. "What's taking so long anyway?"

"Mai and Zuko have a baby to get ready and Adeline and Sirius have a toddler. They like to squirm out of their clothes at that age, or mess their diaper just when you've finished getting them dressed, or they spit up…. It's always something. They'll be along." Tom assured her, sounding equally bored.

"Say, where's Katara at?" Aang wondered, realizing the water tribe girl was also missing.

"She's not down yet either."

"I think she's coming now." Toph offered.

"Oh good." Aang said distractedly as he went back to his book.

Katara made her way down the stairs with sensuous grace. She'd taken special care with her appearance. The dress she wore was a simple one, of dark blue silk that flowed like water. It clung just enough in the right places to hint at what was beneath without being too in your face about it. Her eyes seemed larger and more liquid and her lips fuller and poutier thanks to a very subtle application of makeup. She'd left her hair loose to fall in a riot of curls about her arms and shoulders. She stepped elegantly off the staircase, eyes demurely down and undulated into the parlor, eyes on Aang's feet so she'd know where to aim. She glanced up, coyly, as she reached the door, ready to drink in the gobsmacked expression he always wore when she'd gone the extra distance…and froze.

What greeted her was not the stunned face of her would-be lover, but the face of her rival, leaning on her hand and staring dreamily out into the distance on the back of the book Aang was reading. She took two angry steps forward, fingers already twitching and ready to shred the photograph with shards of ice, when Azula's warm hand snapped out and snagged her wrist and yanked her till she was perched uncomfortably on the arm of the big chair she and Toph were sharing for some reason.

Azula kept her voice pitched low so only the two girls would hear her.

"Keep your eye on the prize, dearie. If you shred the girl's face, whether in person or in a picture, it's all over. Just keep doing what you were doing, but make sure he's paying attention next time."

"Wanton woman." Toph added her own two cents.

"I am not!" Katara hissed back.

"Can't fool me, Sugarqueen. Your sixth arrow is doing the rumba and you're all primed up to ride the Aang express, and don't care who knows it. You might as well have just put a sign around your neck saying 'take me now'."

Katara sputtered a bit, but was saved from answering when the rest arrived, children in tow, apologizing for how long they'd taken. Katara swept off in a flurry of silk, following the others out the door. Azula and Toph huffed and followed after her. She never saw how Aang froze for just a second upon seeing her, and climbed to his feet in a daze. Tom and Harry, however, did.

"Aang, you're killing me here. You both are." Harry sighed.

"It's not… She's been dropping hints that she wants to get back together, and so far I've pretended I
didn't understand what she was talking about. A lot of people have been telling me that I should look for someone that fits and who'll stand by me... but Katara is still Katara, and it's been really nice these last few weeks having her around again... I just don't think I could handle it if she pulls the same stuff on me again. In some ways I trust her more than anyone almost...but in other ways I realize I don't trust her at all."

"Then don't rush into anything, please." Harry begged.

"I'm not planning to." Aang assured him.

"We should get going." Tom reminded them.

Harry pulled his phone and dialed the theatre manager as they started for the door.

"It's Harry. I'm enroute with the director, the Fire Nation royal family and the avatar. Just watch for the flying white bison landing outside."

"We'll be ready."

"Uh...wow. What's going on down there?" Sirius asked, bewildered.

"Movie premier." Harry replied.

"Were they all like this?" Adeline asked curiously.

"They've gotten bigger as more movies have come out. People have started coming out to spot the actors, director, the whole nine yards. I know Witch Weekly ran a couple of articles on Padma and her book and the movies. The puppeteer brigade got a write-up when we filmed and showed all our puppet shows. The Marauders movie too. None of us who wrote the book was in the movie, and I and Neville were on our trip, and Hermione was interning when it premiered. I think everyone else went to it though."

"Wow. I had no idea. Most of the movies have been out a few weeks before we've gone to see any of them." Sirius noted.

As they drew closer, everyone was able to see there was a crowd, many of them snapping photographs of different people as they arrived. A few were being interviewed by a wireless station, as well as several newspaper reporters.

They were all briefly blinded by a plethora of flashing lights as Appa landed, though that stopped quickly when Appa groaned loudly at the annoyance. There was even a red carpet leading to the door. Azula threw her shoulders back and swept towards the doors, which a couple of ushers scrambled to open as she approached. More hurried ahead to open the doors to the theatre proper and escort her towards the reserved balcony that was waiting for all of them.

Once seated in the opulent-to-the-point-of-gaudy theatre, the Fire Nation royals found themselves rather filled with anticipation. This movie thing seemed much more involved than they'd realized.

The lights dropped, an advisory appeared on the screen, and then there was a ten-foot tall Ty Lee in a white halter top with a shorts-with-flouncy-skirt combination on the bottom that left her midriff bare. She was wearing a sash across her chest crosswise that said "Miss Paradise Island" and a sparkly crown.
"Come to Paradise Island for fun in the sun!" she chirped, throwing her arms wide as the view pulled back to reveal the expanse of the island behind her. There were then several scenes of her playing volleyball, running down the beach, frolicking on a wave scooter, lounging in the sun, then it went back to crowned Ty Lee wandering through the resort, filled with tourists. In the background, a tourist won the game he'd been playing and whooped, a couple were married, an old couple sat snuggled together on a bench looking content, a family of five wandered by laughing together, a young couple with the woman visibly pregnant called for assistance as she went into labor, a very young couple walked together hand in hand and smiled at each other. "Come to Paradise Island, where dreams come true!"

Another film began, this time showing a middle-aged man. "This is Newsreel. I'm your host, Ted Tonks…"

Ursa glanced down when she felt a slightly clammy hand grip her wrist. She glanced at her daughter from the corner of her eye, and found her watching the screen, looking every inch the serene princess. She peeled the grip from her wrist, and took Azula's hand in hers, threading their fingers together and squeezed once, gently. Even if Azula's movie was terrible, she had a feeling she would always love it just the same. She watched in interest as they showed parts of the movie being made--actors getting fitted for costumes, a set being built, scenes being blocked out. Always there, was her daughter, overseeing everything like a general on the battlefield.

"She's tough, but you know, I think I did my best work to date because of it."
"Yeah. It's true. She brings stuff out of you that you didn't know was there. She was prescribed until you've given all you've got."
"Would you work with her again?"
"Are you kidding me? In a heartbeat. I saw some of the early edits, and I was blown away, and I was in it! I hope she'll keep making movies for a long time to come."

A quick montage of scenes flew by -- a firebender and a waterbender battling, dancing girls, acrobats, the dragon empress screaming as she was transformed to the blue spirit, the dragon emperor sunk in a miserable heap in a large puddle of water, his scales slowly melting away, leaving only pink mortal flesh behind. He looks at his trembling, transformed hands in disbelief, reaches up to touch his face, growing frantic at the soft, scaleless flesh he finds there, before staring out at the audience with a mad, frightened, ferocious stare.

"Spirit...what have you done? Speak! What have you done to meeecceee!"

The screen went dark and then the title appeared in bold letters. Love Among the Dragons.

The screen went dark again, and then the opening credits began to roll as a thrumming orchestral piece sounded over the speakers. The camera's view meandered through open air as though it were flying amongst the clouds as the credits ran. As the last credit finished, the pace picked up and the view went careening over the mountains, weaving between them, over a lush forest, as flocks of birds erupted from below and shot across the screen, and then shot forward towards an elaborate palace up ahead. The view halted and jolted slightly as though from a sudden landing, then began to follow the dragon empress as though it had been her view as she was in flight that the audience had seen up until then. The long train on her robe and the long sleeves fluttered behind her as she strode towards the palace, her manner proud, but uncertain--far different from the lazy freedom and thrilling flight from earlier. The towering doors opened as she approached, and then the view changed to show the dragon empress as she strode into the palace, and the audience got their first
good look at her. Make-up had been cunningly applied to give her a few scales and a few small frills along her forehead and small horns just before her hairline. She had black hair in an elaborate hairdo, complete with dangling ornaments. Her eyes had slit pupils as well. It was easy to believe she was a dragon transformed to humanoid form, and the overall effect was a strange, exotic beauty.

Long shadows seemed to linger in the halls, and the servants and flunkies scurrying in the background all moved furtively, with stiff postures as though fearing to be struck at any moment. The empress continued to stride forward, outwardly serene, but the occasional nervous dart of her eyes and the slight tenseness in her shoulders gave her away. The guards at the next set of monumental doors moved to open them, but she held up a hand to halt them for the moment. She closed her eyes, visibly gathered her courage and nodded. The doors swung open, revealing a decadent throne room. At the focus of the room, on a high dais lounged the dragon emperor. He ignored the dancing girls flinging themselves through complicated routines, the acrobats contorting themselves, the row of firebenders doing tricks, the nervous servants offering him an array of foods and drinks on golden plates and in golden, jewel-studded goblets. The empress ascended the throne and took her place beside him.

In seats behind the royal family and the avatar, Harry leaned closer to Toph, who he'd kept close to him. He put up a discreet muffliato so he wouldn't disturb the rest watching the movie, and settled himself to narrate the parts of the movie where there was no dialogue so Toph would know what was going on.

"Clever girl. She's much more sensible about budget constraints than I'd expect of a royal princess. She just used the Fire Nation royal palace as the setting for the opening, though she has the guards in different uniforms and used the big hall with the tapestries as the dragon emperor's throne room. I recognize it even if she took the tapestries out. He's up on a high dais, there's acrobats and dancing girls all around it. He looks ready to fry someone and everyone else looks scared…"

Katara watched the finished product with amazed, shining eyes and spared a wish that Sokka was there. He would have loved this. In fact…she began to wonder if she could somehow finagle one of those big screens to take with her to the south pole…though perhaps a flat wall of snow and ice would work as well? Winter days at the south pole were long, and they were often stuck inside for long periods because the weather was treacherous and very, very cold, even for them. They were very good and figuring out ways to amuse themselves, but something like this would be new, exciting, and a single movie would give them something to talk about for weeks!

She stifled a gasp when she realized the ten-foot tall figure up there was herself as the Blue Spirit. She remembered doing this weeks ago, but somehow their odd spirit box had captured the images to play back later, just as they'd told her. She looked surprisingly menacing. It was kind of cool.

As the last shot of the movie blacked out and the credits began to roll, the crowd began cheering. Azula felt the last of the nervous tension that had plagued her all day vanish, leaving behind a sort of giddy pride as she drank in the happy, excited faces around her.

"This…is what I wanted my whole life. Respect. Appreciation. This is everything I ever wanted."

She was startled out of her thoughts when her mother dabbed tears from both her eyes, stood and
then pulled Azula herself to her feet. Azula blinked a few times while staring at her mother beaming at her and then stiffened just a bit when she suddenly embraced her.

"Azula…that was marvelous! I'm so proud of you." she sniffled in her ear.

Azula wrapped her arms around her mother and hid the big, stupid grin she could feel taking over her face in her shoulder.

"I was wrong. Now I have everything I ever wanted."

"So, this is the ministry building. It's pretty big. What's it for?" Katara asked curiously as they all approached on their way to the ministry ball. It was just them this time; Sirius and Adeline had decided to sit it out this year. Adeline was pregnant and didn't feel much like dancing. Ursa decided to sit things out and watch Lu Ten. Iroh was hanging out with Arcturus and Melania and some of their friends rather than the ball.

"All the provinces have a building like this. Headquarters for law enforcement is there, and it's where the domain council--the Wizengamot--meets." Tom explained.

Katara climbed down carefully, checked her dress and hair and made sure to position herself beside Aang as they all entered the building.

She was looking around in interest at the high ceiling, the marble floors, the large fountain, when her attention was torn away quite unexpectedly by an unwelcome intrusion.

"Aang!"

"Hermione! You haven't been waiting long, I hope?"

Katara's jaw dropped as Aang left her side to go meet up with her rival, who had been waiting by the fountain for all of them to arrive.

"Aang has a girlfriend?" Mai asked in interest.

"Good for him." Zuko said cheerfully, not seeing the daggers Katara glared at his back. "She's cute. Who is she?"

"Hermione. She's a friend of mine from school. She's also my distant cousin." Harry answered.

"Oh. She didn't come to Fire Nation when you all came to visit." Zuko realized.

"She was busy helping set up the railroad across the Earth Kingdom at the time. She's interning for the company." Harry explained before pitching his voice to carry to the two chatting across the way. "We should head inside."

Aang and Hermione glanced over sheepishly from where they'd been chattering at each other. Aang held out his arm, which Hermione took with a smile and they joined the rest of them to head in to the ballroom.

The foreign guests all wanted to gasp at the glittering winter forest they were led into, but they managed to control themselves. The space between was filled with guests, tables, food, people
dancing and talking.

Katara looked around and finally spotted Aang and the interloper. They were out on the floor dancing.

"He just wandered off with her, and never looked back. I've... I've really lost him, haven't I?"

She was jolted out of her horrified realization by Azula and Toph, who each grabbed one of her arms and steered her towards the table the rest of them were headed for.

"Remember, shredding her face is a no-no." Azula reminded her.

"I'm gonna tell you the same thing Padfoot and I told Twinkles when he was all depressed about you and Jet. He's your friend, and friends are HAPPY for their friend's happiness. Suck it up." Toph growled on her other side.

"How can I enjoy a party when my heart is breaking?" Katara asked, sounding tragic.

Toph stiffened and her hand clenched at her side.

"Aang fought a war to save the world when his was. You tell me." she whispered viciously before dropping her arm. "Azula? We're dancing."

"What? No we're not." Azula hissed back.

"I know you were practicing with Padfoot and Giggles. Let's see your stuff...unless you're scared?"

"I'm afraid of nothing."

Toph held out a hand and smirked at her challengingly. Azula sniffed, took her hand, and took the lead in dragging Toph towards the dance floor.

Katara turned and watched numbly as her friends simply wandered off together and abandoned her.

"What...just happened?" she demanded.

Zuko sighed "I believe that was Toph seducing my sister."

Beside him Mai snickered. "Her opening salvo at least. I wish her luck."

"You're okay with this?" Katara asked curiously.

"Can you honestly think of anyone else that could handle either one of them?" Zuko asked, a wry grin twisting his face.

"You might have a point there." Katara was forced to admit.
Chapter Summary

Harry, Neville and Luna up their training and plan an adventure, Ron hallucinates, Ginny does impressions.

"You never did explain where you got that thing or why you've taken to practicing with it instead of your sword." Neville noted as he cooled down from his workout. Luna did her final stretches and flopped down beside him, only to look at Harry expectantly as well.

"This?" Harry questioned, spinning the odd staff in his hands. "It's called a shakujo. It's a monk's staff. I got one from Aang over the holidays. I wanted to practice with it, but I didn't want to link the real one to the training dummy, so I made a replica for that. The real one is metal on top and bottom, this one, as you can see is all reinforced wood, and it's heavier than the original so I can build up speed with it."

"You're...becoming a monk?" Neville asked hesitantly.

"I think Tom would object." Luna tittered.

"I'm not becoming a monk...and yes, he would, very much." Harry agreed wryly. "No, I've been keeping up my sword practices, as you both know. I've been training with kunai and shuriken... the thing is, our settlements are peaceful...as peaceful as wizards ever get, really, and the rest of the world has just come out of a hundred years of war and isn't eager to start it up again. I believe in being prepared, so I'm not going to stop training or practicing, but I realize that the various weapons I've trained with regularly are all offensive weapons--meant for war--to maim or kill. I've got my wand, of course, and that can be used offensively or defensively...but I thought adding a more defensive weapon to my arsenal wouldn't go amiss. Aang gave me this. There were a couple in storage in one of the temples. They once used to have acolytes that weren't airbenders, or even benders at all come to the temples to meditate and learn about their non-violent way of life. The rings" he shook the staff to make them clack together "were to warn small animals and insects and such to get out of the way so you wouldn't harm them by accident. Carrying it denotes you as a monk, or at least a spiritually enlightened person, probably in the hopes of keeping bandits from targeting them while travelling. If the bandits or whatever targeted them anyway, it can be used as a weapon to defend yourself non-fatally...though you'll notice there's a bit of a spike on the bottom there. I suppose whoever designed this thing was enough of a realist to know sometimes people don't learn, even if you whack them really hard in the head a few times."

He twirled the staff a few times and went back to defending himself with it from the dummy, the training he'd been doing while the others did their usual workouts.

"I liked the idea of having a less-warlike option should I need to defend myself against some random muggle in this world." Harry concluded.

"Why not just hit them with a stunner and be done with it?" Neville wondered.

"Well... If the bandits or whatever were benders, I would in a heartbeat. If they're ordinary muggles though, it seems like overkill when I have other options. I could hit a muggle from far
away, and they'd have little hope of fighting against it. I could knock them out… or I could kill them, I could cut off their arms or legs, swirl them up in the air and throw them off a cliff, all without getting within arm's reach. Say I did that. Word spreads, other muggles hear the tales, or witness the confrontation, or survive our confrontation… that would breed fear, and resentment… and fuel a desperate search for distance weapons so they could get us first. If I meet them on common ground though, whack them in the head, leave bruises or even broken bones if they're persistent enough… They're able to fight me back. It will likely sting if I win, they may resent it and want a re-match…. But it won't be the same sort of fear-fueled desperation as it would if I used magic against someone who can't properly defend themselves against it. If I use magic on a muggle, I want it to be with consent, and to help or heal, not to hurt or kill them. Now, as I'm not a martyr, should I ever run up against a bandit too strong for me to deal with, or too many to hold against, as a last resort, I will probably use magic--though I'd probably apparate, not attack them. I do value my own life after all. But, for anything less, it seems a bit like using a bomb to kill a single ant. Does that make sense?"

"It does…the thing I worry about though is that, if you have a sword or a staff in your hand, you can't use your wand as well." Neville objected.

"Ah…well, that's not completely true. After I got the thing from Aang, I went and talked to Ollivander and to Griphook. My sword I got from the Lestrange vault. It was made by a wizard, for a wizard. If I needed to I could channel certain spells through it. The shakujo Aang gave me was sitting in a storage cupboard in an abandoned temple for well over a hundred years. The wood was drying and brittle, the metal was beginning to corrode. He gave it to me mostly as an example of a non-lethal weapon--I couldn't have actually used it for long to fight someone with. The goblins are making a new topper and base for me. Ollivander is fashioning a reinforced wizard's staff for the center. I'm a wizard, not a ninja or a monk, even if training and meditation are my hobbies." Harry laughed.

"Huh. That's not a bad idea. Maybe I should see about getting something like that myself. I'll just stick with a regular bo staff though. I'll leave the monk trappings to you." Neville mused thoughtfully.

"I'm not going to bother with a new weapon. I've been learning chi blocking from Ty Lee. Between that and the ninja training and my wand, I figure I have plenty to be getting on with." Luna decided. "Now that we're done our workouts, you said you had something new to show us?"

Harry nodded and deactivated the dummy and put away his practice staff in the rack with the practice swords before coming to sit across from them.

"I finally managed to place a seal with a touch. I've been practicing with the chakra-suppressing seal. It occurred to me that something like this could be important, though also rather dangerous in the wrong hands. Ty Lee's chi blocks wear off after a little while, a seal won't and would have to be removed. If we ever run into a rogue bender or wizard running amok, if we can put them down long enough to get a seal on them, they shouldn't be able to cause any more trouble unless freed from the seal. I was also thinking it would be useful against hostile ninjas should I ever manage to find the right world and go visit my friends in Konoha."

"If they're your friends why even worry about it?" Neville wondered.

"They're not the only ninjas in that world, remember. There's a bunch of ninja villages, as well as missing nins that sometimes turn to crime to make a living while evading hunter nins from their old villages. And yeah, they were my friends when I was eight, but I have no idea going in if they're the same people or if the life of a mercenary killer for hire has made them change for the worse."
I'm not the same guy I was at eight. Eight year old me never would have imagined that the first time I physically travelled to another world that I'd take part in a war and end up with the blood of hundreds, if not thousands, on my hands."

Neville and Luna both blanched at his very matter-of-fact summation of his "adventure" a few years ago.

"T-thousands!" Neville said in horror.

"I helped defend the North Pole. I rusted the bottoms of at least a dozen ships that each had hundreds of soldiers on board. I took part in the spring equinox dance that threw a very large drill hundreds of feet and killed about half the people inside. I set bombs on buildings in military bases. I'm sure at least a few of them resulted in casualties. Pretending I didn't do any of those things or that they don't matter would be a lie. I did those things, in full knowledge that it would lead to the deaths of many people who had never done me personal harm… and if similar circumstances were ever to arise, I would do it again until they stopped. I've mostly made peace with it, but it weighs on me, and I wonder if a way could have been found that wouldn't have resulted in so many deaths, but I haven't really thought of one."

Neville and Luna stayed quiet. Harry had never really talked much about the war. He had hand-waved a lot under "Oh, I just needed a bit of adventure is all", and after that, everyone was concentrating on the move, and then in getting the new settlements set up and functional. He'd never really expressed any lingering regrets or worries about the whole thing before, and they both knew from experience that if they interrupted he would likely clam up again.

Harry's gaze was distant when he continued.

"I meditate a lot, as you both know. I've spent a lot of time thinking about all this stuff and coming to terms with it. I can still remember how furiously angry I was when we were all at the North Pole. A single war ship held probably almost as many people as the whole water tribe, north and south, and they sent hundreds. A hundred years, and no one in Fire Nation ever looked around and thought "you know what, this is horrible and it's gone on way too long."… well, some of them did, but they didn't try to rally like-minded people to try to put an end to it. They just sat around feeling sad occasionally, and stayed part of the war until they were old men even so. The Air Nomads were genocided, they were doing their best to do the same to the Water Tribes, and the bulk of the war was on Earth Kingdom territory and wiped out quite a few villages and cities while it was going on. And through all of that, the Avatar was frozen in an iceberg, buried beneath the ocean, and hidden from the whole world. He couldn't stop anything, and a new one couldn't arise because he was literally frozen in time. I started wondering after a while if it hadn't just been a stupid accident and was actually purposeful. I had even lectured all of them one day about natural processes and how they were all very 'big picture' sorts of things. I started wondering if that's what the whole hundred year war was, if it was the Earth Spirit's equivalent of a super volcano going off."

"Say it was….why let the Air Benders be wiped out?" Luna asked curiously.

"They weren't though….there are descendants a hundred years later. Aang's got a nice little colony forming up. The temple airbenders were wiped out, and I think that might be the difference."

"Why though? They were peaceful…non-violent…" Neville protested.

"And dangerous," Harry interrupted. "Fire Nation attacked while the comet that super-charges their powers was high in the sky. It gave them a hundredfold boost or something. A single airbender took on ten supercharged fire-benders in each case. Sokka and I saw that at the Southern Air Temple. They were wiped out, but it took ten times their number, super-charged at that, to do it. If
the Air Benders had been even just slightly more numerous, it probably wouldn't have been possible."

"They were that much stronger than everyone?" Luna said in surprise.

"Yeah. All the other benders lived regular lives--as soldiers, or guards, or farmers, or what have you. They were busy fishing and being midwives and tending the sick. They used their powers to help with this sometimes, but the rest had regular jobs and bending was just something extra. The Air Benders were monks and nuns. They were far away and above any squabbles that broke out among the others. They could go wherever they wanted in the world and no one could really stop them. If they got hungry while traveling, they just landed in a garden, or an orchard, or a crop field and took some food, and their very large bison helped themselves. When the farmer or what have you came running out, upset that their crops had been decimated, the airbender would fly away from the conflict, or lecture about non-violence. They were taught from an early age that air was freedom, and attachments were bad. If they landed somewhere and stuck around long enough to have a romance, they often left broken hearts, and sometimes babies, behind. The airbender would flit off without looking back when they felt like moving on, because they were freedom, and something interesting was probably over the next hill. They would whip up storms for fun, because it was it exciting to fly around in…and be gone before they had to worry about the ships lost at sea, or the famine that might result from damage to the crop fields. They didn't have jobs, or responsibilities. They sat around all day every day clearing their chakras and getting enlightened and playing with air to see what new thing they could do with it, or wandering around having fun and never dealing with, or even noticing that there were consequences. Food just grew at their temples…and they didn't even gather it themselves, they trained lemurs to do it for them. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"Yeah. Sounds like a bit of a mess." Neville grimaced.

"They didn't deserve to be wiped out regardless…but culturally they were so at odds with the rest of the world that it caused problems. The new airbenders all came from Earth Kingdom, or from among the sand benders, or the Fire Nation, or were former squibs. They understand responsibility, and the harm that you can inflict on others without intending harm, and don't see attachments as something to be completely eschewed. They're planting crops and tending them, making items for trade and to generate a small income for them so they can get things they couldn't otherwise. They aren't likely to land in someone's crop field and eat or destroy it, and will be concerned with how much unintentional damage they might do to those around them if they whip up a storm…and those sorts of sensibilities will be passed down."

"So...you think the Earth Spirit purposefully absented itself, and just let everyone do whatever they wanted for a hundred years?" Luna clarified.

"Yeah, I do. Previously all the avatars kept everyone separate and contained and somewhat static. I think it realized that wasn't working. Everyone started embodying their elements too much. Fire wanted to spread out and gobble everything up, Earth became very rigid and bureaucratic, Water kept to themselves and eyed everyone else with suspicion, and Air went where it pleased and left devastation in its wake sometimes and didn't care or notice. So, the Earth Spirit withdrew and let everyone do what they were doing. Air got wiped out, Fire went to war, Earth became a police state and water stayed in its borders and ignored the outside world. Now, the whole board has been reset. Fire learned to value peace, Water had to engage with the outside world, Earth had to deal with change and upheaval…and Air learned responsibility. When you add us in. We're all elements and yet none. We were parasites in our old world to a certain extent. We've had to learn to stand on our own feet…and we've been providing a buffer zone between the various nations while they're still dealing with the aftermath of the war. When I think about it like that, I still regret the massive loss
of life, but I can live with it, because I think it needed to happen in order for this world to move forward. That doesn't mean I want more blood on my hands though. I've been trying to be more mindful of my actions, and how they affect others and what the long term consequences of certain behaviors and assumptions are."

"So no magic on muggles and non-lethal weaponry." Neville concluded.

"In a nutshell, yes." Harry agreed.

"We'll be going with you when you find the world your friends are in." Luna added.

"I thought that went without saying. It would be rather foolish to go to the ninja world without my team."

The three friends smiled at each other. After a moment, Luna got them back on track.

"So…seals with a touch?"

"Yeah. I'll explain how it works for me. You may find a method that works for you better. I've found, for me, that visualizing it the same way it would be drawn, focusing on the completed image and then sort of pushing it out towards my fingertip with a small burst of magic works for me. If you do use the same method, make sure you put the elements together in the right order. Weird stuff happens if you don't. You also have to make sure you have a clear image, really focus on it as a whole thing, or again, weird stuff happens."

"I take it you've been working on this for a while?" Neville asked with a grin.

"You could say that, yeah."

"If it was so difficult, why keep working on it? You've gotten pretty quick with paper seals." Luna wondered.

"Yeah, but I don't always carry seals around unless I'm specifically packing for trouble, and if you don't already have one ready and run into trouble, you don't always have the supplies, or the time to whip one up. I thought it would be convenient if I could just make one appear where I needed it and have it work, you know? So, I started experimenting. I couldn't get it to work properly for the longest time, but I had enough weird things and partial successes that I thought it was doable, so I kept trying until it worked. Now that I've found a way that works, I suppose I could in theory use it to place all sorts of seals, so long as I know the parts that go into it and can visualize it long enough to transfer it. I'll have to try it out sometime."

"I haven't worked with seals as much as you two. I'm going to need to refresh my memory."

"Alright, we'll work on that, Luna can just try it out."

"Later though. We're going to be late for breakfast if we don't go get cleaned up soon." Luna interjected.

"School." Harry said with some aggravation.

"We've only got this term and next year to get through, remember." Neville chided as they began climbing to their feet.

"Yeah, yeah. And I'm the idiot that decided to take so many NEWT classes, I know." Harry grumbled.
"If we're going to go visit your friends eventually, we should probably step up our training a bit. That world sounds dangerous." Luna mused.

"I didn't really get to see anything outside the village, but yeah, it probably is." Harry nodded. "You know, we need to go visit Gaipan one of these days."

"Gaipan?"

"That's where that treehouse village of freedom fighters was from. There were nice, big trees in that forest. Nothing compared to the forest around Konoha, but close. We can practice tree-hopping and have a game of ninja tag through the tree tops. Sounds fun, doesn't it?"

"Sounds painful. They're really big trees, right? What happens if we fall?"

"You try really hard not to, and you try to remember that, unlike when I learned it, you can apparate to safety if that happens."

"Oh, right. Bring it on." Neville agreed, sounding much more cheerful.

"Morning, everyone. What's going on?" Neville asked as he and Harry took their seats at the table.

"I just sold a screenplay!" Seamus said cheerfully.

"You did?" Ron asked.

"You wrote a movie?" Hermione asked curiously.

"What's it about?" Lavender wondered.

"I thought you didn't have time to write anything while school was in session?" Harry inquired.

"I don't really, that's why I teamed up with Dean and Padma. It was a collaboration."

"I really just did concept drawings for a couple of scenes to send in with their script. They did all the writing." Dean clarified.

"You teamed up with Padma? What kind of story is it?" Hermione asked warily. She wasn't a fan of her Nightfall series.

"It's a supernatural action adventure with a cheesy romance subplot set in the south pole. I just heard back from the studio. They're going to start making it this summer after they're done filming "Oma and Shu" or something. Best of all, that Azula is going to direct it. I loved what she did with the dragon thing." Seamus explained enthusiastically.

"You lucked out then. She's only contracted to do three more movies with us, and then she's going to concentrate on opening her own studio, though we're going to own partial rights on what she makes until she buys out the company's share." Harry informed him. "Though if all her movies do as well as the first, that probably won't be very long at all."

"What on earth is Oma and Shu? It doesn't sound very interesting." Lavender wondered.

"It's sort of like earthbender Romeo and Juliet…except after Romeo dies, instead of killing herself, Juliet builds a city in an impressive display of earthbending, threatens the warring people that caused Romeo's death into submission an makes herself a queen." Harry explained.
"On second thought, that sounds really interesting. You'll need to give it a more catchy title though." Lavender laughed.

"If we could get back to my awesome movie…." Seamus griped.

"Tell me about it." Neville offered.

Ron turned away from Seamus’ excited chatter and sighed a bit dolefully. It sometimes seemed like everyone around him was speeding far ahead of him, while he himself was stuck in thick mud, flailing around and getting nowhere fast. Graduation used to seem impossibly far away, and yet here they were in their last term of sixth year already. Everyone else seemed to already have plans for their futures, big dreams they were making a reality. He was floundering, and it was starting to worry him.

The only dream he'd ever really had for himself was to be a Chudley Cannon someday. No one had scouted him and come to beg him to play for them. He was starting to realize he couldn't depend on his parents to see him through. He'd begun to think they were really poor not because 'the man' was keeping dad down, as he'd always seemed to imply before, but that he was just really pants at managing money.

He used to think just living at home forever, eating his mom's cooking and taking things easy seemed like an ideal life. Lately, the idea of having to stay there for any length of time after graduation was beginning to feel oppressive rather than safe, but leaving had its own set of problems. He didn't know how to cook, or do laundry, or how his mom made the dishes wash themselves. He was as bad with money as his dad was…well, nah, maybe not that bad. He was pretty sure he'd never leave his kids education in jeopardy.

In any case, he'd need money, which meant a job, and he had no idea what to do with his life. Healer, Auror and Curse-breaker all required schooling after Hogwarts, as did getting a Mastery in some subject. When he was done with school, he wanted to be done with school. He wasn't signing away any more of his youth on extra studies.

It was a bit of a conundrum. He wanted to be rich, famous and important….but he didn't want to work a regular job, get extra schooling or expend any effort. That was when a sudden, beautiful thought hit him.

He could be a movie star.

Should be easy, right? Put on a costume, say some lines, have people fall all over themselves trying to get a piece of you. Sounded perfect.

"Oi, Seamus. When are they casting for your movie?"

"There should be a notice in the paper any day now. Why?"

"I'm gonna star in it, of course." Ron announced boldly.

Suddenly feeling much better about things, his appetite came back with a vengeance and he began loading his plate down.

Harry wrinkled his nose at the mountain of food he was now shoveling away. Ron rolled his eyes and flipped him off. Harry suddenly looked like he was having a small epiphany.

"Hey, Ron, meet me after classes are over. I just remembered something I've been meaning to do but kept forgetting about."
Ron eyed him curiously and then shrugged. "Sure, whatever mate." he agreed.

Once their classes were done for the day, and their homework was out of the way, Harry, Neville and Luna met up to discuss how they were going to up their training in preparation for their upcoming trip--whenever Harry managed to find the right world.

"Wrist and ankle weights." Luna suggested. "That should work on both strength and speed."

"Where are we going to get something like that? I don't think any of the stores in these parts carry anything like that." Neville objected.

"Silly. We have magic. I've been messing with the idea since I thought of it earlier. Try this on." Luna laughed, handing Neville what looked to be a cloth wristband. He took it with a dubious look and slipped it on. Luna tapped it with her wand once he had and Neville yelped at the sudden increase in weight.

"See? Gets the job done without being in the way. I made some for myself as well." she showed him, holding up both wrists and then showing him her ankles. "I have a feeling I'm going to be a little sore in the morning, but I should get used to it before too long and then we can up the weight a bit."

"Sounds good to me." Harry agreed. It didn't take long before all three of them were fitted with their new weights.

"I was thinking that instead of staying holed up in the Room in the mornings, we could use the whole castle as our training ground. You know, run up and down the stairs, climb walls, maybe run up the inside walls of the towers or across the underside of the covered bridge if we're feeling really ambitious." Harry suggested.

"Maybe take turns trapping parts of the grounds and the others have to run through it?" Neville added hesitantly.

"Sounds like a plan. It's training, but we should definitely try to have fun with it. We're not going to war, just making sure we can protect ourselves if necessary in a dangerous place."

"We should have a three way brawl at the end of each race, when we're tired out to build our stamina." Luna added.

"You've really taken to this ninja thing." Harry noted.

"It's fun." Luna shrugged.

"It is, kinda." Neville agreed grudgingly "Once you get over the pain and exhaustion. There's going to be a lot of pain and exhaustion in our futures before it starts being fun again, isn't there."

"Yeah, pretty much."

They started their new regiment in the morning. By the time classes started, all three were already weary to the bone from the unaccustomed exertion and went through the rest of their day like zombies.
They were usually recovered by the next morning, and so did it all over again. Their days followed this pattern for the next month. Little by little they got used to it. Halfway through the month, they found themselves perking up and recovering by lunchtime. By month's end, they were usually recovered about an hour after breakfast.

"I think you'll both agree we've gone as far as we can with what we've been doing. It's time for something new." Harry announced one morning.

"Did you have something in mind?"

"Yeah. For the next month, we're going to do our morning workouts on the lake."

"On the lake?" Neville squeaked.

"Ninjas can walk on water, I've seen them do it. I even managed it once when I was a kid on the little stream that ran through the park where I used to train back then. I wasn't able to hold it long and I fell in and got soaked, but I did manage it for a few seconds. I haven't really tried it since then, so this will be as much a learning experience for me as for you two. We'll stay in the shallows so that even if we fall in we're not going to drown or anything."

"Or get grabbed by the squid"

"Also a concern" Harry nodded. "We'll do this for the next month until it's instinctive. The bottom of the feet are supposed to be the hardest place to learn to channel chakra...or magic. I'm still not completely sure which we're doing, or if they're fundamentally the same thing, but eh. Leave that one for the philosophers. It works, which is all I'm really concerned with."

Harry shook his head as though to banish those thoughts and continued.

"Once we get the trick of it, we'll start sparring atop the water until we learn to instinctively channel it to whatever parts of us are on the water, until we can finish a spar without getting wet. That's likely to take some time, so we're likely in for a very wet month."

"The water is going to be freezing." Neville sighed.

"That should push us to learn it faster." Luna replied, serene. "We should probably increase our weights too before we start. I don't know about you two, but I've gotten used to mine."

"Same here. I guess we'll double the weight?"

"That should work."

"Be a ninja, they said. It'll be fun, they said." Neville griped. Harry and Luna just laughed at him.

It took longer this time to make the adjustment. The water was cold enough in the mornings that repeated dunkings sapped their strength, even with liberal application of drying charms. Even after they managed to stay atop the water regularly, doing so while fighting was a whole different ballgame. It took most of the month to keep themselves from falling in once they split their concentration.

"I take it we're going to keep this up for another month?" Neville asked tiredly as they trudged inside after their latest training session.
"Or longer, if that's what it takes." Harry agreed.

"I'm tired of being damp and smelling faintly of brine and fish, even after I shower."

"I'm pretty sure that's in your head." Luna snickered.

"Look at it this way, once we have this down to the point that it's instinctive, it will be useful even if we're not just randomly on top of a lake somewhere. It's annoying now, but I think it will be worth it long term." Harry protested.

"I know you must have noticed some of the benefits of our new training regime." Luna added. "I feel much stronger, not to mention full of energy once I recover from the day's workout. My spellcasting has improved as well."

"There is that. Mine has as well." Neville admitted.

"See? We keep at it until we don't need to think about it at all, and then we keep at it until we can fight all out on the lake without worrying that the split in concentration is going to send us plunging when we least expect it." Harry agreed. "However, now that we're starting to get the hang of things, I'd like to add something else to the mix. We can do it in the evenings after class or on the weekends or something."

"Yeah? What's that?" Neville asked curiously.

"I have a pensieve, and there's a lot of stuff I looked at in the ninja library that I only half or barely remembered enough to write down. I want to go over my memories and retrieve that stuff so I can learn it now…and you two as well, naturally."

"That's not a bad idea. I'd like a chance to see where we're headed for as well." Luna nodded.

"Is there really going to be that much to learn though? I mean, if you were writing down most of what you learned, there can't be that much…"

"I flipped through a lot of books and scrolls while I was there, and the memory of what I saw should still be in my head. For example, I unrolled and glanced over a bunch of genjutsu scrolls the last time I was there that I was planning to memorize, but then I called away by the kids to be interrogated and so never got a chance. I think I grabbed a few basic medical scrolls too. I unrolled each of them and glanced over it to see if it was very long or really involved before grabbing it to add to my reading pile. There were a few more basic seals and what have you, a bunch of elemental jutsu I remember looking at as well that I forgot the details of by morning, since I was more focused on shadow jutsu and later sealing. I want to get that stuff out of my memory and put it to use."

"That's what we'll do then." Luna agreed.

"Yeah, sounds good. I'm always up for something new." Neville added.

"This has been very productive, you must admit. We'll now each have our own library of basic jutsu and training methods. Good on you for being such a nosy, determined little kid." Luna remarked a few weeks later as she put the finishing touches on another scroll and set it aside to be copied so they'd each get one.
"Yeah, you must have at least peeked into half the items in there. Shame you didn't have just a little more time--we might have gotten the lot then." Neville agreed.

"Given what we do have, not to mention our seven years of comprehensive magical training, I'm not really too worried about it. Given what we've seen, I'd say Hogwarts almost guarantees that we have a much larger list of offensive and defensive capabilities than most ninjas can ever hope to lay claim to. The difference is that they either use whatever they do have to best effect or they die, so anyone that survives their teens is very dangerous, even if they have a more limited technique library than we do."

"We'll be sure to keep that in mind." Neville agreed. "Though we saw that ourselves when you all went to fight that mummy guy. You were all running as fast as you could, but you all seemed to be moving in slow motion compared to the rest of them. I wonder how we stack up?"

"Honestly I'm not really sure. We're at least genin level, I'd think…beyond that I couldn't really say. Maybe we should watch ourselves once we work up to going all out on the water and then once we go to Gaipan and then watch the mummy-guy fight again and see if we can make an honest comparison, I guess."

"Sounds like a plan. I just don't want to die stupidly when we go adventuring because some jerkface moves too quickly for me to react to." Neville admitted.

"Alright...so we work in target practice with replacement jutsu until it becomes instinctive to remove yourself from danger, that's all." Harry offered cheerfully.

Neville sighed. "Why do I ever open my big mouth? You two are sadists."

"I've noticed you've begun moving normally again. We really should double your weights once more." Luna spoke up from where she was organizing their new "Jutsu library".

"Sadists." Neville repeated. Luna just smiled and batted her eyes at him.

"Decided to join us today? And you're not all walking around like a bunch of inferi. Good. What's been with you three lately?" Draco demanded when they headed to the Melting Pot after finishing up the last of their "jutsu library".

"New exercise regime that it took us a while to get used to."

"New exercise regime that it took us a while to get used to." Luna answered. "So what are you all up to?"

"We're ranking the cast of "Love Among the Dragons in terms of relative hotness." Pansy replied. She, Padma, Parvati and Lavender had a bunch of recent Teen Witch Weekly's spread out around them, as visual aids it looked like.

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. "You are doing that." he huffed.

"And what have you been doing?" Neville wondered.

"Staring blankly into space mostly."

"Sounds thrilling." Luna said with mock seriousness.
Theo wandered in from outside, saw all of them gathered and turned his steps towards them, flopping down next to Luna with a welcoming grin.

"What are we doing?" he wondered.

"You have your choice of rating actors on relative hotness, staring into space…hmmm, reading the sports pages rather than doing the pile of last minute homework he's been putting off" she added, looking at Ron who was in his quidditch uniform and pointedly ignoring the pile of books at his elbow "sampling the latest efforts of the cooking club" she eyed Crabbe and Goyle who had a number of snacks piled up between them "or a rousing game of…whatever that is Seamus and Dean are doing."

"Jenga" Dean answered.

"We're not allowed to use sticking charms. Makes a bit of a challenge." Seamus grunted as he slowly teased one of the blocks out of the pile.

"This is definitely party corner." Theo deadpanned.

Neville and Harry, almost as if planned, both threw their hands up and said 'Woo hoo' in the most blasé voices they could manage, which set the rest of them to snickering.

"Ron! You're supposed to be doing your homework!" Hermione barked as she came marching through. "Have you done anything at all since I left an hour ago?"

"I've still got time." Ron grumbled without looking up from the paper.

Hermione's eyes narrowed, but she didn't continue nagging as she normally would have. Instead she turned to Seamus.

"It's almost broadcast time." she reminded him. Seamus checked his watch and dug out his microphone.

"What's the lineup tonight?"

"Steve…that is, Mister Mellow, has agreed to sing again. You'll be interviewing the newly formed robot sumo-wrestling club…"

"What? We have that?"

"We do now. There's only two members. Ginny Weasley will be doing impressions, Padma and you are going to hype your upcoming movie, and then 'how to hex off your pimples without losing your nose' to round things off."

"Why doesn't anyone ever just use the boil cure solution we made first year? That's what it's for, apparently. People are always too quick with the hexes." Seamus complained.

"You can tell them that. It could serve as social commentary for the night." Hermione replied offhand.

"You've relaxed a lot over the years, haven't you?"

"Ah, Remus, there you are. How are the Blacks doing?" McGonagall greeted him as he wandered into the Teacher's Lounge.
The group was gathered, listening to the children's broadcast as had become tradition since the radio station's inception. At the moment "Mister Mellow" seemed to be making one of his rare but much lauded appearances.

"Sirius and Adeline are safely delivered of a healthy baby boy, Orion Pollux Black. Mother and son are doing fine." Remus beamed. "Little Regulus seems a bit uncertain at the new status quo, but seems fascinated with the new addition nonetheless."

"It'll be your turn in a few more months." Flitwick teased.

"You don't need to remind me. We'll have our work cut out for us. Pam swears she's the size of a house. It seems it's twins not latent giant heritage like I feared." he admitted.

"Latent giant heritage?" Slughorn tittered.

"That's no laughing matter!" Pomfrey was quick to interject. "Why just a few weeks ago I had a patient with a giant's stomach…and a colony of oversized tapeworms. His friend brought him in and asked me to take a look. He said the boy ate more than his whole family put together at every meal and he's still always hungry, and he thought that couldn't be natural. He had a giant's stomach. The tapeworms were oddly enough a lucky break. He'd likely have been ten foot tall otherwise…or at least ten feet wide with the way he apparently ate. It's taken care of now, no need for concern. I transfigured his stomach and removed the tapeworms once I had a big enough jar to store them in. Those things were massive! I sent them to St. Mungo's. The boy will likely get an entry in their book of medical oddities."

"Well…Mr. Weasley did always say he wanted to be famous." McGonagall said with a faintly nauseous look on her face.

"Minerva! I left out names to keep patient confidentiality!"

"Really, Poppy, who else could it have been?"

In the background, on the radio, Ginny Weasley was introduced and opened her section with a Snape impression. She was interrupted a few moments in by Draco Malfoy, also doing a Snape impression, critiquing her performance and taking points.

The teachers broke off their conversations and began tittering as the two began insulting one another, still in character.

"It's a Snape-off! This is hilarious! They should make this a regular feature!" Remus cackled.

Snape for his part just glared at the radio and muttering about detention.

"Now, now, Severus" Dumbledore chided "you know what they say--imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." he turned the full force of his twinkling eyes on the irate man…at least until the sound of Harry doing a Dumbledore impression came in over the airwaves. He scolded both Snapes, offered them candy and then began a long, rambling nonsensical story. Dumbledore turned and frowned at the radio while the rest of the teachers tried to muffle their snickers.

"Professor Argyle is trying to kill us isn't she?" Ron moaned "Four feet! She's wants four entire feet!"

"You have a month to do it! Stop complaining! And don't you dare put it off like you usually do."
No one is going to remind you. Right, everyone?" Neville demanded, eyeing Hermione.

"Who's going to have time? Not me, I assure you. I have long papers and research projects in all my classes." she told Ron with some asperity. "I have enough to do just worrying about my own. You're going to have to learn to be responsible sooner or later."

"We're all going to be camped out in the library from here till the end of term, aren't we?" Dean sighed miserably. "I don't envy you lot at all, but it's your own fault for taking so many classes."

"I'm gonna have to agree. You all brought it on yourselves." Seamus agreed.

Now at the halfway point in the term, all the professors seemed to suddenly decide they all had too much time on their hands, and so worked valiantly to remove them of it. Most of their year-group found themselves in the library all hours and most weekends as they tried churning out all the long research papers the professors had stuck them all with.

Neville noted about halfway through the month that Ron was slacking off again. He seemed to be spending all his time either reading quidditch books, or practicing for his upcoming audition for Seamus' movie which he'd be going to next Hogsmeade weekend.

Knowing he hadn't even started on any of his long papers yet, when the month was already half over, was really starting to annoy Neville. He couldn't really say anything though, since he was the one that demanded no one do so. He'd seen Hermione biting her lip a few times, hands twitching as though she wanted to grab the other boy and shake some sense and responsibility into him, but she'd usually glance at Neville, sigh and go back to her own work before actually doing so.

He complained one night while he, Harry and Luna were in the library, working on their separate assignments.

"If he doesn't do it, too bad. He'll fail and have to repeat the year, that's all. Still, you'd think he'd care a bit more considering he had to pay for this year himself and all… still not our problem. We're in sixth year, and if he doesn't have it together enough by now to at least keep on top of his homework, he probably never will. Everyone nagging and babying him is just exacerbating the problem." Harry shrugged indifferently.

"Hit him with a genjutsu and torture him a bit when it starts getting to you." Luna suggested.

"Torture him?" Neville spluttered.

"I don't mean actually torture him, just, you know, make his mother appear behind him shrieking every time he slacks off, that sort of thing."

Harry glanced up, a small smirk on his face. "You can't tell from outside if someone is under a genjutsu unless you can feel the disturbance in their chakra. It will look to everyone else that he's just jumping and shrieking at nothing."

"That could be fun. You do his mom, I'll do one with spiders." Luna decided.

"Since when are you so torture happy?" Harry asked idly.

"I'm a Ravenclaw. People who undervalue education irk me." she answered primly.

"Fair enough." Harry agreed peaceably.

"If we start throwing his mum in a strop and spiders at him every time he relaxes, are we going to
end up giving him a complex or something?" Neville asked.

"Your point?" Luna asked curiously.

"Well…isn't it kind of bad to give someone a complex?" he sighed.

"Then maybe he should have thought of that before he decided to slack off." Harry sniffed. Luna just nodded.

"He really should." she agreed sadly.

The following evening at the Melting Pot, Hermione wandered by Ron with an armload of transfiguration books which she dropped with a thud in front of Ron. She didn't say anything, but she did glare at him pointedly before marching off again.

Ron stared at the pile of books glumly, and for a moment it looked like he'd get started, but then…

"Bloody interfering bint. I've got plenty of time." he muttered.

Neville grit his teeth, tried to ignore him, but then decided he just couldn't anymore. He went through the hand signs and sent a gossamer tendril of his magic across to connect to Ron, and sent the certainty that Ron's mum was in the room and outraged, and let Ron's mind and imagination supply the details. For a long moment he wasn't sure it had worked, but then Ron stiffened up, paled, and turned to glance over his shoulder before shrieking like a little girl best by an axe-murderer.

Those sitting close by all jumped at Ron's sudden scream, those further out quieted down and turned to look, only to begin murmuring in confusion at the sight of Ron babbling apologies and cringing at nothing.

Neville released the technique and smiled when Ron scrambled to the books Hermione left for him and started reading.

Neville's genjutsu goaded Ron into writing a whole eight inches, but then he decided to slack off again, so Luna stepped up.

For the next week, everytime he tried to grab something else to distract himself from his looming deadline, it turned into a spider.

He reached for Quidditch Through the Ages--it turned into a giant wolf spider that waved at him and told him to do his homework.

Chess board --all the pieces turned into sapphire tarantulas and told him to do his homework.

Sports pages? The paper turned into a thousand huntsman spiders and landed on his lap before scurrying all over him.

Ron, who by this point had already been twitchy, pale and had developed a nervous tick over one eye, screamed bloody murder, frothed at the mouth and passed out.

"Whoops. I might have overdid it a bit." Luna remarked.

"Learning experience." Harry assured her. "Though I don't think the spiders helped the goal of
getting him to man up and take responsibility. I guess I should try something too."

That evening, as everyone was getting ready for bed, Harry tried his hand at the art of illusion.

Ron froze while getting undressed, yelped and tried to cover himself as his mother once again reappeared. Rather than looking like a slightly frumpy, plump housewife like she usually did, she was dressed in black, her red hair teased into a wild mane of curls. She held a sinister-looking staff topped with a jewel that seemed to suck the light from its surroundings.

"M-mum?" Ron whimpered.

"Do your damned homework, or everything you touch will turn to spiders until you turn eighteen, do you hear me, young man?! I made a pact with the demon-hell of vicious man-eating spiders to see it done. If I hear about you slacking off again, so HELP me, but you will not enjoy it! MWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Much as the paper had done earlier, Molly Weasley turned into a mass of spiders that broke apart and scattered in all directions.

Harry broke the connection when Ron started screaming.

So freaked out was he that he grabbed his books, quill, ink and parchment and ran to the common room, clad only in his boxers. They found him collapsed over his essay in the morning as they were all leaving for breakfast.

"Huh. Only six inches to go." Neville noted as they passed by.

"On that one, sure. He still has three more long papers and only five more days to do them." Harry reminded him.

"Yeah, you're right." Neville realized.

As Harry nudged him awake with his toe, Neville put him under another genjutsu.

Ron came groggily awake, only to yelp and skitter back on his rump when he spotted a bunch of big spiders watching him.

"No slacking off"
"Do your homework"
"Or we get to eat you!" The spiders chittered.

Ron wasn't seen much for the rest of the week. He handed in all his assignments on time.

Sprout took him aside after grading them to see if he was alright. Right smack dab in the middle of his essay, one of the sentences broke off in the middle to say OH GOD WHY SPIDERS! SAVE ME' before resuming as though the words weren't there.

She wasn't terribly reassured when his mouth stretched into a rictus grin and he said he was fine while his left eye twitched spasmodically.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Big trees, bandits, an old familiar face.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Everyone have everything?" Harry asked once they were on the edge of Hogsmeade.

"Weapons, comfy, sturdy clothing…picnic basket. Check." Luna agreed cheerfully.

"Same here. So how're we getting to Gaipan? I've never been there before." Neville wondered.

"You hang on and concentrate on big trees." Tom answered as he approached the three of them.

"See you on the other side." Harry chirped, before grabbing Luna. The two of them vanished.

"Our turn." Tom informed him before grabbing his arm.

Neville felt like he was being forcibly being squeezed through a tight rubber tube, but it was over in three seconds or so.

"Wow. It's a lot different when you do it yourself." he mumbled, trying to get his stomach to settle.

Luna had set up their blanket and picnic basket beneath one of the trees. Tom made his way over and settled down, then pulled out a book and made himself comfy.

"Have fun playing ninja." he offered before immersing himself in his reading.

The three headed some distance away before ascending into the trees. After discussing it a bit they decided to acclimate themselves to maneuvering before trying anything fancy. Once everyone thought they had a handle on things, they moved on to target practice, which forced each of them to apparate or substitute themselves to escape danger, while trying to keep enough attention on their surroundings that they could continue maneuvering. As this took considerable concentration and spatial awareness, it took them a while to get the hang of things.

When they rejoined Tom on the blanket, they were sweaty, had numerous scratches and bits of leaves and twigs in their hair. Neville, who'd been training the least amount of time of all of them, flopped down exhausted and groaned.

"Why do I let you two talk me into things?"

"Oh come on, it was fun, admit it." Harry chided as he began digging in the basket and handing the food out.

Tom waited until they were all mostly done eating before he spoke up.

"So…when are you planning to run off on another adventure, and were you ever planning to tell me about it?"
"You're here, aren't you, so obviously I was. As for when…who knows. I have to find the right place first." Harry shrugged.

Neville finished his share of the food and decided to take a short nap. He'd upped his weights recently and wasn't used to the extra drag yet. Today's workout had worn him out a bit. Luna decided to take a wander so she could appreciate the forest's beauty. She hadn't really been able to before while dashing through the tree tops and dodging projectiles. Tom questioned him extensively on everything he could remember that might be unique about the place.

"I might be able to put together some sort of algorithm that will narrow down the possibilities. I'll get to work on it." he offered.

"I'd appreciate it. I don't really feel any sense of urgency or anything…but I've found myself thinking about all of them a lot lately. I hadn't really done so for years, so it was a bit odd to suddenly have them on my mind so much. I was a bit depressed when that Toad Sage first stopped me from going back. For a while there it was really what got me through the days, knowing I'd go someplace I was happy in my dreams at least. I had to sort of push thoughts of them away so I could move forward. I told my counterpart back then that I'd try to find a way to go there in person, even if only to visit. I have a way, now I guess it's time to keep my promise. Sort of go full circle, you know? That was when my life started to change, the first time I dreamed it. If I hadn't, I would have lived the life that one counterpart was living, the one we helped. Poor guy…his life really sucked until we came along."

"Both of ours. Mine, unfortunately, didn't get any better."

"You said dead you seemed at peace, right? That's something."

"Yes…I suppose it is." Tom admitted.

"Hmmm."

"What?" Tom asked warily.

"Maybe you should give guru Pathik another try. You might have better luck with clearing your chakras this time around."

"Perhaps." he said noncommittally. "How far have you gotten?" he then asked curiously.

"All but the last, and I decided to stop there."

"Oh? Why? No desire for enlightenment?"

"Not particularly. I find I'm kind of a like mind with Zuko on the issue. Folks in temples have already isolated themselves from the world, put themselves into a static, controlled environment. By seeking enlightenment, they're actually looking to shed the last lingering ties to this world. I live in this world, I'm part of it, that means connections, it means conflict, it means pain and disappointment…but it also means love, and friendship and family and happiness. You can't really have one without the other. I think Guru Pathik is a great guy and all…but he's detached. He's not unhappy, but I never really got the impression he's happy either. He's sort of zen most of the time, but that isn't anything I'm looking for. I used to. I was desperately unhappy back then. These days… These days I'm pretty content overall. There were a lot of things in my past that made me unhappy at different points in my life, but I overcame them and it got better. Even though I hated it at the time, I wouldn't change any of it, I don't think. Good and bad, those things made me who I
am…and I think I've finally gotten to the point where I'm okay with that.”

"I'm crazily, stupidly in love with you." Tom said suddenly.

Harry turned to look at him.

"I love you too, Tom. Crazy stupid and all."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That's…good."

Harry snorted and grinned at him. "Ah well. I guess if I had wanted poetry I would have fallen for Draco. Too bad." he joked.

"Poetry? Really?"

"Sonnets. I'm not sure if they're good or not. I'm no judge. I sometimes see the other Slytherins getting teary-eyed when he reads them, but I haven't yet figured if they're really moving, or they're all in pain trying not to laugh."

"A mystery for the ages." Tom said dryly.

"Hey…you know, after we go visit Naruto and Shikamaru we should drop in on Spike and maybe check up on our snake babies."

"Half-naga children, Harry."

"To-may-toe, To-mah-toe."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Keep me. Forever."

Tom pulled him a bit closer until he was snuggled comfortably into his side.

"I suppose I can live with that."

"Are you two done being mushy?” Neville asked as he stretched and sat up.

"For the moment, why?"

"Listen."

"Sounds like swords."

Luna came dashing back towards them.

"I think a caravan was just attacked. Should we go help?"

"Yeah, I guess." Harry grumbled as he climbed to his feet. "I just got comfy too."

"Have fun." Tom offered dryly before going back to his book.
All three leapt into the trees and started making their way towards the sound of conflict. Harry unsealed his shakujo--assembled and ready for action, and channeled a bit of magic through it to keep the rings silent as they approached.

As they reached the end of the forest, they got a clear view of a caravan on the road. The nearest town was a few miles further on. They had seen the tree house village the freedom fighters had been living in earlier. It had shown signs of occupancy--by adults, not the kids living there before to judge by the amount of empty liquor bottles lying around. It would seem that lair was now being lived in by bandits who preyed on traders rather than kids fighting a foreign occupation these days.

The caravan group seemed to be several families, judging by the number of women and children. The men were trying to fend off the bandits, but they were being overpowered. In fact, if not for the one youngish guy among them with the two swords, it looks like they'd have been overpowered long since. He was obviously the most skilled on the caravan's side--perhaps a guard or something. Sadly, the bandits were just skilled enough and outnumbered them as well that even the skilled swordsman was slowly losing ground.

They didn't have to discuss it; they just leapt into action. The women looked terrified, though they were still trying to fight back, or at least stand between the bandits and their children. The children were crying. Two of the men had already fallen and were slowly bleeding out but couldn't get help until the bandits were gone.

There were eight skilled bandits, versus four unskilled defenders and three somewhat skilled. The addition of three would-be ninjas evened the odds quite a bit.

The bandits never saw them coming--one moment they were bragging on how they were going to keep the women after "offing the men and the brats" and celebrating with their hard-won booty, the next the bandits had been lessened by half as three pissed off wizards descending from the trees like the wrath of heaven.

The sudden unexpected help rallied the defenders and short work was soon made of those remaining. While Neville and Luna helped secure their prisoners, Harry hurried to the side of the wounded to see if there was anything he could do.

One guy had been stabbed in the lung and was slowly choking on his own blood, the other was stabbed in the gut and was bleeding out. He cleared the first guy's lungs so he wouldn't choke to death while he dealt with the other. He had to take a deep breath and find his meditation happy place before going to work.

Easy fixes like scratches and such were simple charms and were easy enough to do. Healing something like a gut wound took a slow, steady, delicate touch and required you to pay attention and make sure you got everything before moving on. It was hard, very hard, to keep working slowly and steadily when he knew he was racing against time with both their lives, but he managed, somehow. His first patient was pale and had a weak, thready pulse before he finished. He made himself stay steady, dumped a blood replenisher in his stomach and swathed his wounds with healing salve before binding them up so hopefully the wound wouldn't sour if he'd made any mistakes.

Patient two had all but drowned in his own blood a second time. He dropped another blood replenisher in his stomach, cleared his lungs again and went to work, slow and steady to keep from damaging the delicate internal tissues.
By the time he had his second patient covered in healing paste and swabbed in bandages, his color was returning and his breathing remained clear. His first patient stirred weakly and managed to open his eyes for a second to see what was probably his wife and children clutching at his hand, shaking and tearful. He managed a slight smile and said what might have been "safe", but was so quiet he wasn't sure before falling asleep once more. Harry checked him over once more, but it looked like he might have actually caught him in time.

"They should be fine with rest. They both lost a lot of blood, so lots of meat if you can manage it, green leafy vegetables, beans to help them build it back up. Try to keep them from moving around too much for the next day or two at least. I healed what I could, but the tissues are still delicate, so they're best not disturbed until they've settled some. Give them plenty of water. They're probably dehydrated along with all the blood loss."

"Honored sir, thank you! Whatever you need is yours." The old man who was probably the leader of the caravan offered.

"You don't owe me anything. I could help, so I did."

"Please allow us to repay you!"

All the traders got stubborn, mulish looks on their faces. Harry stifled a sigh. He'd almost forgotten--they were Earth kingdom. They liked their accounts to balance, hated owing anyone.

"Very well then. Repay me by passing my good deed on to the next person in need that you see, and ask them in turn to do the same."

"Honored sir…none of us are healers." one of the women, likely patient no. 2's wife, protested.

"I didn't say heal someone, I said do a good deed. If you see someone hungry, give them a meal; cold--give them a blanket. Someone lost, help them find their way. I have had two patients, and so I require two acts of kindness from you to those in need. Tell them this story and tell them to also pass on their good deed when next they meet someone in need. Spread a bit of kindness and make the world a better place in some small way. That's how you will repay me."

"It shall be as you say, honored sir."

"That's all that I ask."

The traders all bowed, so he bowed back. When he turned around he found himself looking at someone familiar. The swordsman that had been defending the caravan.

"Jet, is that you?"

"I thought I recognized you. You were that guy with the Avatar before… Harry, right?"

"Indeed. You're looking well. Last I had heard you were in prison."

Jet grimaced and looked away. "It was a mental health facility, actually. They transferred me there because I kept getting in fights with the other prisoners." he admitted.

"They let you out. You're doing better then?"

"I guess. I was there a couple of years after all."

"In Fire Nation?"
Jet snorted with bitter irony.

"Yeah. It was…"

"Hard, I imagine. Having to let go of your hatred and see people in front of you rather than monsters."

"Yeah." Jet repeated quietly.

"Where are you living now?"

He shrugged and looked a bit lost. "Around. Those jerks there were living in our old place. I've been wandering, working as a guard and a bounty hunter. I don't suppose you know where any of my old crew got to, do you?"

"Not the rest, but Longshot, Smellerbee and the Duke are living with the Air Nomads. Last I heard they were still at the Western Air Temple since that's where the nursery is. Longshot and Smellerbee had a baby in the fall. Longshot's been training as an airbender. He's got his arrows, so he's a master these days."

"Seriously? Wow. Huh. Hopefully one of these jerks has a bounty on his head. Maybe I'll get enough to travel out there to see them."

"Save your money. They found a herd of wild sky bison. They can come get you so long as they know where to find you. I can get in touch with them easy enough."


"Hey… any idea what happened to Katara?"

"She's somewhere around Omashu last I heard, filming a movie."

"I heard of those. Some of the traders mentioned them."

"Longshot and them might know more, I'm not sure. The princess of Fire Nation is in charge of the production. We all consider her a friend." he warned.

"Relax. I was stuck tooling around Fire Nation for a few years while I was locked up and a few months after I was let out. I'm not gonna snap and harm your precious princess."

"Actually I was more worried about you."

"Che!" Jet grumbled. "I'll probably be in Gaipan for the next week. I'll leave word where I'm headed next so they can track me down if I'm not there when they come looking."

"I'll let them know. Take care."

"You too. I'd best go. I'm supposed to be guarding this thing. I don't get paid till we actually reach the village."

Harry rejoined Neville and Luna, and all three waved to the children as the caravan got underway and trundled slowly into the distance.

"So, that was the famous Freedom Fighter, was it." Neville noted.

"Yeah, that was the infamous Jet. He seems a lot better. He was all twisted up inside before. I'm
glad to see it, honestly...though I do wonder how this is going to play into the whole Katara-Aang-Hermione-Ron tangle."

"It will be a love pentagon instead of a love square, which just sounds silly." Luna decided.

"Good point." Neville snickered.

"I just realized...Jet was kind of the last dangling thread from the war, from our group's perspective at least. Everyone else moved on and started making a new life for themselves in some way, shape or form. He was the only one who really couldn't, because he went off the rails for a while and got lost along the way...but now it seems like even he got some sort of closure. Maybe the world is finally able to move on."

He tilted his head back as they walked back to their picnic site and just enjoyed the quiet beneath the trees, and how the sunlight illuminated the leaves and fell to the ground in beams of gold, while the passing breeze made the leaves and shadows dance.

"I almost have to laugh when I look back. I was so nervous before going through the gateway the first time my poor knees were knocking together. It was a whim, really--have a bit of extended holiday, bit of adventure. I had no idea how much would change because of it."

"Regrets?" Luna asked curiously.

Harry looked over at her an Neville--they were both scuffed and dirty, and a bit bruised and bloody from both their earlier training and their altercation with the bandits, but they were solid and steady nonetheless. He thought of the rest of his friends--new world and old, his family--which now included two little brothers to cuddle and spoil, and perhaps eventually train to be "wizard ninjas" too. He thought of the beautiful, now-peaceful world they had come to, and all they'd done to make it a home for themselves...and last but not least...

Tom glanced up from where he was sprawled out on his side, reading, and their eyes met. They'd been together for a while now, but he still made his heart race. They really needed to head back so he had time to have his wicked way with him before he had to head back to school.

"No regrets. Everything is perfect."

Chapter End Notes

Well, there ya go. So ends Ninja Wizard. Thank you everyone who left comments and kudos. I read and appreciated every one, even if I didn't always respond. I'll keep writing and posting so long as folks remain interested in my stories. I am planning another side story, which will basically cover Harry and co.'s trip to the Naruto world to bring things full circle. I have not written that story yet, nor even really plotted it out beyond a very general idea of what I'd like to see happen, so no real idea when that's likely to start being posted. If I have other ideas for world-hopping adventures or the will to write them, they'll likely make an appearance at some point as well. I would like to have all my various Toms and Harrys in one place at some point just because, but I don't have any real idea for what to do with them all once I have them there. If anyone has ideas, swing them by me. Maybe I'll be inspired. Again, thank you for staying with me this far.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!